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# The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America In The Cold War



## Synopsis

After decades of bloody revolutions and political terror, many scholars and politicians lament the rise and brief influence of the left in Latin America; since the triumph of Castro they have accused the left there of rejecting democracy, embracing Communist totalitarianism, and prompting both revolutionary violence and a right-wing backlash. *The Last Colonial Massacre* challenges these views. Using Guatemala as a case study, Greg Grandin argues that the Cold War in Latin America was a struggle not between American liberalism and Soviet Communism but between two visions of democracy. The main effect of United States intervention in Latin America, Grandin shows, was not the containment of Communism but the elimination of home-grown concepts of social democracy. Through unprecedented archival research and gripping personal testimonies, Grandin uncovers the hidden history of the Latin American Cold War: of hidebound reactionaries intent on holding on to their own power and privilege; of Mayan Marxists, blending indigenous notions of justice with universal ideas of freedom and equality; and of a United States supporting new styles of state terror throughout the continent. Drawing from declassified U.S. documents, Grandin exposes Washington's involvement in the 1966 secret execution of more than thirty Guatemalan leftists, which, he argues, prefigured the later wave of disappearances in Chile and Argentina. Impassioned but judicious, *The Last Colonial Massacre* is history of the highest order--a work that will dramatically recast our understanding of Latin American politics and the triumphal role of the United States in the Cold War and beyond.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"In a series of remarkable biographies Grandin shows how men and women made high politics and high politics made them, demonstrating that the Cold War was waged not only in the airy game rooms of nuclear strategists but 'in the closed quarters of family, sex, and community.'" (London Review of Books) "A searing indictment of U.S. imperialism in Latin America." (Science & Society) "This work admirably explains the process in which hopes of democracy were brutally repressed in Guatemala and its people experienced a civil war lasting for half a century." (International History Review) "A richly detailed, humane, and passionately subversive portrait of inspiring reformers tragically redefined by the Cold War as enemies of the state." (Journal of American History)" --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Latin America today is seen by many as the crown jewel of the U.S. effort to spread freedom throughout the world. During the Cold War, the argument goes, the United States defeated Latin American communism, paving the way for the region's embrace of capitalist democracy and making Latin America the model to be emulated around the globe. *The Last Colonial Massacre* mounts a powerful challenge to this view. Through unprecedented archival research and gripping personal testimonies, Greg Grandin uncovers a hidden history of the Latin American Cold War: of hidebound reactionaries holding on to their power and privilege; of Mayan Marxists blending indigenous notions of justice with universal ideas of equality; and of a United States supporting new styles of state terror throughout the continent. Drawing from declassified U.S. documents, Grandin exposes Washington's involvement in the 1966 secret execution of over thirty Guatemalan leftists, prefiguring later disappearances in Chile and Argentina. With Guatemala as his case study, Grandin also argues that the Latin American Cold War was a struggle not between political liberalism and Soviet communism but two visions of democracy--one vibrant and egalitarian, the other tepid and unequal. And ultimately the conflict's main effect was to eliminate home-grown notions of social democracy. Grandin provocatively concludes that the definition of democracy now being extolled as the best weapon in the war against terror is itself a product of terror.

Great read. Dr. Grandin is both knowledgeable and concise. The depth of research and cohesiveness throughout this book is impeccable. I highly recommend this book to anyone who is looking to understand the effects of Latin America and the Cold war.

Terrible book but not the sellers fault

- originated in Washington, not Moscow, and was far more bloody and destructive than in eastern Europe. Grandin's tour de force of the cold war's hot-blooded reign in Latin America focuses on Guatemala, where it began with the emergence from dictatorship in the "democratic spring" of 1944, and ended with the US-backed return to business as usual in 1954. The cynical rhetoric employed in Guatemala and elsewhere was identical to Moscow's in its own sphere, and makes this book a revealing comparison to Constantine Pleshakov's "There is no Freedom Without Bread" (reviewed elsewhere.) The essential origin of the modern cold war began, of course, in Russia in 1917, when the propertyless classes began entering the political sphere demanding forms of democracy relevant to themselves, going beyond the middle class interpretation of constitutional rights and civil society to give democracy a material basis. Ever since, confused liberal reformers have recoiled in horror and sided with counter-revolution, leaving Lenin or Castro to harvest the fruits of mass movements they refuse to touch or lead. In Latin America, this spectacle of "democrats" fearing democracy reaped the grisliest harvest in formal peacetime, and remains unknown to most North Americans for whom Solidarity and Lech Walesa are household names. Grandin's style is anecdotal, as a previous reviewer states, and somewhat rambling; but he is assuming a familiarity with the subject that may be a stretch for the general reader precisely because Latin America in the cold war is terra incognita north of the Rio Grande. He is right to question the notion of "radicalism as the cause of radicalization," as American/conservative academics are prone to do to explain why this movement or how that leader "went Communist;" seeing Latin Americans as "children of Cain" out to kill for killing's sake. But while it's essential to focus on the context of the cold war as producing this carnage, it's also true that this period dovetails with a history of state and insurrectional violence in the region. Like eastern Europe, repression did not just descend from the sky after 1944, but rather world politics outside stimulated and exploited old desires for new deals and the traditional reaction to them by those holding the cards. Of all the books on Guatemala and Latin America in this period, one of the better ones.

I found myself wanting to put this book down a lot and did not understand why the author was focusing on the things he did. I must say I was mistaken. Most of the other posters mention the Mayans, but it must be added into consideration the role of the PGT in their aiding the indigenous in applying for land titles through legal channels despite repression. There isn't a lot of contemporary history in this book as I feel the author focuses his efforts on one community and its history of relation to the state. I can't stress enough, that if you're unfamiliar with the region, this will be a tough

read. However, it is well done. If one is so inclined the same publisher put out a book by Neil Harvey The Chiapas Rebellion. Chiapas is the state of Mexico next door to Guatemala so many of the ethnic and land ownership problems are similar and parallel each other through the 20th century. Worth the money, but don't be discouraged if you don't get why the author treats the topics he does, they are relevant in that many criticize the left in a blanket fashion during the Cold War to justify their worldviews. The PGT and the struggles of the Mayans in this corner of Central America and the treatment of them by Grandin refute those assertions.

Many books discuss the violence and political turmoil in Guatemala. What Grandin has done is add a wonderfully distinctive and long-overdue Mayan voice to a terrible history. He describes the May 29, 1978 massacre of approximately 100 Q'eqchi' Indians in Panzos, Alta Verapaz. Grandin profiles a number of Q'eqchi' throughout his book culminating in Mama Maquin, the Q'eqchi' woman leader who was killed attempting to deliver a letter of protest to the local governmental authorities in Panzos. Grandin lays the foundation for the 1978 massacre by going back to the critical events of the 1950s Arbenz administration. He describes how the Q'eqchi' were increasingly dispossessed of their land, going from 97 Q'eqchi' in 1888 owning fincas, or large plantations, to just 9 in 1930 and then dropping to none in 1949. (p. 26) After World War I, German immigrants to the Alta Verapaz acquired more and more land. Grandin notes: "Swastikas hung from municipal buildings and flew above German plantations." (pages 24-25.) Perhaps the gem of Grandin's book is a quotation from a portion of Arbenz's sole campaign stop to the Alta Verapaz during the election of 1950. The speech was translated into Q'eqchi' word for word as it was given by Arbenz. Here is an excerpt: "From the time when Alta Verapaz was populated by only the brave Q'eqchi' race until this moment...from the exploitation of the conquistadores' whip to the infamous exploitation of the plantation owners...they have taken your property, your liberties, your rights...Alta Verapaz workers are the most exploited in all the country. The struggle of the reactionaries, of these 'friends of order' who scowl at us on the street, is to impose this regime on the whole republic. We, in contrast, want to destroy this system. It is not only agrarian reform that will resolve the problem. We need to treat Indians justly..with respect like human beings. We promise you better houses and a better salary. We promise you a little more justice." (p. 44.) Arbenz won the election and instituted land reform that placed hundreds of thousands of acres of previously fallow land in the hands of Mayans. He was deposed in a CIA-sponsored coup in 1954. Grandin shows how that tragic loss of democracy led to the Panzos massacre in 1978, which set the fuse for the explosion of the long-simmering guerilla war and the genocidal military campaign in 1982 of President Rios Montt, who was praised at time by Ronald

Reagan as getting a "bum rap" on human rights and being a man of "great integrity." Grandin's book for the first time tells the story of the Q'eqchi' and their quest for justice. Kudos to him.

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