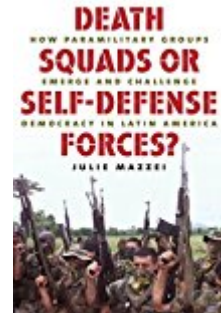


Julie Mazzei. *Death Squads or Self-Defense Forces?: How Paramilitary Groups Emerge and Threaten Democracy in Latin America.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. 272 pp. (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3306-3; \$22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5969-8.

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Understanding Death Squads

Literature on paramilitary violence consists of a large volume of scholarly and journalistic accounts of single national cases. Theoretical works often consist of generalized features of single cases, so that discussions of paramilitaries as a phenomenon are prone to applying the special features of a particular national case to other areas. Even definitions of what constitutes a paramilitary group are either too narrowly fitted to specific cases, or fail to describe what distinguishes paramilitary groups as a whole from other kinds of organized political violence. This topic of social movements and political violence, therefore, calls out for systematic comparisons. And it is for that reason that this book by Julie Mazzei provides a qualitative advance in our understanding of paramilitaries.

Mazzei compares the emergence of paramilitary groups in Chiapas (southern Mexico), Colombia, and El Salvador. This is a convergent case analysis—Mazzei does not include a case in which paramilitaries did not emerge—but the variation in historical trajectories and political and economic systems among the three cases allows her to detect a pattern that distinguishes incidental factors from necessary conditions for the formation of these nonstate agents of violent repression.

For instance, the common impression that paramili-

taries are essentially plainclothes, clandestine units of national militaries, who by their actions relieve their commanders and political bosses of accountability, gives way to a more complex picture in which paramilitaries feature a range of relationships to regular militaries. Paramilitaries are not simply the result of armies spinning off their domestic repression operations when the glare of international scrutiny becomes too harsh. In the Salvadoran case, death squads in the 1980s were indeed little more than military personnel without uniforms or accountability. In Colombia, independent groups were organized by landowners and eventually received protection, training, and materiel from the regular forces. The drug trade provided some of them with a financial source that was independent of the army. In Chiapas, a tradition of armed civilian guards organized by property owners was revived and repurposed for the overtly political aims of a paramilitary.

Some of the most fascinating, and important, insights of the study involve the relationship of paramilitaries to political competition within the three nations. Here the findings are surprisingly consistent, given the important ways that the cases diverge. In each case, paramilitaries emerged at a very similar stage of the cyclical competition between reformist and hard-line elite groups. For it was when the reformists attempted to rationalize mili-

taries, taking the first timid steps to impose civilian rule, transparency, and international norms, that militarized repression was organized outside the state's auspices.

Linked to this shared dynamic of the three cases is a parallelism in the outlook of the paramilitaries' leaders and backers. These insights are the fruit of Mazzei's painstaking efforts to gather primary documents and interview those involved. The military, economic, and political sponsors begin with a deeply established sense of legitimacy in their command of resources, mostly land, and their political monopoly. With the threat from a state that prefers reformist cooptation of opposition movements to violent repression, they see the formation of paramilitaries as their patriotic duty. In the course of their campaign of violence, moderates who oppose their tactics are perceived as colluders with the leftist guerillas, and all distinctions between a parliamentary and armed opposition dissolve. Thus in all of the cases paramilitaries did not target their attacks exclusively at armed opposition groups, but carried out campaigns of intimidation and assassination against all who opposed them. Much has been written on the Salvadoran case, where no labor organizer, human rights advocate, or even government bureaucrat charged with carrying out reforms, was safe. But in Colombia and Chiapas too, paramilitary leaders openly rejected any distinction between leftist rebels and parliamentary or government actors who favored reform.

The comparative framework also supports a refinement of the concept of paramilitary group. While refusing to rely on one country's experience as a paradigm, Mazzei also rejects definitions that are too broad. Not every nonstate counterinsurgent armed group should be called a paramilitary. These groups are distinguished from other armed nonstate actors by their political aims.

The distinction ends up playing an important part of Mazzei's account, for in all three cases, a precondition for the emergence of paramilitaries was the existence of a tradition of armed civilian forces for the security of the persons and property of local elites. Those precursors lent legitimacy, and often pre-existing organizational networks, to paramilitaries.

The limitations of the study are consequences of methodological tradeoffs inherent in its design. As useful as the strategy of using three convergent cases is in Mazzei's hands, there is always the danger of attributing causal importance as a factor simply because it is found in all three cases. Some elements of Mazzei's model therefore remain as hypotheses for further comparative study. For example, we do not know how important pre-existing traditions of armed civilian defense organizations are without a case in which they were absent while many of the other preconditions obtained.

Of course, in raising the question of the emergence of paramilitary groups abstracted from any specific national context, Mazzei inevitably raises the practical questions of how these groups can be prevented, how the harm they inflict might be mitigated, and how they can be demobilized and reintegrated. Understanding their roots in a convergent triad of elite groups helps to appreciate what sustains these groups. Their connection to alternating elites can help us to anticipate their emergence. And the remarkable experience of El Salvador, where the death squads were rapidly and successfully disbanded even as the political conflict continued, provides clues to achieving the same outcome in other cases.

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