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In *A Compact History of Latin America’s Cold War,* Vanni Pettinà offers the latest attempt to synthesize the history of Latin America’s unique and varied Cold War experience.[1] This is an extremely challenging task, given the complexity of the topic and the wide span of space and time that it encompasses. Pettinà’s fresh approach—tackling the region’s Cold War in a short book that sits somewhere in the no-man’s-land between textbook and extended essay—makes it ideal for classroom adoption.

Pettinà certainly accomplishes his primary goal, “to provide a useful analytical guide” to the field of Latin America’s Cold War history (p. x). In chapter 1, “Historiographical Approaches to Latin America’s Cold War,” he provides a cogent overview of the literature on both the Cold War in general and on Latin America’s place in and experience of that conflict. He summarizes the debates among the traditional orthodox, revisionist, and post-revisionist historians about the causes of the Cold War, as well the contributions made by practitioners of the “new Cold War history,” who have decentered the field by expanding it beyond the United States and the Soviet Union (p. 5). Pettinà also discusses some of the principal debates among those who study the Cold War in Latin America: how to determine the chronology of the Cold War and how to balance US hegemony with Latin American agency. In this historiographical section, Pettinà offers one of the most comprehensive orientations to date of the literature on Latin America’s Cold War, including work produced in the United States, Europe, and Latin America.

Pettinà spends the second half of this chapter establishing his own interpretive framework for the Cold War in Latin America. Pettinà defines Latin America’s Cold War as “one process of socioeconomic and political transformation that began in Latin America after 1929 and a second dynamic launched with the start of the bipolar conflict, ini-
tially expressed in the U.S. foreign policy change toward the region” (p. 32). He argues that the new postwar international system overlapped with local processes in Latin America, causing two fractures—an external fracture and an internal one. The external fracture resulted from the swift about-face in US foreign policy after the conclusion of the Second World War, as US leaders abandoned the Good Neighbor Policy of the 1930s and early 1940s and its rejection of interventionism and support for progressive social change in Latin America. According to Pettinà, US policymakers' new global view of their confrontation with the Soviet Union led them to actively prevent even moderate reforms anywhere in the world. This external fracture coincided with and supported the internal fracture that Pettinà identifies as the second defining element of the Latin American Cold War. In the internal fracture, Latin America’s hardline conservative sectors recovered from the setbacks that they had suffered in the wake of the Great Depression by reintegrating the region within the international economic order, decreasing state involvement in the economy, and embracing anti-communism and authoritarianism.

Pettinà makes several valuable interventions and contributions in this chapter. In his discussions of both the external and internal fractures, Pettinà puts more emphasis than many scholars on economic processes and structures. Pettinà also presents a thoughtful intervention in two of the main debates that he identifies in the field, regarding the chronology and US role. In contrast to other scholars, including Gilbert Joseph, Greg Grandin, and Tanya Harmer, Pettinà argues that the Cold War in the region was a distinct period that began after the end of World War II, not earlier.[2] And, in comparison to earlier work on Latin America's Cold War by scholars like Grandin and Stephen Rabe, Pettinà puts less totalizing emphasis on US power and instead assigns equal analytical weight to internal and external factors.[3]

In the rest of the book, Pettinà divides the Cold War in Latin America into four main phases, devoting a chapter to each. The first phase (the subject of chapter 2) consists of the years between 1946 and 1954, when, according to Pettinà, the bipolar Cold War had a less violent impact in the Americas. He argues that the optimism and cooperation of the Good Neighbor and World War II years swiftly shifted to pessimism in this phase, especially in the economic realm. He also traces the rapid implementation of anti-communist measures and the spread of antidemocratic regimes across the region. Pettinà closes the chapter by examining the histories of Costa Rica, Mexico, and Guatemala in the early postwar period to illustrate both these general processes and the exceptions to the prevailing trends.

Chapter 3 focuses on the Cuban Revolution and its impact across Latin America in the 1960s, which Pettinà identifies as the second phase of the Cold War in Latin America. He argues that Cuba’s revolution was a turning point in Latin American history and that Fidel Castro’s decision to ally with Moscow marked the first significant break from the Monroe Doctrine and US hegemony in the region since 1823. He also discusses the Cuban Revolution’s polarizing impact on Latin America; leftist cultural and political movements tried to emulate Cuba and often enjoyed Cuban support for their efforts, while conservatives built powerful internal coalitions and worked with the United States to contain Cuba’s example.

Chapter 4 moves to the 1970s, which Pettinà describes as “the decade of terror” (p. 87). He contrasts the détente between the global superpowers with the escalation of social unrest and violence in Latin America in this third phase of Latin America’s Cold War. According to Pettinà, the 1970s saw two major changes: a shift in the locus of armed struggle from the countryside to the cities and a significant increase in the levels of violent state repression. The geographical focus of this chapter also shifts, with in-depth descriptions of the Cold
War in Chile and Argentina. Pettinà’s analysis in this chapter at times seems to revive the “two devils” thesis that the Right and Left were equally to blame for the violence of Latin America’s Cold War. For example, when discussing Mexico, he claims that “the spreading armed struggles in rural and urban areas all across Mexico, and the government’s covert operations in response, reached a climax during the 1970s” (p. 103). By framing the state’s brutality as a response to rather than a cause of the violence, Pettinà minimizes the role that Mexican leaders (and others) played in driving their critics to take up arms in the first place.

The last body chapter moves the story forward to the 1980s and the conflicts that engulfed Central America in the fourth and final phase of the Cold War in Latin America. According to Pettinà, the bloody civil wars in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala were caused both by the local oligarchies’ refusal to adopt modest social and political reforms and by polarizing foreign interventions on the part of Cuban revolutionaries, the US government, and South American dictators. Once again, Pettinà seems to want to apportion equal blame to the Right and the Left for the instability in Central America; for example, he criticizes Jimmy Carter’s indecisiveness at least as often as Ronald Reagan’s anti-communist zeal. The chapter concludes on a positive note, however, with a discussion of the Latin American-led peace process that eventually brought the Central American civil wars to a negotiated end.

Pettinà concludes the book with an epilogue in which he argues that, just as external and internal fractures ushered in the Cold War in Latin America, they also combined to bring it to a close. The easing of bipolar tensions and collapse of the Soviet Union encouraged US leaders to dial down their interventionist Cold War policy, since they no longer perceived any external threats to their hegemony in the region. And domestically, Latin America’s conservative, authoritarian governments had delegitimized themselves both economically and politically through ballooning debt and repressive policies. Pettinà concludes that whereas the external fracture that characterized the Cold War has largely healed, the internal fractures and their concomitant socioeconomic inequality and political violence remain.

A Compact History of Latin America’s Cold War is an ambitious book that deserves to become required reading for students and scholars interested in this pivotal phase in the region’s history. The historiographical chapter, especially, offers a comprehensive overview of the literature and a compelling analytical framework. The body chapters flesh out the details that back up Pettinà’s framework, but their brevity combined with the sweeping scope and focus on trends and processes leaves them feeling a little lifeless. While Pettinà does an excellent job of integrating analyses from global, regional, and national perspectives, he often leaves out the ground level—the actual people who experienced and fought Latin America’s Cold War. That may have been a necessary sacrifice—this is a compact or “minimal” history after all, as the original Spanish-language title indicates—but it does result in a rather dry read at times. While Pettinà’s book marks an admirable advance in efforts to synthesize and analyze Latin America’s Cold War, readers seeking to understand the human aspects of the conflict should not stop here.

Notes

[1]. Earlier books that try to cover the entire Cold War in all of Latin America include Hal Brands, Latin America’s Cold War (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); and Stephen G. Rabe, The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).


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