

# The Central American Countries Since Independence: Shared History, Different Histories

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## INTRODUCTION

Central America, a narrow isthmus some 1,800 kilometers long, runs from the southern frontier of Mexico to northern Colombia, linking the two giant land masses of North and South America. The region today includes five nations that belonged to Spanish Central America—Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica—as well as Belize (until 1981 British Honduras) and Panama (until 1903 part of Colombia). The total area of these seven countries is 530,247 square kilometers, about three-quarters the size of Texas. The smallest, El Salvador (20,935 km<sup>2</sup>), is slightly smaller than Massachusetts; the largest, Nicaragua (139,000 km<sup>2</sup>), is approximately the size of Iowa. Belize, the least populous country, has less than 200,000 inhabitants; Guatemala, the most populous, has 8.7 million (1988), 1 million more than New York City.

Although Central America is small by North American standards, its geography is extraordinarily varied.<sup>1</sup> Its biology too is remarkably diverse; Costa Rica alone supports 850 bird species, more than the United States and Canada combined, and over 12,000 plant species, twice the number in California, which is 18 times as large.<sup>2</sup> This variety arises from Central America's role as a land bridge where North and South American species mingle and from a largely mountainous topography that splits the region into myriad microenvironments. A chain of volcanoes extends from northern Guatemala into Panama for almost the entire length of the isthmus, dividing the region into Pacific and Atlantic (or Caribbean) zones and producing occasional eruptions and frequent tremors and earthquakes. Trade

winds from the Caribbean have, over thousands of years, wafted vast quantities of volcanic ash onto the western slopes of the mountains and the narrow Pacific coastal plain, creating some of the most fertile soils in the world. On the Atlantic side of the isthmus, however, as well as in most of Honduras and Panama where less volcanic ash fell, the soils tend to contain more clay and are easily leached and less productive.

The volcanic mountains, which block the moist clouds carried by the Caribbean trade winds from reaching the Pacific, also divide Central America into two broad climatic zones. The Atlantic slopes and coastal plains experience year-round rains, which at 300 or more centimeters per year are among the heaviest anywhere in the world. Much of the Atlantic region, even today, remains covered with almost impenetrable tropical jungles and swamps. On the Pacific side, and in the intermontane valleys, a pronounced dry season, from November or December to April or May, gave rise to less forbidding vegetation and, together with the rich soils, provided more favorable conditions for human settlement. Toward the south, in southern Costa Rica and in Panama, the isthmus narrows and the Caribbean climatic influence and the rainy season are correspondingly greater.

Most of Central America's rivers are shallow and either nonnavigable or navigable only by small vessels and for short lengths. The largest inland body of water, Lake Nicaragua, home to a unique species of freshwater shark, shares a depression between two sections of the volcanic range with Lake Managua and is joined to the Caribbean by the San Juan River. On the Pacific coast, this depression begins at the Gulf of Fonseca, one of the isthmus's few good natural ports, shared by Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador. Elsewhere, few coastal indentations exist that make safe harbors, except perhaps for Bocas del Toro on the Atlantic side of Panama. On the Caribbean coast, nearly constant rains and annual hurricanes further complicated maritime transport.

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## THE COLONIAL HERITAGE

These geographical conditions shaped human settlement long before the arrival of Europeans. The fertile volcanic highlands of El Salvador and northwestern Guatemala and the Pacific plains as far south as Costa Rica's Nicoya Peninsula were home to stratified societies based on maize and bean cultivation that generally had close linguistic, religious, and sometimes political and trade ties with the main centers of Mesoamerican civilization in central Mexico. Indigenous groups in Atlantic Central America, in contrast, usually relied on tuber-based production systems that supported only scattered populations with less complex forms of social organization strongly influenced by those of the South American tropical forests.

The initial Spanish colonization and settlement of Central America, motivated by the search for precious metals and easily exploited sources of Indian labor, was centered in the mid-altitude and Pacific coastal areas that had the greatest populations at time of contact. Stratified indigenous societies—with their permanent settlements and histories of tribute collection, *corvée* labor, and autocratic rule—were easier to control than the mobile, egalitarian bands of forest Indians that inhabited the Atlantic regions. In both areas, the Indians lacked immunities to European diseases (influenza, measles, smallpox, plague, etc.) and died in massive numbers. In the Nicaragua-Nicoya area, the Spanish captured additional thousands of Indians and forced them to serve as cargo bearers across the isthmus of Panama or in the conquest of distant Peru.<sup>3</sup>

As colonization advanced and Indian populations declined, the conquerors established their strongest presence in the areas where geographical conditions seemed favorable and significant sources of indigenous labor survived, such as central and Pacific Guatemala, El Salvador, and some parts of Pacific Nicaragua. Elsewhere, such as in Honduras or central Costa Rica, the Spanish entered in small numbers into zones where Indian populations were sparse, either because few had lived there in the first place or because epidemics left few survivors.<sup>4</sup> Panama, for much of the colonial period, was important primarily as a convenient, narrow point linking the Atlantic and Pacific that facilitated movement between Spanish strongholds in the Caribbean and the gold and silver mines of Peru. Belize, an area of dense jungles not effectively settled by the Spanish, became home to English shipwreck victims and wood cutters in the early seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup> Much of the Atlantic side of the isthmus, especially after the English seizure of Jamaica and Barbados in the mid-

seventeenth century, never came under Spanish domination. In some cases, such as the Nicaraguan Mosquitia, a British protectorate until the late nineteenth century, the integration of such zones into modern national states remains problematical to this day.

The strength of the colonial state, then, varied greatly in different parts of Central America, from its administrative and economic hub in Santiago de Guatemala (present-day Guatemala City) to its peripheral outposts, such as marginal central Costa Rica, to areas where its influence was all but absent, such as much of the Atlantic coast. Because colonial traditions and structures constituted major political, economic, and cultural problems for the independent Central American states, it is important to describe briefly some of the key institutions the Spanish established, as well as the economic cycles that affected the region. It should be remembered too that different countries' nineteenth-century, post-independence experiences grappling with the colonial heritage did much to shape current social arrangements and contemporary political culture. The dramatic contrasts within contemporary Central America are rooted in the outcomes of these earlier attempts to resolve colonialism's legacy (as I shall discuss in more detail below). At one extreme, Guatemala and El Salvador today are characterized by brutal military repression, intransigent elites, and social polarization, while at the other, Costa Rica has no genuine military, a reformist and democratic political culture, and a more fluid social structure.

The principal institutions of the colonial state were intended to control or administer land, labor, and commerce and to generate tax revenue for the Crown. In the immediate post-conquest period, the Crown awarded conquerors and colonists *encomiendas*, which gave them the right to exploit the labor or tribute of particular indigenous communities, and various kinds of grants of land on which to put the Indians to work. With the rapid decline of the aboriginal population and the mid-sixteenth century enactment of the New Laws, which prohibited Indian slavery, *encomiendas* were gradually replaced with other forms of mobilizing indigenous labor. *Repartimiento*, an institution which dates from the late sixteenth century, came to have two basic meanings in Spanish Central America. Spanish owners of farms or other enterprises could apply for consignments of Indian laborers, though *repartimiento* "judges" were supposed to make sure that no more than a specified proportion of each community's population, usually one-fourth, participated in such tribute labor at any one time. The other form was often termed the *repartimiento de bienes* or *repartimiento de mercancías*,

which literally meant the "distribution of goods or merchandise."<sup>6</sup> Under this system, low-ranking colonial officials required Indians in their jurisdictions to deliver in-kind tribute, sometimes by providing them with raw material to process, such as raw cotton which they were required to turn into dyed thread.

Despite the vicious exploitation carried out within the framework of repartimiento, Indians had certain rights in colonial society that set them apart from people of mixed ancestry. Indian communities—formed in most cases from ethnically diverse, scattered survivors of military campaigns, epidemics, and encomienda exploitation—were legal corporations that received Crown grants of land and tax exonerations and which retained some rights to self-government.<sup>7</sup> Non-Indians were prohibited from living in Indian communities, though particularly later in the colonial period this rule was frequently violated and ignored.

The Spanish spurred formation of such settlements in order to more effectively missionize and control the Indians. Most notably in Guatemala, they encouraged inhabitants to identify with their localities, rather than with the large pre-Columbian political or linguistic units, such as the Quiché or Cachiquel states, which, if resurrected, might represent a threat to Spanish domination. Membership in a community fostered political and cultural fragmentation and subjected Indians to onerous tribute or repartimiento obligations. But it also conferred access to land and, in cases of dire need, to village "community chest" funds. Particularly in the seventeenth century, when Church budget restrictions forced the withdrawal of Spanish clergy from many villages, pre-conquest religious beliefs reemerged and combined with elements of Catholic liturgy to form a durable blend of Christian and Mayan practices that provided an important source of identification and meaning for many community members.<sup>8</sup> The *pueblo de indios* thus offered a space, however circumscribed, in which the survivors of the conquest and their descendants could reconstruct a culture and institutions that might provide solace and some limited defense against the demands of the conquerors.

Very early in the colonial period, displaced Indians who belonged to no community, persons of mixed Indian-European parentage, and free Africans and their descendants, came to constitute an intermediate and growing group in Central American society. Early Crown regulations which prohibited single women from travelling from Spain to the Americas without special permission were one factor which led Spanish men to seek wives and concubines among the local populations.<sup>9</sup> By the time of independence in the early nineteenth century, about 65 percent of

the region's 1 million inhabitants were considered Indian and a mere 4 percent Spanish, a category which included both Iberian-born *peninsulares* and American-born white creoles (*criollos*). People of mixed Indian, African, and European ancestry accounted for almost one-third of Spanish Central America's population and considerably more in areas outside of heavily-Indian Guatemala and western El Salvador.<sup>10</sup>

Beyond these densely settled Indian population concentrations hispanization proceeded rapidly, even where communities retained access to land and people appeared to others and identified themselves as Indians. Communities often retained the outer forms of indigenous self-governance permitted by the Spanish authorities—the election of headmen called *principales*, for example—long after traditional languages and dress faded into oblivion. Except for north-central Guatemala and western El Salvador, Spanish became first the lingua franca and then the only tongue of all but the most isolated zones. Pre-conquest foods—dishes made with maize, beans, squash, and chile peppers—remained dietary staples and were often called by variants of their pre-Columbian names, as were numerous places and common objects. The Spanish spoken in Central America, like that which evolved in other colonial backwaters such as Argentina-Uruguay, sounds antiquated even today to travellers from Spain or from areas (such as Mexico, Peru, or Cuba) which as colonies experienced more sustained interchange with the "mother country." This quaint sound resulted not only from the hundreds of Indian words that entered the language (because that happened too in Mexico and Peru), but from the retention of grammatical forms that died out in Spain and the more important colonies soon after the conquest, such as the ubiquitous use of *vos* instead of *tú* for the informal singular *you*.<sup>11</sup>

Referred to as *castas* (literally "castes"), mixed-race individuals did not share with Indians the right to community membership and lands, nor did they enjoy Spaniards' many privileges, such as the rights to hold political office, to work in the most remunerative and prestigious occupations, to receive or inherit Crown land grants, or to employ repartimiento labor. Only in the mid-eighteenth century were mixed-race (*mestizo*) individuals permitted to purchase or sell land.<sup>12</sup> Colonial law regularly provided more severe punishments for castas than for whites who had committed the same offense.<sup>13</sup> Colonial Spanish language usage, some of which survives in Guatemala to this day, came to reflect these distinctions of a society organized along ethnic lines. Spaniards and other whites were called *gente de razón* [people of reason] or simply *gente decente* [decent people], while

Indians—who by implication had neither reason nor decency—were labelled *naturales* [natural ones]. A wide variety of terms was applied to various combinations of Indian, European, and African ancestry, but the designations that included all people of mixed blood, such as *casta* or *ladino*, typically came to have negative connotations, such as dishonesty or immorality.

Not surprisingly, given the difficulties and discrimination they faced, castas gravitated to sparsely populated rural zones, where they eked out a living working as farm hands, squatting on Crown lands, or rustling cattle. They also flocked to the towns and cities, where some became artisans and others formed a lower class of occasional laborers, peddlers, and petty criminals that excited frequent elite comment and fear. The Spanish also imported small numbers of African slaves to work in the mines, indigo farms and dye works, sectors from which the Crown had barred Indians because of their high mortality. African slavery in Central America, however, never attained the economic importance that it did in more developed plantation regions, such as the Caribbean or Brazil. Indeed, by the seventeenth century it had become common for slaves to hold positions of considerable autonomy and responsibility as hacienda administrators and guards.<sup>14</sup> While many Central Americans today have some clear African ancestry, most are descended primarily from Indians and Europeans. The large concentrations of African-Americans on the Caribbean coast, from Belize to Panama, are for the most part the result of subsequent, late nineteenth-century migrations from the West Indies.

Part of the difficulty the castas faced in integrating into Central American society grew out of the lack of dynamism of the colonial economy. The three centuries of Spanish rule were marked by a constant and largely unsuccessful search for a “motor product” that would fuel economic growth and create riches.<sup>15</sup> Occasional local booms in silver mining, cacao beans, or indigo dye generated a few rays of hope, but these were short-lived and followed by long periods of depression. At independence in 1821, El Salvador’s main export was indigo, a deep blue dye made from a shrub that initially grew wild and was later spread by human hands throughout the lower and middle altitudes. Guatemala, earlier an indigo producer as well, had largely switched to cochineal, another dye—scarlet this time—made from the females of a tiny insect that grew inside a tall cactus called a *nopal* (whose distinctive branching tubes have come to be associated with Mexican restaurants in the United States). Nicaragua, rather than exporting to Spain, specialized in sending cattle to the rest of

Central America, while Costa Rica exported small quantities of brazil wood, used for making orange dye.<sup>16</sup> Honduras, which had been a minor silver and cattle producer earlier in the colonial period, exported little of anything.<sup>17</sup>

For most of the colonial period, the Crown required its colonies to trade only with Spain. This commerce was bogged down by diverse restrictions and prohibitions intended to ensure royal control over even the tiniest and most mundane transactions. In part for security reasons, goods and precious metals went to Europe only in large fleets, escorted by naval gunboats, that typically called once each year, at a small number of major ports, none—apart from Panama—in Central America.<sup>18</sup> The secondary economic benefits of the fleet system—the shipyards, sail and rope makers, and provisioners—were concentrated in Veracruz (Mexico), Havana (Cuba), Cartagena (Colombia), and Lima (Peru), all far from Santiago de Guatemala, the capital of Spanish Central America and its largest city, which even at independence in 1821 had a mere 40,000 residents.<sup>19</sup> And just as Central Americans were required to export only to Spain, they had to buy manufactured imports from the “mother country” as well, even though the nascent cottage industries of nearby Mexico, South America, or the British West Indies could have met many of their needs at less cost. Not surprisingly, given this state of affairs, contraband trade, especially with Belize and the British Caribbean, assumed major importance in colonial Central America.

Added to the trade restrictions and the fleet system were a series of heavy taxes and state monopolies on key products that further straightjacketed commerce and development. Levies included the *alcabala* (a 2 percent sales tax), the *barlovento* (a 1 percent sales tax to fund the Caribbean fleet), the *quinto* or “fifth” (a 20 percent tax on mining, usually assessed at 11 percent), the *almojarifazgo* (5 percent import tax), the *diezmo* (10 percent ecclesiastical income tax), and the *media añata* (the half-year salary “contributed” by newly appointed officials to the royal treasury).<sup>20</sup> In addition, the Crown implanted a system—still in place today—in which virtually all routine documents (contracts, sworn statements, etc.) had to be written on special sealed paper (*papel sellado*) available only from government agencies. Users often had to affix additional tax stamps to these sheets to fund one or another aspect of the colonial administration. Finally, in the last century of the colonial period, the state created monopolies for the production and sale of gunpowder, tobacco, and alcohol in order to squeeze yet more revenue out of the poverty-stricken Central American provinces.

This picture of total, rigid economic control began to change in the last century of colonial rule as the new Bourbon monarchy took limited steps to mint more coinage, stimulate intercolonial trade, open new ports to trade with Spain, build roads, and relax or abolish Indian tribute and repartimiento obligations.<sup>21</sup> Administrative reforms succeeded in ousting numerous corrupt officials and in limiting the Church's power, including its previous near monopoly as a moneylender. But these "free market" reforms were too little, too late. In the last years of the colonial period, Central America was trapped in a severe economic depression, due in part to France's 1807 invasion of Spain, the insecurity of sea trading routes, the massive grasshopper infestation that decimated the indigo plantations, and competition from other areas that produced the same small list of exports.

### POST-INDEPENDENCE SOCIETY

In Mexico and in South America independence from Spain came only after protracted and bloody military campaigns. In the backwater that was Central America, however, despite a few minor anti-colonial rebellions in the last decade of Spanish rule, independence arrived without a struggle, a secondary consequence of events in Mexico. In Costa Rica, the southernmost province on the isthmus, independence came literally "on the back of a mule." Indeed, it turned out that the country had been independent without knowing it for almost a month. Only when the mail arrived on October 13, 1821, did Costa Ricans learn that Guatemala had declared the provinces independent on September 15, 1821.

In Mexico, independence leader Agustín de Iturbide, who grandiosely crowned himself Emperor Agustín I, declared the annexation of Central America to his newly proclaimed "Mexican Empire." The disintegration of Spanish rule and the isthmus' absorption into far-off Mexico created a vacuum in which political and regional antagonisms earlier held in check by the colonial state erupted with a vengeance. Though nominally part of the Mexican Empire, Central America after 1821 consisted of a multitude of independent, autonomous town governments and hinterlands controlled by local elite families.<sup>22</sup> The details of these conflicts and shifting alliances are less important than the underlying contradictions they represented. Although Iturbide's "Empire" collapsed in 1823 and the Central American countries' representatives opted for total independence under a united isthmian federation, these local loyalties and basic disagreements would remain sources of strife well into the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup>

The conflicts in the political arena reflected fundamental problems facing the peoples of newly independent Central America. How could stagnant economies—based on exports of dyes made from leaves, wood, and insects or on herds of almost wild cattle—generate sufficient wealth to create a modern society? Could economic growth occur when the Church owned vast expanses of land, much of it idle, and required believers to donate 10 percent of their income to its treasury? How could a modern state be created out of the remnants of the cumbersome Spanish bureaucracy? How could labor be found to work in new enterprises if Indians and many hispanicized rural residents retained access to community lands and could thus subsist primarily as small farmers rather than as someone else's employees? How were the indigenous peoples, former slaves, and castas, so long excluded from society, to be incorporated into the new nations?

Different answers to these pivotal questions became the focus of contention between two broad forces in Central American society, Conservatives and Liberals. It is important to remember, however, that in Central America (and most of the world) these labels were (and are) understood very differently from the way they are used in U.S. political discourse today. Central American Conservatives would probably have considered the above questions illegitimate or incomprehensible. They usually came from families who believed in and had ties to the colonial order—the dye export enterprises of Guatemala and El Salvador, the large merchants of Guatemala City (most of whom had accumulated fortunes in indigo), the vast cattle haciendas of southern Nicaragua, the Spanish bureaucracy, the Church. They favored fusion of Church and state and, despite their backing for union with Mexico during Iturbide's short-lived "Empire," decades after independence many still longed to make Guatemala and its former provinces a protectorate of the Spanish Crown.<sup>24</sup>

Liberals, on the other hand, tended to be anti-clerical, pro-"free market," and pro-foreign capital, and favored limiting ecclesiastical power and constructing a secular state that would assume functions previously carried out by the Church (with civil marriages, state-run hospitals, and universal education). Their social base tended to be among provincial merchants and artisans, many of whom had been involved in contraband under the Spanish, who longed for the abolition of colonial taxes and restrictions on commerce. By the mid-nineteenth century, Liberals also drew significant support from elite sectors who hoped to transform the isthmus's weak economies with new export products, especially coffee.

The first period of Liberal ascendancy was linked to the brief Central American Federation that succeeded Iturbide's "Mexican Empire." As a principle unifying the region, federation embraced key Liberal ideas, such as decentralizing economic and political power and broadening electoral participation and access to property (though, as we shall see shortly, the real effect of such lofty ideas was often contradictory). But the Federation was torn from its beginnings in 1823 by conflicts that revolved not only around Liberalism versus Conservatism, but around jealousies between Guatemala, which was home to nearly half the region's population and which consequently controlled the new Congress, and the provinces. Civil wars between shifting alliances of Conservative and Liberal towns and provinces racked most of the isthmus during 1826-1829, leaving the latter forces, led by the Honduran Francisco Morazán, victorious.

In 1831-1838, the Liberal regime of Mariano Gálvez in Guatemala instituted a series of reforms that came to be emblematic of liberalism. These included promotion of exports, creation of a new secular school system, disregard of remaining restrictions on free trade, civil marriage and divorce, establishment of religious freedom, reduction in the number of religious holidays (because they encouraged "idleness"), replacement of the ecclesiastical "tenth" with a land tax, and institution of a head tax that affected Indians and non-Indians alike. To finance export incentives, salaries for bureaucrats and teachers, new roads and other programs, the government imposed heavy taxes on the "community chests" in Indian villages. As if this were not enough, it also permitted squatters to acquire lands they occupied at one-half their value, a measure which contributed to growing restiveness in Indian communities that saw their holdings seized in this way.<sup>25</sup>

Liberal ideology held that free markets in land and labor were essential for the smooth functioning of a modern economy. This belief had ominous implications for Indian communities, as the law favoring squatters showed. In addition to the clear threat to the Indians' land base, other factors turned indigenous communities against the Liberal state in the 1830s. Indians and other peasants connected a series of frightening natural disasters to the Liberal regime's attack on Church privileges. In 1833 the Atitlán Volcano in Guatemala exploded and ominous meteor showers appeared in the sky. Two years later ashes from the eruption of Nicaragua's Cosigüina Volcano fell up to 1,500 miles away and blotted out the sun for a week. "Priests wandered in the streets giving the last rites to passersby. Domestic animals

were mad with terror and wild animals roamed the streets of the towns."<sup>26</sup>

In 1837 a massive cholera epidemic spread from Mexico and Belize, killing as much as a third of the adults in some areas. Priests in Indian villages fanned discontent by spreading rumors that government doctors were poisoning rivers and by convincing devout parishioners that the epidemic constituted divine retribution for the Liberals' policies.

Beginning in 1837, Indians throughout Guatemala and in parts of El Salvador rose in revolt under the leadership of Rafael Carrera, a charismatic, semi-literate mestizo mule driver and pig farmer who had seen his wife abused by marauding Liberal troops.<sup>27</sup> At the end of 1837 Gálvez concluded his term and left office. A period of growing chaos and political disintegration ensued that lasted until Carrera and his Indian troops crushed Morazán's Liberals in 1840. Carrera, in turn, with strong backing from his indigenous constituency, set about reversing the Liberal revolution in Guatemala during two and one-half decades of one-man rule and presided over the final demise of the Central American Federation. The Church recovered its confiscated properties, as did many Indian communities, and the entire edifice of Liberal legislation was replaced with norms modelled on those of the colonial era.

Outside of Guatemala, the Liberals acted with more caution and achieved less. Only in Costa Rica, which had remained largely on the sidelines during the internecine conflicts of the 1820s and 1830s, was the Liberals' program implemented to any significant degree. This had less to do with hegemony of a Liberal party or army than with the debilities of the political institutions and the export economy inherited from colonialism and the consequent absence of a genuine "Conservative reaction" from powerful groups tied to the old order.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, in Costa Rica, both Liberal and Conservative elite factions carried out programs that smacked of classical liberalism.<sup>29</sup> But with a small indigenous population, a relatively poor Church, and a weak state, the targets for reformers' zeal were limited, and political and physical space existed for alternative kinds of development. The country's small population—barely 50,000 at the time of independence—and its abundant territory meant, in the context of this feeble colonial heritage, that peasants could obtain land on the edges of the settled area without major difficulties.

#### LIBERALISM AND THE COFFEE ECONOMY

Conservatives in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua in the 1840s sought to revive colonial

economies based respectively on cochineal, indigo, and cattle. Costa Rica, in contrast, which had the least dynamic export economy, embarked on an entirely new path that was to have revolutionary consequences throughout Central America. The precise circumstances of coffee's arrival to Central America in the late eighteenth century are neither entirely clear nor ultimately important. What matters instead is the extent to which different Central American societies were able to adapt to this promising new export and the transformations that accompanied the transition from the old colonial economies to coffee. This process, which occurred at distinct paces in the five countries, involved a relatively peaceful transition in Costa Rica and major upheavals in Guatemala and El Salvador. To a significant degree, the political cultures of the Central American countries continue to be colored by the conflicts, assumptions, and institutions that grew out of these experiences.

Coffee flourished in the volcanic soils of Pacific Costa Rica's mid-altitude zones and by the 1830s it had become the country's major export.<sup>30</sup> But in addition to fertile earth, coffee required certain social arrangements that initially were more easily achieved in Costa Rica than in the rest of Central America. First, while in Costa Rica most potential coffee land was either in private hands or unoccupied, and could thus be cultivated and mortgaged, in Guatemala and El Salvador (and to a lesser degree in Nicaragua) it belonged largely to indigenous communities. Honduras generally had fewer lands adequate for coffee, but those that were suitable were largely village *ejidos* or commons. Second, coffee harvesting was a labor-intensive activity, and quality control was easiest with "free" rather than servile labor (which had nothing to lose). With the Conservative restoration outside of Costa Rica, Indians and other rural inhabitants worked their community lands with relatively little need to labor for wages. In Costa Rica, which had a small population and widely available land, labor was also scarce. But there family members and part-time harvesters provided a sufficient, though relatively well-paid, labor force for the small farms. Third, coffee had to be financed at both the production and processing stages. This implied private rather than community landholding, since loan recipients had to have collateral. Farmers who planted coffee instead of food crops also needed money to survive three or more years until harvest time, to purchase seedlings and tools, and to pay field hands. Owners of processing machinery, though generally more prosperous, required funds to acquire equipment and to advance loans to farmers. In Costa Rica, British coffee importers early on provided much

of the necessary capital. In the Conservative republics to the north, the Church and the largest merchants maintained a stranglehold on credit and few other sources of large-scale rapid loans were available.

The lure of coffee as a lucrative export crop was thus inextricably bound up with the Liberals' vision of how to transform society. In Costa Rica, where coffee cultivation first took hold, the Liberals' main goals—abolition of non-private landholding, universal secular education, limiting Church power, modernization of banking and transport—were achieved gradually and largely peacefully over the course of the nineteenth century. At least as early as the 1840s, Guatemalan and Salvadoran Liberals looked to Costa Rica's coffee-based prosperity as a model that ought to be followed in their own countries. In the mid-nineteenth century, the synthesis of inexpensive chemical dye substitutes for Central America's indigo, cochineal, and brazil wood undermined the economic model propounded by the Conservative regimes. In 1852, hurricane-force winds and two weeks of uninterrupted rains demolished Guatemala's nopal cactus plantations and finished off the cochineal trade.<sup>31</sup> Powerful merchants in the capital, who had dominated cochineal and been mostly sympathetic to the Conservatives, now moved to take control of coffee exports.<sup>32</sup> The ladino (non-Indian) peasants in the eastern zone who had been the main cochineal producers saw their livelihood destroyed. The Liberal argument that favored coffee as the engine of growth (and radical reform of colonial structures as the prerequisite to coffee) gained an increasing number of adherents.

The second period of Liberal ascendancy in Central America, after Gálvez's abortive attempt at change in the 1830s, began in the late 1860s when poor, largely ladino peasants who hoped to gain access to Church lands joined frustrated provincial coffee planters in a rebellion against Guatemala's Conservative regime. In 1871, Liberal guerrilla leader Justo Rufino Barrios seized the capital and ended over 30 years of Conservative rule in Guatemala. Two years later he became head of state and presided over a process of economic liberalization that exceeded even the wildest dreams of his Liberal predecessors of the 1830s.

Although the Guatemalan Liberals of the 1830s had acted against the interests of the Indian majority, ideologically they were still inspired by the French Revolution and by Spanish Liberalism's commitment to justice and equality. By the 1870s, however, Liberal ideology had come to emphasize order and progress and had absorbed a pseudoscientific, racist social Darwinism that confirmed old prejudices about—and justified the subjugation of—the

"inferior" Indian population.<sup>33</sup> If the Indians—still the majority of Guatemalans—were to progress, Liberals argued, order would first have to be imposed.

The first acts of the new regime signalled what kind of order this would be. Almost immediately, Barrios began to seize Church and Indian community lands and turn them over to private entrepreneurs. In 1877, a new law required occupants of community lands to purchase their plots within six months or forfeit their rights. Lands could then be auctioned to the highest bidder. In practice, the Indian communities that suffered most were those with lands in mid-altitude zones where coffee could be planted. But many highland communities had also owned land at lower altitudes and depended on access to this "hot" land to maintain dense populations and a degree of autonomy. Planters sometimes even acquired village lands in the high, "cold" zones that were useless for coffee, simply to deny access to Indians, who would then have to work for wages. In effect, Liberal land policy not only "freed" land for coffee, but also undercut the subsistence base of the Indian communities and forced their residents to become seasonal laborers on large coffee farms.<sup>34</sup>

The Liberals' labor policies were equally draconian. They enacted a forced labor system much like colonial repartimiento that obliged peasants to work on the large coffee farms. Landlords advanced loans to peasants who were then compelled to work off the debt. Interest, transportation from the worker's home to the farm, food, and other costs were often added to the debt, making it impossible to pay and permanently subordinating the worker to the landlord. All workers had to carry a card listing outstanding debts and their place of employment. Those who reneged on their "obligations" or who were found without this document were considered vagrants and could be captured by the militia, bound hand and foot, and brought to serve the landowners. Indians and other peasants now usually left their villages every year for months at a time and brought their entire families, including young children, to labor on the plantations.

The total destruction of the Indian communities' land base in the mid-altitude zones accelerated the process of hispanization. But in the highlands, where many villages retained some land, Indians clung desperately to the self-governing institutions established under the Spanish and resurrected under the Conservatives, such as the Indian mayors and judges. These, however, increasingly lost real power or had their authority restricted to the administration of religious affairs, such as the festive celebrations of patron saints' days that marked the high point of many communities' annual calendars. While ladinos

(the colonial castas) had been persecuted prior to the Conservative revolt in the 1830s, Liberal policies narrowed the gap between ladinos and whites and encouraged a de facto alliance of both against the Indians.<sup>35</sup> Aggressive ladinos used Liberal legislation to appropriate Indian lands and they frequently became the most important merchants, labor contractors, and politicians in Indian towns. Finally, while the Liberals' hopes of encouraging massive European immigration to "whiten" Guatemala never bore fruit, they did successfully encourage large numbers of foreigners, particularly Germans, to enter the coffee business.

In El Salvador, where Barrios helped install a Liberal president in 1876, the "reform's" impact on the peasantry was in many respects even more extreme than in Guatemala. In 1879 over a quarter of the country consisted of community lands, many on the volcanic slopes that were the best potential coffee zones.<sup>36</sup> Unlike Guatemala, where the mountains were taller and many Indians lived in cold highlands unsuitable for coffee, El Salvador's indigenous population was concentrated on the most fertile soil. In 1881 the "Law of Extinction of Communities" abolished communities' legal status and required that their lands be divided among the co-owners or revert to state ownership. The next year, another decree eradicated all village commons. The result was the most rapid and complete dispossession of the rural population anywhere in Central America and the accumulation of vast wealth in the hands of a tiny elite that came to be known as "the fourteen families." Given El Salvador's small size, dense population, and the thoroughness with which the peasantry was stripped of its land, the coffee planters did not have to resort to the same kind of forced labor recruitment employed by their counterparts in Guatemala. "For the landowners, the labor supply is so abundant," a United States diplomat wrote five decades after the Liberal reforms, "that a farm animal is worth much more than a worker."<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, the Liberal regime created rural military police-predecessors to the Salvadoran National Guard—that projected state and landlord power into even the most remote hamlets.

Liberalism in Honduras and Nicaragua came late and failed to achieve the same "successes" as in Guatemala and El Salvador. Honduras never became a major coffee producer, despite attempts to encourage cultivation in the 1870s and 1880s under a government installed by Barrios. The Honduran elite had always been among the weakest in the region and, in a country with particularly rugged terrain and fewer good soils, the problem of transport was critical. Railroad projects miscarried as a result of

government corruption and potential coffee zones inland had no outlet to either coast.<sup>38</sup> In contrast to the rest of Central America, Honduran peasant communities frequently remained in possession of their common lands until the mid-twentieth century.

Liberals only came to power in Nicaragua in 1893, under José Santos Zelaya. Conservative governments, beginning in the 1880s, had already decreed that peasants in areas of new coffee farms had to register with "agricultural judges" and carry work documents. As occurred in Guatemala and El Salvador, this sparked rural rebellions, which were violently crushed by the army.<sup>39</sup> To these repressive measures, Zelaya's government added a series of laws against "vagrancy" and for the privatization of church and community lands.<sup>40</sup> In certain zones, such as the northern Segovia mountains, the expropriation of village commons had dramatic consequences. But in most of the country, sparsely settled and dominated by large cattle haciendas, community lands were much less significant than in Guatemala or El Salvador. Zelaya, an inveterate nationalist, succeeded in recovering control over the Atlantic Mosquitia, which had been a British protectorate since the seventeenth century. He angered the United States, however, by refusing to grant exclusive rights to any canal that might be built in southern Nicaragua and by trying to involve Japan and Germany in such a project.<sup>41</sup> In 1909, Washington promoted a Conservative rebellion that toppled Zelaya and which soon after ushered in two decades of nearly continuous United States military occupation of Nicaragua.

#### CANALS, RAILROADS, AND NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY

As the narrowest point on the continent, Central America had been strategically important since the Spanish first used Panama as a staging area for the conquest of Peru. Two related transport problems are interwoven with the history of the isthmus. First, the issue of a transport route or canal between the Atlantic and Pacific. Second, that of rail links between interior coffee-growing zones and the coasts where the "golden grain" could be shipped to European and North American markets. Both matters raised complex problems of national sovereignty and dignity that are far from being resolved even in the late twentieth century.

Even during the colonial era, the most promising water route across the isthmus was the San Juan River, which flows along the Nicaraguan-Costa Rican border from the Caribbean into Lake Nicaragua.

Small ships could sail up the San Juan, cross the giant Lake, and unload passengers and cargo on the thin ribbon of land that separated the Lake from the Pacific. Like the overland crossing in Panama, this route's importance heightened with the 1849 California gold rush. Before the completion of the United States transcontinental railway 20 years later, the fastest and safest way for fortune-seekers to reach California from the populated eastern seaboard of the United States was to travel by ship to Central America's Caribbean coast, cross the isthmus, and continue north by ship in the Pacific. By the late 1840s United States shipping magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt had a line of steamers that plied the Río San Juan-Lake Nicaragua route. In the mid-1850s a transisthmian railway opened in Panama, which was still a remote, almost unpopulated province of Colombia.

One of the most bizarre yet significant episodes in Central American history occurred when William Walker, a pro-slavery soldier-of-fortune from Tennessee, invaded Nicaragua in 1855 with a small mercenary force and the backing of a faction of Liberals. Walker, who helped the Liberals vanquish the local Conservatives, hoped to found new slave states in Central America for the United States and to take over Vanderbilt's transport company. After turning on his Nicaraguan allies, he named himself president, declared English an official language, and reestablished slavery. Walker received diplomatic recognition from Washington, which greatly alarmed Central Americans and the British. After he launched an invasion of Costa Rica as a prelude to seizing the rest of the region, the united armies of the Central American republics, backed by Vanderbilt's funds and British arms, marched on Nicaragua and, in a long and bloody campaign, defeated the invaders. The war against Walker remains a potent symbol of the struggle for sovereignty, especially in Nicaragua and Costa Rica, where parks and schools are still named for heroes who fought the invasion.

In the late nineteenth century, Central American governments desirous of effectively incorporating remote areas and linking coffee zones to the coasts endeavored to improve ports and build railways. The Honduran effort in 1867-1871 failed due to massive contractor fraud, leaving the capital Tegucigalpa even today without rail links to either coast. But over the next two decades, foreign companies tied to the banana transnationals constructed a railroad linking the center of Guatemala to the Pacific and lines in Costa Rica between the capital and both coasts (a Guatemalan line to the Atlantic opened in 1908). In Nicaragua and El Salvador lines connected the main towns and cities of the Pacific area.<sup>42</sup>

Apart from providing an outlet for the region's coffee, railroads in Central America were important for two reasons. First, governments unable to raise funds typically offered generous concessions to foreign companies to build and operate railways. Sometimes such deals included extravagant land grants, as when Costa Rica in 1884 rewarded Long Island native Minor Keith with the right to 800,000 acres—nearly seven percent of the entire country—in return for paying the national debt and completing a rail line to the Atlantic.<sup>43</sup> Second, railroad building—and not long after, banana plantations and the construction of the Panama Canal—spurred new migrations to Central America's Caribbean coast that permanently changed the culture and ethnic composition of the region.

The major difficulty Keith faced in building the Atlantic railroad through the almost impenetrable rainforests of Costa Rica's Caribbean coast was finding laborers able and willing to withstand the abysmal working conditions. Yellow fever and malaria were rampant, insects and poisonous snakes abounded, it rained heavily and constantly, and living quarters were primitive. Keith first imported Chinese workers, many of whom died or fled to urban areas. He then imported 1,500 Italians who went on strike and demanded to be repatriated.

By the 1890s, thousands of West Indians, fleeing poverty and landlessness on their native islands, had come to Central America to build railways and ports, toil on banana plantations, and work on the French and later the American Panama Canal projects. Though these Afro-Caribbean laborers, unlike the Chinese and Italians, may have had immunities to some tropical diseases, they too died in huge numbers. An estimated 4,000 Jamaicans perished during the construction of just the first 25 miles of Keith's Atlantic railroad in Costa Rica.<sup>44</sup> Despite this terrible toll, economic prospects in the West Indies were so dismal that a veritable diaspora of English-speaking blacks flowed out of the islands to the coast of Central America. From Panama in the south to Belize in the north, the Caribbean coast of the isthmus was settled by people who contributed immeasurably to the region's development, but who (except in the British colony Belize) had very different historical experiences and traditions than those of the dominant Hispanic cultures.

The construction of the Panama Canal revolutionized transport in the entire region and brought a new nation into being. Until the late nineteenth century, the Río San Juan-Lake Nicaragua route appeared to be the obvious location for a transisthmian canal, and Nicaragua was the focus of geopolitical contention between the United States and Britain. In

1881 a French company started construction of a canal in Panama but went bankrupt eight years later. In 1889-1893, a United States company began preliminary work on a Nicaraguan canal, but it too ceased operations when funds ran low.<sup>45</sup> Lobbyists for the Panama route utilized the 1902 eruption of Momotombo Volcano on Lake Managua—90 miles north of the proposed route—to convince geographically naive United States senators that Nicaragua was not a suitable place for a canal. The United States then acquired the rights of the French company that had begun work in Panama and negotiated with the Colombian government for the perpetual lease of a strip of land across the isthmus. When the Colombian congress refused to ratify the treaty, the United States backed a revolt by canal proponents that led to Panama's independence from Colombia. The new republic's declaration of independence and its constitution were drafted in a Washington hotel room and its first flag was sewn not in Panama, but in Highland Falls, New York.<sup>46</sup>

If Panama owed its emergence as an independent nation solely to United States intervention, the institutions created in the Canal Zone constituted an even more painful, problematical legacy. Extending for five miles on either side of the canal, the Zone was officially United States territory, what Panamanian leader Omar Torrijos later termed bitterly "a fifth frontier," in addition to the Costa Rican and Colombian borders and the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. The United States engineers and administrators who came to build and govern the waterway had been paid in gold, while the West Indian laborers who actually dug the ditches received silver. This distinction became the basis of a system of discrimination in the Canal Zone, modelled on the "Jim Crow" racism of the United States South. Most Panamanians had some African ancestry and in the Canal Zone, where many worked, they found water fountains, toilets, schools and clinics euphemistically labelled "gold only" or "silver only."<sup>47</sup> This institutionalized bias in the United States enclave, as well as the tiny white elite's domination of politics (until 1968), imbued Panamanian nationalism with a particularly strong ethnic dimension and a pronounced anti-United States tone.

The Costa Rican land grant to railroad baron Minor Keith formed the nucleus of what was to become in 1899 the United Fruit Company, the massive banana enterprise that soon also expanded into Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, Jamaica, Cuba, and Colombia. The banana company, like its competitors Cuyamel Fruit (acquired in 1929) and Standard Fruit in Honduras and Nicaragua, operated from enclaves where national governments had little real

power. The company had its own stores, railroads, port facilities, shipping fleet, and police force. Its top management and middle-level employees typically spoke English rather than Spanish. While this sometimes permitted English-speaking West Indian migrants a degree of upward mobility in company ranks, it exacerbated antagonisms with both national governments and Hispanic plantation laborers. Top management remained exclusively white and North American.

The availability of plantation work generated new waves of migration within the isthmus, as well as from the Caribbean. Nicaraguans travelled to Costa Rica and Panama to clear the jungle with axes. Salvadorans flocked to the *bananeras* on the north coast of Honduras. Guaymí Indians from Panama increasingly abandoned their traditional way of life for stints of plantation labor. Wages tended to be somewhat higher in the banana zones than in other agricultural jobs, but working conditions could hardly have been worse. "We had a hard and humiliating life," Costa Rican union leader Carlos Luis Fallas remembered about the early 1930s.

In the immense banana plantations of the Atlantic, there was not a single clinic, nor medical services of any type. . . . The commissaries, through which the United exercised a total monopoly of commerce, sold articles of whatever quality they pleased and at the most scandalous prices, even though through the tolerance of our government, the company did not pay import taxes. . . . And since the United's ships 'couldn't wait at port,' the jobs had to be done at any time and under any circumstances. Sometimes sick men had to harvest in furious storms. Sometimes they had to finish hauling the bananas at night under the rain, using gas lamps for light, struggling with frisky mules, running on badly constructed rails, crossing improvised and dangerous bridges. The same accidents occurred time and again.<sup>48</sup>

By the first decades of the twentieth century bananas were by far the largest export in Honduras, rivalled coffee in Costa Rica, and were among the top dollar earners in the other producing countries. The companies, particularly United Fruit, meddled constantly in politics and contributed to the unenviable stereotype of the Central American countries as "banana republics"—impoverished, violent, corrupt, comic-opera nations, where presidents were imposed and deposed at the whim of foreign fruit magnates. Honduras, in particular, with a weak elite and a history of corruption in high places, was particularly vulnerable and became the quintessential banana republic. United Fruit installed "its" first president there in 1911, with the aid of the United States

consul, and remained a constant presence in national politics. Even in countries where United did not directly control the executive branch, its economic importance gave it immense power. Central American governments frequently granted it huge concessions of land and scandalous tax breaks, winked at labor law violations, and provided troops to quell strikes.

Racism in the Panama Canal Zone and banana company interference in politics were not the only challenges to dignity and sovereignty Central America experienced in the early twentieth century. In Nicaragua, where Zelaya was toppled by United States-supported Conservatives in 1909 after he executed two United States mercenaries caught laying mines in the Río San Juan, United States troops landed in 1910 and were an almost constant presence from 1912 to 1932. Ostensibly, the Marines arrived to put down a combined Liberal-Conservative revolt against the Washington-backed regime that replaced Zelaya. But Nicaraguan governments during the Marine occupation closely followed Washington's dictates, granting the United States exclusive rights to build a canal (thus blocking any potential competition with Panama), conceding offshore islands to Colombia (to assuage bruised feelings about Panama's secession), and permitting North Americans to administer the country's customs service, which was used to pay debts to United States banks and citizens.

In 1927 a dissident Liberal officer, Augusto César Sandino, launched a guerrilla war to expel "the blond invaders" from Nicaragua and "defend national dignity."<sup>49</sup> Sandino's struggle against the United States Marines touched profound yearnings for sovereignty throughout Latin America. His general staff included citizens of El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Colombia and Mexico and his troops incorporated representatives from all of Central America. The Mexican government, recently emerged from its own revolution and conflicts with the United States, also lent some support. Ideologically, "the General of Free Men," as some called him, professed a mix of anarchist, mystical, and nationalist beliefs. The Communists supported him in the first years of his war, but he refused to adopt their recommendations and they denounced him as a traitor.

The war against the United States Marines was brutal and prolonged. In 1927, when Sandino's forces occupied Ocotol, in northern Nicaragua, the Marines responded with devastating aerial strafing and bombardment that left several hundred dead, including numerous civilians. This was "the first organized dive-bombing attack in history—long before the Nazi Luftwaffe was popularly credited with the

'innovation."<sup>50</sup> Sandino's guerrillas dealt harshly with informers, executing some with a famous "vest cut" that involved slicing off the captive's limbs with a machete. United States Marines, who lambasted Sandino's soldiers as bandits and mule thieves, on several occasions decapitated prisoners and displayed the heads to intimidate the local population.<sup>51</sup>

Sandino fought the Marines to a draw in a cat-and-mouse struggle that lasted until the United States, withdrawal in early 1933. The Marines' departure heralded a new era in United States-Latin American relations, Franklin Roosevelt's Good Neighbor policy. Before leaving, the Marines established and trained a new National Guard to take over the job of keeping law and order. The Guard's first Nicaraguan head was Anastasio Somoza García, a parvenu who married the daughter of an elite family and who charmed the Americans with colloquial English acquired in his days as a used car salesman in Philadelphia. In 1934, Somoza, together with the United States ambassador, helped engineer the assassination of Sandino, who had come unarmed to Managua to negotiate and dine with the president. Less than three years later, after staging a coup, Somoza became president himself, initiating 43 years of family rule characterized by a grotesque venality unusual even by the standards of Latin American dictators. Just as the United States-sponsored Canal Zone fed powerful anti-American sentiments in Panama, Sandino's murder and Washington's support for the regimes of Somoza and his two sons reinforced the strong nationalism and the acute sensitivity about foreign intervention of Nicaraguan political culture. In the late 1970s, these smoldering currents would coalesce in a movement—today's Sandinistas—which, with Sandino as an inspiration, brought down the last of the Somozas and led Nicaraguans in another protracted struggle with the United States.

#### THE 1930s DEPRESSION AND THE RISE OF THE CAUDILLOS

By the 1920s, the Central American countries had established "dessert economies," based almost entirely on the export of bananas and coffee. This concentration on just two main export items (Panama now had the canal and Belize timber) brought extraordinary vulnerability to oscillations in the North American and European economies. Coffee prices began to tumble even before the depression hit Wall Street in 1929. When the slump struck the developed countries that purchased Central

America's exports, the region's economies went into a tailspin.

Countries that specialized heavily in coffee, especially El Salvador and to a lesser degree Costa Rica, were hardest hit by the drop in export earnings and income. Because United Fruit controlled about 60 percent of the international banana market, it was able to maintain fairly stable banana prices and profits by reducing its purchases of fruit from independent farmers and raising efficiency on its own plantations.<sup>52</sup> Banana economies like that of Honduras were thus somewhat less affected by the depression than coffee economies. In both sectors, however, unemployment soared and wages, the value of national currencies, and government revenues plummeted. The 1930s were marked by intense social unrest, the rise of new social movements, and a transition from Liberal oligarchic to one-man dictatorial rule in most countries.

The greatest turmoil occurred in El Salvador in 1932, where the rural poor had lost their community lands in the 1880s Liberal reforms and for the most part no longer had plots to farm or jobs on the coffee plantations. Economic misery provided a fertile ground for union organizers. The recently formed Communist Party recruited tens of thousands of members into a Rural Workers Federation. Party organizers included several local Indian leaders, as well as Agustín Farabundo Martí—a veteran of Sandino's war against the Marines—and Jorge Anaya—a talented Mexican agitator who addressed crowds of peasants in a Nahuatl (Aztec) dialect similar to the Pipil spoken in western El Salvador.<sup>53</sup> In late 1931, General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez seized power from a weak but well-intentioned reformist president who had been unable to meet the military payroll for several months because of the economic crisis. The Communists were at first cautiously optimistic about the coup. But in January 1932, when they won several local elections in the largely Indian western zone and the government refused to certify the results, events spiraled out of control.

One night in the last week of January 1932, a spectacular eruption shook El Salvador's Izalco Volcano, "the lighthouse of the Pacific," and spewed molten lava and hot rocks on the surrounding area. Within hours, thousands of Indians armed with machetes stormed surrounding towns, where they killed police and government officials, cut telegraph wires, looted stores, and torched houses of the local elite. In some nearby areas, non-Indian peasants joined in as well. The insurrection's coincidence with Izalco's eruption was pure, albeit dramatic, happenstance. The Communists had planned the revolt, though Party

leaders—almost all captured and imprisoned days before the rebellion—had little if any control over what happened. In most places where the uprisings occurred, they lasted only a few days before the military arrived in force. The rebels killed a total of perhaps 100 persons. In the succeeding weeks, however, the army and police slaughtered a number estimated at 10,000-30,000—roughly 1 or 2 percent of the country's entire population (and more in the western zone)—an event that came to be known as *la matanza*, the massacre.<sup>54</sup>

The 1932 *matanza* remains the pivotal event in recent Salvadoran history and a key reference point for today's political adversaries. The massacre marked the virtual end of indigenous culture in El Salvador, since in the repression that followed the revolt it became dangerous to wear Indian clothes, speak Pipil, or even carry a machete. It also contributed to a hardening of attitudes and an aversion to compromise that characterizes much of the Salvadoran upper class and military to this day. In effect, the *matanza*, threats, and repression, rather than social reform, became the favored model for responding to political demands from subordinate groups. The icons of 1932 continue to exercise a powerful, symbolic influence in El Salvador. One of the main right-wing death squads that emerged in the 1970s was christened with the name of General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, mastermind of the 1932 carnage. The leftist guerrilla coalition founded in 1980 is called the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, named for the Communist leader executed in 1932.

Elsewhere on the isthmus economic deterioration in the 1930s also fueled social unrest and an upsurge of union organizing among urban artisans (shoemakers, tailors, typesetters, bakers, carpenters), miners, and plantation workers. Frequently, the newly formed Communist Parties gained support in these hard-hit sectors, though in Honduras and Guatemala the labor movement and the Left were repressed by the new dictatorial regimes of Tiburcio Carías Andino and Jorge Ubico. In Nicaragua, still dominated by cattle and coffee, with fewer artisans and a smaller plantation sector, Marxists and labor organizers made little headway until the 1940s, when they profited from a brief political opening and then were crushed by Somoza. In Costa Rica in 1934, 10,000 Communist-led banana workers struck against United Fruit in one of the largest labor actions against a United States company ever to take place in Latin America. This set the stage for the Costa Rican Communists to play an increasingly important political role, including participation in a coalition

government with Social Christian reformists in 1940-1948.

The rise of military dictatorships like those of Hernández Martínez in El Salvador (1931-44), Ubico in Guatemala (1931-44), Carías in Honduras (1933-49), and Somoza García in Nicaragua (1937-56) signalled the demise of the classical Liberal regimes that had dominated the region since the late nineteenth century (though with less success in impoverished Honduras and Marine-occupied Nicaragua). The advent of these *caudillos* or strongmen reflected the depression-era collapse of exports, the depletion of state treasuries, and the consequent incapacity of Liberal governments to fund restive militaries or otherwise take decisive action. The dominant groups that previously felt their concerns were best served by Liberals who promised *laissez-faire* and modernized transport and banking increasingly organized to demand both defense of export interests through strict economic controls (balanced budgets, spending restraint) and repression of popular discontent.<sup>55</sup> Even in Costa Rica, where democratic traditions were stronger and the military weaker, the president elected in 1936, León Cortés Castro, mimicked the *caudillo* style, refusing to permit elected Communist legislators to take their seats, attempting to hand pick his successor, and repeatedly professing his admiration for Hitler.

In the 1940s, diverse forces attempted with varying success to transform Central America's autocratic regimes, single-crop economies, and unequal societies. In Costa Rica, the president elected at the beginning of the decade with upper-class support, Rafael Angel Calderón Guardia, revealed himself to be a serious (though previously closeted) reformer who, governing with Catholic Church and Communist support, instituted a labor code and a social security system. When his successor Teodoro Picado proposed enacting an income tax, the government's remaining elite support evaporated. Middle-class discontent, while exacerbated by corruption and by the Communists' prominence, resulted instead from the limited opportunities for upward mobility available in a coffee-, banana-, and sugar-based economy where the traditional upper class had monopolized bank credit and state resources.

Following a disputed presidential election in 1948, a peculiar alliance of middle-class social democrats and traditional oligarchs forced the Social Christian-Communist coalition from power after a two-month civil war. The social democrats, however, under José Figueres, controlled the arms of the winning side and opted to rule by decree following the conflict. Rather than dispensing with the previous governments'

labor reforms, as their erstwhile upper-class allies had hoped, Figueres and his supporters took two steps which were to radically reshape Costa Rican society. First, they nationalized banking and began to diversify the economy, channelling resources to areas of the country, to middle-class investors and to productive sectors that previously received few loans. Second, they abolished the army, which they feared might serve as an instrument of an upper-class coup, and expressed a commitment to spend the resources that would otherwise have gone to the military on education and social needs. Finally, after 18 months of *junta* rule, they turned power over to the oligarchical candidate who had won the 1948 election, but who had never taken office, thus restoring an almost uninterrupted pattern of smooth electoral transitions.

In Guatemala, attempts at reform were ultimately frustrated with singularly tragic consequences. In 1944, demonstrations by students and professionals against Ubico drove the dictator to resign. A triumvirate of young military officers took power, authored a new constitution, and held elections in which an exiled schoolteacher and philosopher, Juan José Arévalo, became president. Arévalo restored press freedom and initiated reforms that included labor laws, social welfare, and health programs, a social security system, and abolition of the vagrancy laws that under Ubico had in effect required rural Indians to perform forced labor. These measures were hardly to the liking of Guatemala's traditional elite, but it was the agrarian reform proposed by Arévalo's successor, Jacobo Arbenz, that tipped the balance against the reformers. Arbenz proposed expropriating idle properties, including those of United Fruit, compensating the owners, and turning plots of land over to landless peasants. This proposal ironically was hardly more radical than the land reforms Kennedy's Alliance for Progress encouraged throughout Latin America little more than a decade later. But at the height of the cold war in a country in the United States' strategic backyard, this attack on United Fruit and the presence of a few Communists in Arbenz's administration set off alarm bells in Washington. In 1954, a disaffected colonel leading a mercenary army trained and equipped by the United States Central Intelligence Agency invaded from Honduras, overthrew Arbenz, and ushered in three decades of virtually uninterrupted military rule. This was the first United States military intervention in Latin America in the more than two decades since the Good Neighbor policy had brought the Marines home from Nicaragua. Since the CIA's 1954 coup, Guatemala has had the most consistently dismal human rights record of any country on the continent.

## POST-1950 EXPORT-LED GROWTH: PRELUDE TO THE CRISES OF THE 1970S

Post-World War II prosperity in the United States and the reconstruction of Europe and Japan had a far-reaching impact on Central American societies. The fertile Pacific coastal plain, from southern Mexico to northern Costa Rica, was too low and hot for coffee and not quite humid enough for bananas, but it was among the best land in the world for growing cotton. As Japan reconstructed its powerful textile industries in the late 1940s and as the Korean War heated up in the early 1950s, cotton prices soared and landowners throughout Pacific Central America converted extensively operated cattle haciendas into modern farms. The widespread introduction of DDT and related insecticides in the late 1940s not only made it possible to kill insect pests on cotton much more effectively and inexpensively, but also facilitated control of malaria in the coastal lowlands.<sup>56</sup>

On the heels of the cotton boom came a new expansion of beef production geared primarily to the United States market. The Pacific coastal plain had been a livestock zone since the colonial period, but its cattle went exclusively to local and regional markets. Beginning in the early 1950s, the rise of fast food chains and the exhaustion of many grazing lands in the United States generated mounting demand for inexpensive, grass-fed Central American beef. Modern slaughterhouses opened throughout the region and ranchers extended pastures into new areas. Many expressed hope that beef cattle would bring prosperity to Central America in much the way that coffee had almost 100 years before.

The third boom to hit Pacific Central America involved another traditional product, sugar. When Washington broke relations with Havana following the 1959 Cuban Revolution, the island's United States sugar quota was reassigned to other Caribbean and Central American nations. Many Cuban sugar mill owners also came to Central America and established themselves in their old line of business. Then, in the early 1960s, the formation of a Central American Common Market brought new soft-drink and processed food industries that consumed huge quantities of sugar. Cane fields and huge new refineries became common features of the landscape.

The cotton, beef, and sugar booms all occurred at roughly the same time and in the same general area. Like the earlier period of export-led growth based on coffee in the nineteenth century, they had devastating consequences for the region's peasants and fueled vast social upheavals. In the late 1940s, the Pacific coastal plain from Mexico to Costa Rica was dominated by large cattle estates which frequently

allowed employees or nearby peasants to cultivate small plots of maize and beans, either as tenants or sharecroppers or as part payment for their labor. As long as cattle remained a relatively low profit business and few other options for using the land existed, this system of mixed large and small enterprises allowed the rural poor to survive and provided the well-to-do with an easily available labor supply. Especially in El Salvador, to an important degree in Nicaragua, and less so in the other countries, the Pacific lowlands were the last region where the rural poor retained significant access to land.

The violent crises that shook so much of the isthmus in the 1970s and after have their immediate roots in the social disruption that took place as a result of the cotton, beef, and sugar booms. Just as the late nineteenth-century coffee frenzy in Guatemala and El Salvador deprived peasants of their lands in the mid-altitude zones, the mid-twentieth-century cotton, beef and sugar expansion dispossessed the tenants, sharecroppers, and smallholders of the Pacific lowlands. Landlords often refused to renew peasants' rental or sharecropping agreements, expanded into smallholding areas where owners lacked sound title to the land, or simply offered long-time hacienda residents nominal payments to secure their departure. Harvesting cotton and sugar provided some jobs, but these tended to be seasonal and very poorly paid. The cattle ranches absorbed very little labor and most of the non-harvesting operations on the other farms were carried out with tractors and other machinery.

Working conditions generally did not improve with this modernization of production, even though Central America in the 1950s and 1960s had some of the highest rates of economic growth of any region in the world. Indeed, the dispossession of yet another sector of the rural poor kept wages low and contributed to weakening family and community ties, as massive numbers of desperate people fled to new urban slums or migrated across the countryside in search of work. Displaced, suddenly landless workers frequently clustered, with or without their families, in dusty, wretched new settlements next to the cotton fields or on the thin strips of state land separating the farms' barbed wire from adjacent roads.

The growing reliance on chemical insecticides, herbicides, and fertilizers also posed new dangers for farm laborers. Poisoning became a familiar problem everywhere and in Guatemala and El Salvador it was not uncommon for crop duster airplanes to spray cotton fields with deadly pesticides while migrant families picked the bolls from the plants below. Throughout the Pacific zone, aerial spraying withered the remaining peasants' crops, contaminated

drinking water, and killed wildlife. Levels of carcinogenic residues in mothers' milk skyrocketed dangerously.<sup>57</sup>

Governments throughout the region encouraged the new model of development as a way of diversifying highly vulnerable coffee- and banana-based economies. In the 1950s to late 1970s, state responses to the social tensions unleashed by the cotton, beef, and sugar booms varied considerably in the different countries, reflecting distinct assumptions about elite goals and responsibilities, as well as contrasting levels of political pressure from below. In Guatemala, where elites for the most part remained contemptuous and fearful of the Indian majority and where Arbenz's abortive attempt at land reform raised the specter of communism, the dominant groups remained intransigent defenders of the status quo, resisting even calls for mild social and political reform issued by the Kennedy White House. This was true as well in El Salvador, where memories of the 1932 peasant uprising and the *matanza* continued to shape the thinking of the military regimes and the upper class. In Nicaragua, the Somozas managed the emerging conflicts with more sophisticated populist rhetoric and a combination of carrot-and-stick tactics that either absorbed and paid off or selectively, albeit unmercifully, repressed key individuals and groups.<sup>58</sup>

The absence of major conflicts in Honduras and Costa Rica, which included only small portions of Pacific Central America's "fertile crescent" and were thus less affected by the cotton boom, contrasts with the experiences of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Honduras, the poorest country in the region, remained something of a backwater. With its capital distant from the Pan-American Highway and a series of ineffectual, if relatively benign, military governments (some of a reformist bent), Honduras continued to experience less development than its neighbors. Thousands of smallholders lost their lands as a result of the beef boom and the Honduran peasant movement became the most powerful in the region. But municipal landholding was still sufficiently entrenched to provide some access to land and defuse the worst tensions. Costa Rica, unlike its neighbors, embarked on a massive program of social spending that in a short time gave it health and literacy indices approaching or equalling those of developed countries, such as the United States. The country had hardly eliminated poverty and in essence it remained a vulnerable dessert economy—based now on coffee, bananas, sugar, and beef. But a broad consensus existed that gave middle- and even some working-class groups ample access to education, credit from the nationalized banks, free or low-cost

medicine, state pensions, and extensive social services.

Panama's experience in the late 1960s and 1970s suggested that military rule did not necessarily mean control by conservative traditional upper classes. In 1964, when students tried to raise the national flag on a Canal Zone pole and were thwarted by police, rioting ensued and United States troops operating on Panamanian territory killed 21 and wounded over 400. Four years later, a group of young army officers inspired by "the martyrs of 64" overthrew a civilian government dominated by members of the tiny white elite. Omar Torrijos, mastermind of the coup, raised the hopes of Panamanians, especially blacks and mulattoes, who had long seen the "gold only" United States zone as an affront to their dignity. "I do not want to enter into history," Torrijos declared upon taking power. "I want to enter into the Canal Zone."

Panama under Torrijos was a mass of contradictions. The economy, centered around canal-related services and offshore banking, depended much less on agro-exports than the rest of the region. While civilians nominally held office, real power was centralized in the Panamanian Defense Force (which became increasingly corrupt after the General's 1981 death in an air accident). Even though the government for the first time made major strides in health care, education, and communications in rural areas, the military dealt harshly with opponents who overstepped the narrow boundaries of acceptable criticism. Though Torrijos lived more modestly than most leaders of militaries in neighboring countries, he fostered a personality cult and saw that his portrait appeared on walls all over Panama. His most important accomplishment, achieved a decade after seizing power, was to negotiate the eventual return of the United States zone and the canal to Panamanian sovereignty.

Belize's problems in this period were rather different than those of the other Central American countries. Despite the immense gap that separated the colony's majority English-speaking black population from neighboring Hispanic cultures, Guatemala had long claimed Belize as part of its territory and the military periodically rattled swords and threatened to invade. Trucks in Guatemala bore stickers claiming "Belize is Guatemala's" and official maps showed the country as a department or province not separated by a national boundary. The Guatemalan threat was the principal reason Belize remained a British colony long after the United Kingdom granted

Jamaica and most other Caribbean possessions independence. British troops patrolled the steamy jungles along the border and provided a deterrent against Guatemalan aggression.

Although Belize became a minor participant in the beef and sugar expansion that affected the rest of Central America, its economy was tiny, lacked dynamism, and offered few employment opportunities. More than any other country in the region, Belize came to rely heavily on remittances from citizens who migrated to the United States to work. Thousands of Belizeans settled in central Brooklyn, New York City, where many worked as nurses and medical technicians or in other service positions. The extent of this outward migration was striking. In 1965, for example, 14,000 persons were officially listed as employed in Belize, but 22,000 received income from relatives abroad. Additional resources came in the form of United Kingdom grants and loans and large transfers of Church funds.<sup>59</sup> Ten years later, the number of emigrants each year was equivalent to 84 percent of the country's natural population increase.<sup>60</sup> In the 1980s, thousands of Guatemalans and Salvadorans fled civil wars at home to Belize, changing the ethnic composition and economy.

The expansion of export agriculture, changing economies and land tenure patterns, nationalism and foreign intervention, and the political cultures of dominant and subordinate groups need to be taken into account in understanding the differences between the Central American countries and the complex crises that have shaken the isthmus since the late 1970s. The Nicaraguan revolution and the *contras*, the Salvadoran civil war, and the Guatemalan guerrilla movement and the military's war of extermination against the Indians can only be understood in light of how the region's shared history and its different histories have been filtered through the particular prisms of the key groups of historical actors in each country. The United States, ever present in the region's politics and economies and home to growing numbers of Central American refugees and migrants, has been a major player, some would say a determining one. But much of Central American history has been a struggle by contending groups to remake their societies in the face of what they considered overwhelmingly mighty forces. This contention, as the conflicts of the 1970s and after show, has constituted an element with which even the most formidable powers have had to reckon.

## ENDNOTES

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