The Cold War in Latin America: Intervention, Reform, and Resistance

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Introduction

This book begins from a simple premise: the Cold War was never merely a chess match between Washington and Moscow. It was lived, contested, and reimagined in towns, universities, barracks, sugar mills, parishes, and union halls across Latin America. The Cold War in Latin America: Intervention, Reform, and Resistance traces how superpower rivalry took distinctive local shapes—how it intertwined with land conflicts, racial hierarchies, class struggles, and aspirations for democracy—and how the resulting confrontations transformed states and societies across the region. By foregrounding Latin American actors alongside foreign policymakers, the narrative restores agency to those who interpreted, negotiated, and resisted the global conflict on their own terms.

Methodologically, this is a work of nonfiction grounded in archival records and oral histories. Declassified cables, military manuals, party newspapers, and development plans are read together with testimonies from former presidents and guerrilla cadre, mothers seeking the disappeared, rural catechists, student organizers, and soldiers. These sources allow us to view familiar episodes—Guatemala in 1954, Chile in 1973, Nicaragua in 1979, and the Central American wars of the 1980s—not as isolated crises but as connected theaters in a continental story of intervention, reform, and resistance. The pairing of documentary evidence with lived memory reveals not only what happened but how it felt, and why those experiences continue to shape politics today.

Chronologically, the book spans from the end of World War II to the early 1990s, when negotiated settlements and democratic openings recast the region’s political landscape. Early chapters situate Latin America in the emerging postwar order, tracing how anticommunism, developmentalism, and national security doctrines interacted with local projects of modernization and social reform. Mid-century upheavals—from the overthrow of Guatemala’s reformist government to the Cuban Revolution and its hemispheric aftershocks—created new possibilities and new fears. Subsequent waves of military rule, revolutionary insurgency, and U.S. and Cuban involvement placed countries on divergent paths, even as they faced shared dilemmas about sovereignty, violence, and social justice.

Thematically, the book follows three interwoven strands. Intervention examines the spectrum of external influence: covert operations, military training, electoral assistance, and information campaigns by the United States and, in more limited but consequential ways, by Cuba and the Soviet bloc. Reform explores efforts to transform societies from within, including agrarian change, industrial policy, education and health initiatives, and the Alliance for Progress—projects that courted hope while often

reinforcing surveillance and control. Resistance focuses on the repertoire of opposition deployed by heterogeneous actors: guerrilla warfare and urban militancy, labor and peasant mobilization, indigenous movements, feminist and human rights activism, and the pastoral networks of liberation theology. Each strand illuminates the others, showing how external pressures and internal projects collided to produce outcomes that were neither scripted nor inevitable.

While national case studies anchor the narrative, the book also reconstructs transnational connective tissue: the clandestine flows of intelligence and arms; the itineraries of exiles, students, and militants; and the region-wide architecture of repression epitomized by Operation Condor. These cross-border circuits help explain why techniques of rule and repertoires of dissent often looked strikingly similar from Montevideo to Mexico City, even as local histories generated distinct meanings and limits. Attention to the circulation of people, ideas, and technologies clarifies how the Cold War became a regional system rather than a mosaic of isolated conflicts.

The human costs and long-term consequences of these decades are central to the analysis. Dictatorships and counterinsurgencies left legacies of trauma, institutionalized impunity, and militarized policing that still reverberate in contemporary security policies. Revolutionary experiments and social movements reconfigured political participation, expanded rights discourses, and reshaped civil–military relations and party systems. Economic strategies—from import substitution to debt-driven austerity—combined with authoritarian and democratic transitions to produce new forms of inequality and precarity. By drawing a through-line from Cold War choices to twenty-first-century debates over memory, justice, and development, the book invites readers to connect past violence and aspiration with present dilemmas.

A note on voice and ethics is in order. Oral histories were conducted with informed consent and with sensitivity to the risks that still attend speaking about repression and clandestine struggle. The book avoids romanticizing insurgency or sanitizing state violence; it seeks instead to understand how people justified extraordinary actions and how institutions normalized coercion. Where sources conflict, the analysis foregrounds corroboration and transparency, acknowledging gaps and uncertainties rather than forcing a spurious consensus.

Finally, a roadmap. The chapters proceed roughly chronologically while grouping cases to highlight comparison and connection. We begin with the early Cold War and the first dramatic interventions, then follow the revolutionary wave and counterrevolutionary responses across the continent. Midway, we examine the consolidation of national security states and the emergence of transnational repression, before turning to the Central American wars and the cultural and religious fronts of the conflict. The concluding chapters trace transitions to democracy, mechanisms of accountability, and the enduring legacies—material and mnemonic—of a regional Cold War whose

shadows still shape the Americas.

CHAPTER ONE: Setting the Stage: Latin America and the Postwar Order, 1944–1953

The ending of the Second World War arrived across Latin America as a mix of relief, opportunity, and quiet uncertainty. In city squares and port unions, radios crackled with reports of victory in Europe and the Pacific, while governments and citizens alike counted the costs and calculated the possibilities. For a hemisphere that had supplied raw materials and strategic bases more than soldiers, the transition promised new markets and a chance to redefine hemispheric relations. Washington’s wartime economic expansion had forged tighter links across the Americas, and now those links were about to be tested by the pressures of peace and the emerging contest between the United States and the Soviet Union.

From Mexico City to Buenos Aires, postwar optimism intersected with long-standing social questions. Labor movements that had grown during wartime mobilization pressed for better wages and political recognition. Middle-class professionals dreamed of modernization through infrastructure, education, and health reforms. Rural workers, tenant farmers, and indigenous communities long excluded from formal politics asked urgent questions about land, dignity, and citizenship. The war’s rhetoric of freedom resonated in these conversations, but so did the realities of inequality and authoritarian habit. The result was a regional climate of expectation mixed with impatience, the kind that can either propel change or provoke backlash.

The United States emerged from the war as the hemisphere’s dominant economic and military power, eager to lock in a liberal order anchored by open markets and collective security. Through the Good Neighbor Policy’s final chapter and into the early Cold War, U.S. officials sought to transform wartime cooperation into peacetime alignment. The Inter-American system, with the Rio Treaty of 1947 and the creation of the Organization of American States in 1948, provided the legal scaffolding for hemispheric solidarity against external threats—interpreted in practice as threats from the left. As the U.S. shifted from fighting fascism to confronting communism, Latin America’s position in global strategy grew more complicated and more consequential.

Latin American governments, for their part, were far from passive. Leaders in Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, and elsewhere navigated the new realities with a mixture of opportunism and caution. Some saw alignment with Washington as the price of security and access to capital; others tried to maintain a degree of autonomy by cultivating economic ties with Europe or experimenting with regional integration. In the background loomed chronic problems: fragile state capacity, uneven industrialization, and agrarian structures that concentrated land and power. Reformers

argued that solving these problems was the best defense against extremism, while conservatives warned that rapid change could destabilize fragile orders.

The founding of the United Nations offered a fresh arena where Latin American voices could be heard on issues from colonialism to development. Smaller states, especially those with democratic traditions such as Costa Rica and Uruguay, saw the UN as a platform to promote social rights and multilateralism. Their initiatives encouraged broader discussions about education, health, and labor standards that resonated across the region. Even as superpower competition tightened, these multilateral spaces preserved room for agenda-setting by regional actors. They would later become important as forums for human rights advocacy, but in the immediate postwar period they signaled a tentative hemispheric confidence.

At the same time, the Cold War's ideological currents began to filter into domestic politics. Anticommunism, once a wartime staple, evolved into a governing principle for security establishments and political elites. Communist parties in Chile, Argentina, and elsewhere had gained legitimacy through their role in wartime resistance and labor organizing; now they confronted both legal restrictions and social suspicion. The Soviet Union's global ambitions were distant but not abstract, and local elites often framed labor unrest or land claims through the lens of subversion. The United States encouraged this perspective through diplomatic channels, intelligence sharing, and development assistance.

The era's most dramatic events often had local roots that predated the Cold War. In Argentina, the death of Juan Perón in 1955—actually, no, let us step back; Perón's removal came later. Rather, the years 1944–1953 were marked by Perón's consolidation and then his fall in 1955, which lay beyond this chapter's timeframe. The same caution applies elsewhere: Guatemala's reformist government under Juan José Arévalo (1945–1951) and Jacobo Árbenz (1951–1954) would become a focal point of Cold War confrontation, but the pivotal 1954 coup belongs to the next chapter. Brazil's postwar democratic interlude under Getúlio Vargas and later Juscelino Kubitschek, culminating in the 1964 military takeover, likewise unfolds beyond the immediate period under review.

One defining event of these early years did directly foreshadow hemispheric dynamics: the 1948–1953 Bogotazo and La Violencia in Colombia. Following the assassination of liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in April 1948, Bogotá erupted in riots that exposed the fragility of Colombia's political system and the depth of social divisions. Rural violence soon spread, creating a prolonged cycle of conflict between Liberals and Conservatives that would last years. Although Colombia's violence was rooted in its own political culture, it also resonated with broader Cold War themes, as both sides accused the other of communist influence or reactionary repression. The U.S. took note, offering limited support and training, while Colombian elites framed the conflict as a bulwark against subversion.

Brazil’s political trajectory during this period provides a clear window into the region’s postwar balancing act. Getúlio Vargas, who had governed in different forms since the 1930s, returned to the presidency in 1951 amid populist appeals and industrial ambitions. His administration wrestled with inflation, labor demands, and the pressures of U.S. alignment. Vargas’s suicide in 1954, amid military and elite pressure, underscored the volatility of democratic experiments in a context of economic strain and security anxieties. While Brazil would not experience a full-scale Cold War coup until 1964, the 1950s set the tone for a political culture in which military institutions claimed a guardian role over national stability.

In the Southern Cone, Uruguay and Chile offered contrasting models of democratic resilience. Uruguay’s postwar political system, built on broad social welfare and party pluralism, remained relatively stable through the early 1950s. Chile’s coalition governments navigated economic challenges and labor activism without immediate authoritarian breakdown. Both countries maintained strong labor movements and communist participation within legal frameworks, showing that anticommunism did not always translate into repression. Their experiences complicate the narrative of an inexorable slide into dictatorship, reminding us that the Cold War’s local manifestations varied according to institutional strength and social bargains.

Mexico’s post-revolutionary state, anchored by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), pursued a path of state-led development and corporatist labor management. The 1940s and early 1950s saw the consolidation of a ruling party that could accommodate labor and peasant sectors while suppressing independent leftist challenges. Mexico’s foreign policy maintained a characteristic stance: formal alignment with the U.S. in hemispheric bodies, while preserving a rhetorical commitment to sovereignty and non-intervention. The combination of economic nationalism and political authoritarianism would later be tested by student protest in 1968, but in these years the PRI managed the Cold War’s ideological crosswinds with pragmatic control.

Cuba under Fulgencio Batista offers a different prelude. After a 1944–1948 democratic interlude, Batista seized power in 1952, foreclosing constitutional politics and deepening corruption. The island’s economy—dominated by sugar, tourism, and U.S. investment—produced stark inequalities, while political repression curtailed avenues for reform. Communists held modest influence in labor and intellectual circles, but the broader opposition to Batista included liberals, nationalists, and eventually radical movements that would only coalesce later. The Cold War lens would later frame Cuba’s revolution as a Soviet beachhead; in the early 1950s, it looked more like a classic case of authoritarian decay and social frustration.

Costa Rica’s civil war of 1948 stands out as a decisive fork in the road. The conflict, brief but intense, pitted reformist forces against established oligarchic networks and

culminated in the abolition of Costa Rica's standing army. Under the leadership of José Figueres Ferrer, the new political order emphasized social democracy, education, and universal suffrage. Costa Rica's choice to dismantle its military and embrace a welfare-oriented state made it an outlier in a region where armed forces often acted as political arbiters. The United States initially viewed the decision with skepticism, but over time Costa Rica's stability and anti-communist posture within democratic bounds earned it a special status in Washington's hemispheric calculus.

Guatemala's experience under Arévalo and Árbenz introduced the theme of social reform as a lightning rod. Arévalo's government (1945–1951) advanced labor codes and social security, while Árbenz's land reform after 1951 challenged the entrenched power of the United Fruit Company and other large landowners. The reforms were broad, legal, and popular among rural workers and urban professionals, yet they generated alarm among conservative elites and foreign corporations. As the U.S. intensified its anticommunist focus, Guatemala's experiment became a test case for how far reform could proceed before crossing the threshold into perceived subversion. The architecture of intervention would soon take concrete form.

The creation of the OAS in 1948 and the signing of the Rio Treaty in 1947 institutionalized hemispheric defense against aggression. In theory, these bodies reinforced collective sovereignty; in practice, they offered legal frameworks for collective action against perceived threats, often defined in ideological terms. The Inter-American system also gave smaller states diplomatic tools to advance development and social rights agendas. The tension between sovereignty and collective security became a recurring theme, and the OAS provided a stage where local conflicts could be elevated into hemispheric questions. In the years ahead, these institutions would be tested by interventions, coups, and revolutionary challenges.

Economic ties bound the hemisphere in ways that were both visible and subtle. The U.S. emerged as the principal market for Latin American exports and the leading source of investment, particularly in oil, mining, and fruit. Development theory, especially the ideas of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), promoted import substitution industrialization (ISI) as a path to autonomy. ISI aimed to reduce dependency by building domestic industries behind protective tariffs. Washington's response was cautious, sometimes supportive of industrial growth when it served stability, but wary of policies that excluded U.S. firms. The development agenda thus straddled aspiration and constraint, with policy debates reflecting both nationalist ambitions and external leverage.

Security establishments in the region were reshaped by U.S. training and doctrine. The U.S. Army School of the Americas, founded in 1946, trained Latin American officers in counterinsurgency, military management, and anticommunist doctrine. Military missions and defense agreements spread technical assistance and institutional ties. These networks did not inevitably lead to authoritarianism; they were embedded in

professional military cultures that varied from country to country. Yet the training and the mindset it encouraged—prioritizing internal security, viewing political activism as a threat—would become pivotal in later crises. The groundwork for national security states was being laid, sometimes almost invisibly.

Intellectual currents traveled quickly across borders. Development economists, sociologists, and political theorists debated modernization, dependency, and the role of the state in shaping social change. University students organized along ideological lines, experimenting with Marxist, nationalist, and Christian democratic ideas. The printed press and radio amplified these debates, bringing rural and urban audiences into dialogue and sometimes into confrontation. The region's cultural scene—film, literature, music—also reflected the tensions of postwar society, with artists grappling with themes of justice, identity, and power. Ideas, like people, crossed borders and set the stage for the conflicts to come.

The early Cold War in Latin America was not a single story but a mosaic of episodes. In some countries, democratic institutions expanded and absorbed social pressures; in others, repression and exclusion hardened. The United States sought order through markets and alliances, while the Soviet Union searched for footholds and influence through diplomacy and propaganda. Local actors—labor federations, peasant leagues, student movements, church hierarchies—pursued their own agendas, sometimes aligning with superpowers, sometimes charting independent paths. The result was a region pulled in multiple directions, trying to reconcile national aspirations with global pressures.

These currents converged on questions of sovereignty and development. Leaders across the hemisphere wrestled with how to modernize without losing autonomy, how to integrate into global markets without deepening inequality, and how to ensure security without extinguishing dissent. The Cold War provided a language for these debates—anticommunism, democracy, revolution—but it did not dictate outcomes. Local institutions, economic structures, and social hierarchies mattered. So did historical memory: the legacies of colonialism, the traditions of popular mobilization, and the rituals of state violence that many societies knew all too well.

By the early 1950s, a pattern of expectations had emerged. Washington looked to Latin America as a strategic buffer and a source of raw materials, pressing for anticommunist conformity and market-friendly policies. Latin American governments sought aid, investment, and diplomatic support while managing domestic pressures for reform. Popular movements pushed for land, labor rights, and political inclusion, often facing the accusation—whether accurate or not—that their demands masked foreign agendas. The stage was set for dramatic confrontations that would be both intensely local and unmistakably global.

The global context mattered. The Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan signaled a

U.S. commitment to contain communism through economic and security assistance. In Europe, these policies stabilized allies and rebuilt war-torn economies; in Latin America, the tools were different but the logic similar: promote growth, reinforce anticommunist institutions, and limit radical alternatives. The Point Four Program, announced in 1949, explicitly extended technical assistance to developing countries, including those in Latin America. It offered expertise and funding for infrastructure, agriculture, and health, embedding U.S. influence in the daily operations of states. The message was clear: modernization and anticommunism were two sides of the same coin.

Regional summits and hemispheric treaties created venues where ideas and agendas clashed. Diplomats debated non-intervention, economic cooperation, and the definition of aggression. Smaller states tested the limits of collective action, sometimes using multilateral forums to resist bilateral pressure. The Inter-American system became an arena where legal norms and strategic interests contended, and where Latin American actors could articulate a vision of regional order. These meetings did not resolve fundamental tensions, but they made the Cold War a shared conversation, linking capitals in ways that would matter as crises erupted.

As the decade progressed, intelligence cooperation expanded. The U.S. cultivated relationships with local security services, sharing information and methods. Some governments welcomed the assistance, seeing it as a way to modernize policing and counter subversion; others worried about external influence over sovereign institutions. In practice, the boundaries between political policing, criminal investigation, and labor control often blurred. The early 1950s did not produce the sweeping repressive apparatuses later seen in the Southern Cone or Central America, but they did establish habits of surveillance and coordination that would become more visible and more violent in subsequent years.

Agricultural modernization and land reform emerged as flashpoints. Large estates coexisted with subsistence farming, and the push for productivity often clashed with customary land use and labor rights. Reformist leaders argued that equitable land distribution would strengthen national economies and defuse social tensions; critics countered that it would provoke capital flight and political instability. The United Fruit Company in Central America and other foreign-owned enterprises symbolized the stakes: development and sovereignty versus investment and stability. These debates were not purely ideological; they involved concrete policies, legal frameworks, and everyday experiences in rural communities.

Urban growth transformed the political landscape. Migrants from the countryside swelled cities, creating new neighborhoods and forms of association. Labor unions organized within factories and service sectors, while informal economies expanded. The urban poor and the burgeoning middle class demanded public services, schooling, and jobs. Political parties adapted, sometimes incorporating new constituencies

through corporatist arrangements, sometimes facing unrest from activists who felt excluded. The city became a stage where Cold War ideas—about modernization, revolution, and security—were enacted in public squares, workplaces, and community organizations.

The media played a crucial role in shaping perceptions. Newspapers, radio stations, and newsreels transmitted global narratives into local contexts, framing events in terms of communism versus freedom, order versus chaos. Governments and parties sought to influence coverage through subsidies, censorship, and intimidation. The contest for public opinion became a core dimension of the Cold War, with messages tailored to national audiences. In the early 1950s, this contest was still developing, but it already shaped how citizens understood strikes, reforms, and elections. The battle for hearts and minds had begun.

Religious institutions offered another lens on the era. Catholic hierarchies varied from conservative to socially engaged, with some clergy embracing modernization and social justice initiatives while others emphasized anti-communism and defense of tradition. The Catholic Church’s influence over education, family life, and moral discourse made it a key actor in shaping public values. The seeds of liberation theology were present in pastoral work among the poor, but the movement’s later prominence lay ahead. For now, the church served as both a stabilizing force and a space of debate, navigating the tensions between faith, politics, and social change.

Economic crises reminded the region of its vulnerabilities. Inflation, balance-of-payments deficits, and commodity price swings disrupted plans and provoked political unrest. The 1949–1950 slowdown in global trade hit export-oriented economies, prompting debates over import substitution and exchange controls. Governments experimented with planning and regulation, but capacity was often limited. The U.S. encouraged market-oriented reforms and integration into the global economy, while some Latin American economists argued for a more state-led approach. These technical debates had immediate political consequences, affecting labor relations, urban services, and the credibility of elected leaders.

The early Cold War’s labor landscape was dynamic and contested. Unions organized strikes for wages and working conditions, often facing repression or co-optation. Communist-led unions were particularly active in Chile, Argentina, and parts of Central America, leading to clashes with governments under pressure to demonstrate anticommunist credentials. The U.S. promoted “free” labor movements through international organizations, aiming to undercut leftist influence. Outcomes varied: in some countries, unions gained legal recognition and bargaining rights; in others, strike leaders were arrested or union structures were absorbed into corporatist systems. The struggle over labor’s role foreshadowed broader conflicts over political inclusion.

Public health and education reforms offered tangible benefits and symbolic victories.

Vaccination campaigns, rural clinics, and school construction projects communicated a vision of state capacity and social citizenship. In countries like Costa Rica, these investments would become pillars of long-term stability. Elsewhere, reforms were partial, unevenly funded, or politicized. International agencies and bilateral aid played growing roles, introducing technical standards and evaluation methods. While not always dramatic, these initiatives influenced daily life and shaped expectations about government responsibility. They also created constituencies that would defend or criticize the state's performance in later political battles.

Migration and diaspora communities added another layer to the region's Cold War. Exiles from Spain's civil war and from authoritarian regimes in the Southern Cone brought political experiences and networks that enriched local debates. Artists, intellectuals, and activists moved across borders, contributing to a vibrant transnational milieu. Some of these figures would later play important roles in revolutionary movements or human rights campaigns. In the early 1950s, these flows were modest but consequential, setting precedents for the more dramatic exile politics that would emerge after coups and revolutions in the 1960s and 1970s.

The language of democracy was ubiquitous, but its meaning was contested. For some, democracy meant competitive elections and civil liberties; for others, it implied social rights, economic justice, and mass participation. These competing visions coexisted within parties and movements, generating complex coalitions and frequent realignments. The U.S. endorsed procedural democracy, often with an anticommunist filter, while Latin American democrats argued for deeper reforms. The result was a region where elections could be both a pathway to change and a mechanism for preserving existing hierarchies. This tension would recur repeatedly as the Cold War intensified.

In retrospect, the years 1944–1953 set crucial patterns. The Inter-American system formalized collective security, while bilateral ties anchored U.S. influence. Economic debates framed development as both opportunity and constraint. Security institutions absorbed new doctrines, and political actors adapted to the language of global rivalry. The region's diversity—democratic stability in some countries, authoritarian habit in others—meant that the Cold War did not arrive as a uniform experience. Instead, it intersected with local histories, producing a spectrum of outcomes that ranged from reform to repression. These patterns would soon be tested by dramatic interventions and revolutions.

By the early 1950s, the stage was set, but the script remained unwritten. Latin America was neither a passive recipient of superpower pressures nor an autonomous sphere immune to global forces. It was a region of agency, complexity, and contradiction, where people pursued dignity and security within structures that both enabled and constrained them. The Cold War would amplify these tensions, but it did not create them. As we move into the mid-1950s, the intersection of local agendas

and global rivalries would produce the crises and transformations that define the era: coups and reforms, revolutions and resistances, all unfolding across the Americas.

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