

# Latin american history and the dirty wars



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Violations of Human Rights always occurred in the LA countries from the beginning. But the XX century, because of the surge of so many revolutionary movements, was the scene of the most horrific abuses, only surpassed by the genocide practiced by the Spaniards upon their arrival. So, let's start with the XX, the so called Cold War. The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union (Capitalism against Communism) had a tremendous impact on Latin American countries, where thousands of people were caught in the middle of two factions: the guerrilla movements and the military governments.

When in 1959 the Marxist revolution took over Cuba, a new chapter opened in the history of LA. Without faith in capitalism and democracy, systems that had not helped the lower class, many opposition groups attempted to experiment with another social contract, following the Cuban model. The political conscience of the region was high, as high as people's frustration with injustice and poverty.

The lands were in the hands of a few landowners (and still are) and the dream of many revolutionary leaders was to implement a land reform. But this was unacceptable for the landowners, and something akin to "communism" for the United States. This was the political and social arena in the second part of the XX century in the region.

Latin America saw the emergence of numerous revolutionary movements, some armed with real weapons, others with just talk; some violent, some pacifist. : Montoneros, MRP in Argentina. Farabundo Marti in Salvador, Shining Path and Tumas Amaru in Peru, Sandinistas in Nicaragua, to mention a few of them, all of them following a Marxist ideology (Most of them are

defaced now except for the Maoist guerrillas in Colombia and Tupac Amaru in small regions of Peru). Of course we cannot forget the Mexican revolution, at the beginning of the XX century, and the most recent movement, the Zapatistas, in the south of Mexico. But for different reasons, they don't have much in common with the other movements, typical of the second part of the century.

When talking about the Dirty Wars between the sixties and the nineties, we are referring to: a.) The opposition between small leftist movement and the whole machinery of the army, that is to say, these were not civil wars as we conceive them; b) the brutal reaction of the military governments whose actions amounted in some cases to real genocide, killing or making disappear thousand of innocent people; c) the procedures used by the military, which can be qualified as "state terrorism" through the use of death squads, which gave these conflicts the name "Dirty Wars".

This was one of the most successful -and horrific- operations in Latin America, and one of the most unknown by the American people whose tax money went to finance the repressive governments in Latin America. These military governments were allied not only to the U. S. but to the powerful landowners of each country and, in some cases such as in Argentina, to the Catholic church (In other countries there was schism in the church, and some priests favored the Theology of Liberation and their "option for the poor"- they were also victims of the state's persecution).

In any case, the mission of the military class in power was to "clean" the countries from "subversives", "communists", the "enemies of the country", and whoever opposed the government. Their real agenda was to project the

oligarchy in power, that is, the elite who ruled the countries. But it was necessary to protect the foreign interests in the region as well. If the ruling class was counting on the support of the U. S. , they had to protect their interests , such as the copper mines in Chile, the export business in Argentina, the fruit in Central America, and so on.

**Dirty War** It is true that the guerrilla movements received logistical support from Cuba and financial support from Europe. But in the process of fighting Communism, the real victims were the people: peasants in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, accused of helping the guerrilla; students, professionals and intellectuals in Argentina , Uruguay, Brazil and Chile, accused of being subversive or sympathizers of the clandestine movements. The numbers are staggering: 15, 000 in Chile, 30, 000 in Argentina, 200, 000 in Guatemala, just to have an idea.

In Argentina, prisoners were taken to ESMA, the School of Mechanics of the Army, or to the Isla del Silencio, belonging to the church. Once there, the torture began, with cutting people's limbs off with the aid of a doctor (to be sure that the victim would not die during interrogation), pulling finger nails, using electrical prods on the sexual organs, and finally disposing them into the Atlantic Ocean or Rio de la Plata, during nocturnal flights, while they were still alive. Some bodies were incinerated.

A by-product of the war in Argentina was the abduction of babies. *La Historia Oficial*, y *La Cautiva* (new films) are based on historical facts. The U. S. Intervention How could all of this have happened without international outcry? Did people know about this? Probably not in the U. S. The Congress here was often misinformed by the CIA, but not always. The truth is that it

was part of the U. S. politics during the Cold War to contain the growing of communism wherever it might appear, mainly through covert operations.

Unfortunately, this policy contributed to the disappearance of thousand of people in Latin America, as well as in Indonesia. To summarize: the Cuban revolution and the emergence of Communist parties in Latin America had brought the Cold War to the Western Hemisphere. The policy of the U. S. in Latin America was to finance and promote, through coup d'etat , the overthrowing of governments, in order to install a military government from the extreme right, who would be willing to fight the emergence of Communism. But let's remember that behind each ideological posture there are economical interests.

Both sides, the Soviets and the Americans, wanted to have the " biggest portion of the cake", in this case, the Latin American markets and resources. One of the earliest examples of intervention of the U. S. was in Guatemala. The 1954 coup that deposed the democratically elected government of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman (who was proposing a land reform) has long been acknowledged to have been the result of CIA covert action. Recently declassified documents have shown a new and more sinister light, on the CIA's involvement in an action that gave birth to some of the most brutally dictatorial regimes in modern history.

The military regimen established after that was responsible for the 200, 000 deaths and the disappearance of peasants, committed mainly under the command of General Rios Mont, (during the Presidency of Ronald Reagan). Another well know example is the operation of the CIA in Chile, Thousands of Chilean military officers came to the United States for training, which

included presentations on the impact of global communism on their own country. After Salvador Allende won a plurality in the Presidential election on September of 1970, the consensus at the highest levels of the U. S.

Government was that Allende's presidency would seriously hurt U. S. national interests (Allende wanted to establish a land reform and nationalize the copper mines which were in the hands of American companies- See film *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*, security advisor for Richard Nixon). Under this policy, the CIA kidnapped and killed General Rene Schneider in Chile, because his support of Allende's government. This happened exactly on September 11th of 1973. Another sinister operation was the Contras, in Nicaragua, which the American public is more aware of, due to the Iran-Contras scandals.

In Honduras, the worst violations of Human Rights occurred during the tenure of Mr. Negroponte as an ambassador, who is our current chief of National Security. Training in the School of Americas The School of the Americas originated in 1946 in Panama. Now it is located on the grounds of Fort Benning, Georgia. Its original mission was to train military personal to fight the guerrilla and leftist groups in Latin America. In the late afternoon of December 4th 1980, an unmarked grave was found in a field in El Salvador. When it was opened in the presence of the U. S. Ambassador, it revealed the bodies of four women.

Maryknoll Sisters Maura Clark and Ita Ford, Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel and lay missionary, Jean Donovan. Of the five officers later found responsible for the rape and murder of these women, for political reasons, three were graduates of the United States Army School of the Americas. El Mazote is the

name of a town in El Salvador where there was direct intervention of U. S. forces in the military actions. In 1991, a United Nations forensics team excavated a village in El Mazote and found hundreds of skeletons, including those of little children who had been butchered by the Salvadoran army along with their mothers and fathers.

But this war crime, like so many others in El Salvador, went unpunished, not only in El Salvador but also in Washington. No American official was held accountable for giving misleading testimony to Congress or covering up the atrocity, perpetrated by forces trained in the School of the Americas. 21 American soldiers died in secret combat against leftist guerrillas in El Salvador. Operacion Condor Operation Condor was a bilateral cooperation among regional intelligence services to track the activities of, and in at least a few cases, kill political opponents.

An envoy from the U. S. called governments from the neighboring countries (which are collectively called the Cono Sur) to a meeting in Asuncion, Paraguay, according to declassified documents from the White House, to start the operation. It was an intelligence-sharing arrangement among Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay established in 1975. Asuncion was chosen as the center of operations, since general Stroessner, the Paraguayan dictator, had demonstrated a great ability to crush the opposition with a brutally repressive apparatus.

The origin of the U. S. intervention The origin of the political and military intervention of the U. S. in Latin America can be found in the Manifest Destiny and the Monroe doctrine of 1821, which prohibited the European presence in this hemisphere, but didn't exclude the American intervention in

Latin American business. Jefferson sent a letter to James Monroe in 1823 where he expressed his intention to expand the U. S. to the South, and another to Lafayette in 1817 where he says that the Latino-Americans are incapable of governing themselves.

John Quincy Adams wrote in 1821: " It is unavoidable that the rest of the continent will be ours..." A few years after the Manifest, we find the first examples of intervention, such as Polk in Mexico in 1846 and the loss of half of Mexico, and Veracruz in 1913 during the Mexican revolution. In the Caribbean, Cuba was de facto a U. S. colony from the Platt law which gave the U. S. the right to intervene.

In Central America, Theodore Roosevelt took a whole province from Colombia to create Panama and he expressed that he was irritated by " those little republics that cause him so much difficulties. ". The occupation of Dominican Republic, Haiti and Honduras were to protect the American properties, notably the United Fruit Company. The secretary of state John Foster Dulles declared that in Latin America, the U. S. doesn't have friends, but interests. But perhaps no other nation suffered more humiliation than Nicaragua, first occupied by the American William Walker in 1857 who proclaimed himself the president of the nation. And from then on was continuously occupied, when Sandino was killed and Somoza was installed in power, and supported by the American Marines until 1979.

During 4 decades, Nicaragua suffered the occupation and Somoza was protected. As Franklin Roosevelt said, " Somoza is a son of a bitch, but he is our son of a bitch! " (He also supported other dictators like Trujillo in Dominican Republic and Batista in Cuba). The causes of



underdevelopment and social unrest We know then that the cause of these so called dirty wars was the emergence of revolutionary movements with a Marxist agenda, and the reaction of the military juntas allied to the U. S. interest.

But why did the revolutionary movements start in the first place? There is no doubt that these movements grow out of a need for a change; they were the product of disconformities among people within the capitalist system, which did not provide the basic needs to the population. But the historical background is very important if we are to understand the difference between the American society and the Latin American ones. The conquista The LA countries have been suffering enormous social inequality from the time of the colonies.

In the United States we had pilgrims escaping from persecution, coming to this land to stay and to produce and finding territory relatively easy to clean of the indigenous populations. In contrast, the Spanish and Portuguese conquistadores came to the continent to find glory and richness, and conquered the lands in the name of the king. With the sword in one hand and the Bible in the other, they successfully submitted the huge indigenous population to perform cheap labor and become destitute in their own land. We soon had a territory of dispossessed mestizos, landless people whose social organization had been destroyed.

The birth of these societies was not an easy one: it was an act of violation, of rape, literally and metaphorically. This is the first problem of Latin America: the latifundios, or big territories in the hands of a few. The work relationships was consolidated in the system of " haciendas", as a successor of the system

of encomiendas; that is, the Europeans received indigenous labor in exchange for “ protection and evangelization”, but in reality it was a system of perpetual debt through the life of the indigenous peasants and their descendants.

The church also acquired large pieces of land to consolidate its power. When there is an accumulation of wealth, as it happened in LA under the system of encomiendas from the beginning, this rich class tends to have the political power, and they would write or implement the laws that protect their own interests. This political system is called the “ Oligarchy”. This economical organization based on a feudal system, plus the development of caudillismo, or regional chiefs, the strong bureaucracy created by Spain and the subsequent corruption created very weak democratic institutions.

Corruption in the colonies was rampant, especially during the economic crisis of Spain during the rein of Felipe III (XVII century). If the king didn't pay the subjects in the colonies, they would have to find their own means. Perhaps the most important factor here is that Spain closed its doors to democracy, and therefore, it never developed its democratic institutions until recently. The Enlightenment never arrived to Spain, and therefore, to the colonies (the books by Rousseau, the Social Contract and others were prohibited during the colonial period as being “ subversive”).

The independence and foreign interventions in the economy. . When you have a country with weak institutions, there is a propensity to corruption in the political spheres of governments, and therefore the countries are pray to the exploitation from outside. This is what happened to these young nations. Powers from outside took advantage of the situation and made the corrupt

political class their allies, to protect their economic interests. For example, in Argentina, export and import transactions were administrated by England, and the U.

S. was a partner through loans and credit . The British dominated the communications to such an extent that it was said that Argentina was something like a semi-colony of the British Empire. The same could be said about most of the countries of Latin America. The new threat to the region is not in the form of a military occupation right now but again in the form of economical manipulation. Any Latin American child is born now owing a thousand dollars to some foreign bank (according to the UN study in 2000).