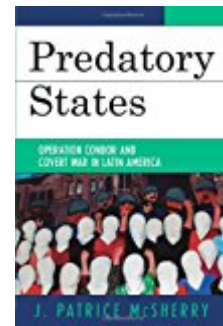


J. Patrice McSherry. *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005. 320 pp. \$96.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-3686-9.

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Exposing Operation Condor

Throughout the first two weeks of November, commemorations of the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall were ubiquitous. You only needed to turn on a television news program or scan your favorite newspaper to be reminded of the events of 1989. Along with images of the celebrations that took place twenty years ago, those reports served to highlight the horrors of state terror. Indeed, the Soviet Union and its satellites are justifiably condemned for their human rights records. However, historians of Cold War Latin America would be quick to point out that communist governments were not alone in using the power of the state against their own citizens; right-wing governments throughout the region abducted, tortured, and murdered in the name of national security and ideology. Lest the triumphalism of the early 1990s reappear, J. Patrice McSherry provides a stinging indictment of Operation Condor, the multilateral coordination of terror and murder perpetuated by South American military governments with U.S. support. He searches for villains and discovers plenty: among the leaders of right-wing military governments, along the corridors of political power in Washington, within the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and among ordinary people who committed almost unspeakable crimes against humanity.

McSherry defines Operation Condor as “a secret intelligence and operations system created in the 1970s

through which the South American military states shared intelligence and seized, tortured, and executed political opponents in one another’s territory.” Military leaders were “[i]nspired by a continental security doctrine that targeted ideological enemies,” and consequently “engaged in terrorist practices to destroy the ‘subversive threat’ from the left and defend ‘Western, Christian civilization’” (p. 1). Formally established by the military governments of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay in 1975 (Ecuador and Peru joined in 1978), Condor was premised on the idea that the most pressing threats to the regimes emanated from domestic leftist insurgencies. Condor states subsequently agreed to act collectively in confronting the perceived menace. They shared intelligence, detained and tortured one another’s suspect citizens, and all too often murdered alleged subversives. McSherry defines the networks, based within military and intelligence agencies, as a “parallel state” that “controlled the lives of their people through terror” (especially pp. 243-247). Although linked to the formal state through the security apparatus, the parallel state was designed to work outside the bounds of any legally sanctioned structure and to provide plausible deniability to political leaders. Moreover, even after the military governments of Condor countries fell during the 1980s, McSherry finds that the parallel states continued to function. They remained active, for example, by

helping to carry out anti-subversive campaigns in Central America throughout the decade.

At its heart, *Predatory States* asks how Condor was structured and how it worked. The book is divided into seven substantive chapters in addition to a conclusion. The first three chapters establish the background of Condor operations. McSherry situates Condor squarely within the context of the Cold War—as the logical culmination of a global struggle against communism. Chapters 4 through 6 constitute the heart of the book. Here McSherry details specific Condor operations. Like a prosecutor, she meticulously lays out her evidence. She introduces readers to both torturers and victims while painstakingly recreating the bureaucratic connections between military and intelligence services. By the end, Condor’s architecture is fully exposed.

Among the most important of the book’s arguments, McSherry links the United States directly to Condor operations throughout its operational history. Indeed, she concludes that “U.S. forces laid the groundwork for Operation Condor” (p. 251) by working “behind the scenes with the Latin American military and intelligence forces that comprised the Condor Group, providing resources, administrative assistance, intelligence, and financing” (p. 250). From U.S. bases in the Panama Canal Zone, Washington also arranged logistical support for Condor. Condor operatives were trained at the School of the Americas. CIA officers were sometimes present while detainees were tortured. Under the Nixon and Ford administrations in particular, the United States emerged as a full co-conspirator in Operation Condor.

McSherry’s emphasis on U.S. involvement is significant in light of scholarly discussions on the agency of Third World actors that go back at least two generations. In response to the excesses of dependency theory, most scholars of inter-American affairs have highlighted the agency of Latin American actors from all walks of life. The vision of a U.S. puppet master, manipulating the strings of Latin American elites, has given way to a more nuanced understanding of the construction of power across national borders, and of the means that ordinary people employed to resist or accommodate the application of that power. While McSherry is certainly cognizant of the asymmetrical power relationship between the United States and its Latin American neighbors, she adds to our understanding of the mechanisms through which that power was employed. *Predatory States* does not argue that a prominent U.S. official like Henry Kissinger personally ordered, for example,

Phase III Condor assassinations of suspected subversives, or that Latin American military leaders simply did his bidding. Instead, McSherry builds on the new consensus by highlighting the international networks through which such decisions were reached. By no means does McSherry let Washington policymakers off the hook, but South American leaders rightfully share culpability.

Although the question of why either U.S. or South American leaders pursued such extreme tactics emerges throughout the narrative, the answer is for the most part assumed. They were motivated by anticommunism and the corresponding fear of domestic leftist insurgencies. Condor was a brutal response to a clash of ideologies as framed by the Cold War. However, McSherry does not provide detailed analysis of why Condor happened; she is primarily concerned with documenting Condor’s crimes and establishing that the United States played a leading role. To that end, *Predatory States* succeeds. But it remains for other scholars to interrogate the motivations behind Operation Condor with the same analytic rigor.

McSherry draws upon an impressively broad array of sources, including oral histories and newspaper and magazine reports, in addition to more traditional government documents archived in North and South America. Her choice of topic required that she cast a wide net. Many government records, both in the United States and in South America, have not been declassified and made available to researchers; the so-called terror archive in Paraguay is a notable exception to that trend. As a result, McSherry was forced to be creative in her use of sources. She has exhaustively searched newspapers and magazines for stories on Condor and integrated her findings throughout the book.

In light of the reluctance of governments to release official records, and in keeping with her desire to capture the voices of Condor’s victims, McSherry’s extensive use of newspaper articles and oral histories makes a great deal of sense. However, it also raises important methodological questions that I would like to have seen her address in some depth. The motives and memories reflected in those sources must be interrogated. To what extent have the news reports and oral histories been corroborated by other sources? Have individual newspapers and their reporters been reliable, or have they too been colored by ideology? At times, McSherry includes a discussion of corroborating evidence when relying heavily on one such source. However, given ongoing discussions among scholars about the use of oral histories in particular, a detailed discussion would have been welcome.

In the final analysis, McSherry has produced an appropriately international history of Operation Condor. Her book provides a detailed accounting of horrendous events throughout the hemisphere. Specialists in inter-American affairs, international history, U.S. foreign relations, and Latin American politics will all profit from her work.

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