

THE CENTRAL AMERICAN MILITARIES: A Survey of the Literature

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The overthrow of Nicaraguan strongman Anastasio Somoza Debayle by the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional in mid-1979 promises to stimulate academic research on contemporary Central America just as the rise of Fidel Castro and Salvador Allende did for Cuba and Chile. As scholars and policymakers contemplate the future of post-Somoza Central America, they will inevitably consider the role of the armed forces in each country. In recent years the military institutions have occupied key positions in national politics as the Central American nations have attempted to reconcile the often conflicting demands of economic development, political order, and social reform. This note is intended to serve as a guide to the existing social-science literature on the Central American militaries. Costa Rica, having replaced its army with a civil guard or police force in 1948, is mentioned only in passing. Although historically considered a part of South America, Panama is included here because it shares many characteristics with the Central American countries. Not surprisingly, the available literature is sparse in comparison with the sophisticated studies of the armed forces of Brazil, Peru, Argentina, Chile, and Mexico. Only Guatemala has inspired a significant output of scholarly analysis. Millett's work (1977) on the Nicaraguan national guard is the only published monograph concerning one of the Central American military institutions, although several unpublished dissertations have appeared and at least one valuable article exists for each country.

General

Virtually the only effort to analyze the relationship of the Central American militaries to society and polity is a chapter contained in Monteforte Toledo et al., *Centro América: subdesarrollo y dependencia* (1972, 2:177–220). This study surveys the role of the armed forces in each country and offers comparative comments as well. In general, the authors view the militaries as technologically advanced but ideologically retrograde institutions in the service of oligarchies and U.S. interests. Torres-Rivas and González (1972) also touch on the militaries in their analysis of Central

American political economy within a dependency framework. They conclude that the officer corps of each nation, with the exception of Costa Rica, operates in the service of the national commercial-industrial bourgeoisie and its allies, North American capitalists.

Bonds between the United States and the armed institutions of Central America constitute a topic of special interest. Many observers have blamed U.S. policy for providing the militaries with the capability of dominating politics and repressing the popular sectors. Etchison, *The United States and Militarism in Central America* (1975), argues that U.S. collaboration with the officer corps of each Central American country (including Panama but excluding Costa Rica) has contributed to political instability and the permanence of military rule while frustrating social reform. While following the general lines of other analyses, Etchison's study is unsophisticated in methodology and normative in tone; his conclusions are forceful but unsubstantiated. Monteforte Toledo's "Política militar de los Estados Unidos en Centroamérica" (1969)—despite the title, it deals with all of Latin America—is a less ambitious but more effective critique. After tracing the development of U.S. policy from the 1930s to the late 1960s, he concludes: "The military policy of the United States is the fundamental obstacle for the structural reform and democratic progress of the Latin American countries, whether by the road of modern capitalism or by the road of socialism" (p. 43). In a review essay, Sereseres (1979) challenges this interpretation, arguing that while the U.S. may strengthen military establishments the behavior of the officer corps is determined more by domestic than by external considerations.

Saxe-Fernández (1967) and North American Congress on Latin America (1973) focus on the Central American Defense Council (CONDECA), which is seen as the instrument by which the United States seeks to incorporate the Central American armed forces into its own defense structure and to safeguard its interests in the region. Both affirm that Costa Rica's joining CONDECA in 1965 and subsequent participation in joint exercises foreshadow the eventual militarization of that country.¹ In contrast, Smith (1969) provides a favorable and uncritical account of the organization and operations of CONDECA during the 1950s and 1960s, from the standpoint of the U.S. military.

K. L. Weaver's dissertation (1973)—based on extensive interviews with thirty-two Central American officers who had graduated from the U.S. Air Command and Staff College—examines transnational interaction among Central American officers. He concludes that the degree of interaction is high, largely because of the common experience of U.S. training; nevertheless, the military elite remains nationalist rather than regional in its orientation. Weaver's deliberate exclusion of inquiries about attitudes and social origins unfortunately restricts the value of his study.

Ropp (1970) relies on limited data on the birthplaces of 204 Guatemalan, Honduran, Nicaraguan, Chilean, and Uruguayan cadets, all of whom attended the United States School of the Americas in Panama. He tentatively suggests a pattern of increasing recruitment from urban areas and the possibility of future identification of the officer corps with middle-class, reformist elements.

Zamora Castellanos's *Vida militar de Centro América* (1966–67), first published in 1924, is a traditional military history of Central America from pre-Columbian times to the early twentieth century. In the absence of national military histories, it is of some value to historians despite its narrative, nonanalytical approach. Ameringer (1974) deals with the activities of revolutionary groups in the Caribbean from 1945 to 1959 but incidentally contains some information on the armed forces.

Guatemala

Of all the Central American militaries, the Guatemalan has attracted the most attention, due to the country's importance in the region and to the central political role of the armed forces in recent decades. Nevertheless, no institutional history or book-length study has yet appeared.

The best general analysis is to be found in Adam's *Crucifixion by Power* (1970, pp. 238–77),² which devotes a chapter to the subject. Adams traces the development of three interrelated processes: professionalization, by which officers came to identify themselves primarily by their military status; incorporation, by which members of the officer corps came to perceive clear boundaries between other social groups and their own; and regnancy, by which the military came to assume direct political control over the country. The author emphasizes U.S. assistance as crucial in making possible the dominance of the officer corps in politics. His succinct treatment of the institutional development of the Guatemalan armed forces is an invaluable introduction.

A chapter of Monteforte Toledo's *Guatemala: monografía sociológica* (1965, pp. 359–74) is also useful, particularly because of its rare survey data. Between 1949 and 1951, the author conducted three attitudinal surveys, using samples of one hundred Guatemalan soldiers, thirty cadets at the Escuela Politécnica, and thirty officers. His results are still cited today for want of more recent and more comprehensive data. Dombrowski et al. (1970, pp. 305–28), like most of the *Area Handbooks* produced by American University, contains a chapter of factual information but is nonanalytical and entirely favorable to the armed forces.

More detail on institutional development may be found in various works on limited periods or topics. One of the explanations for the relatively early professionalization of the Guatemalan officer corps (in comparison with those of the other Central American states) rests on the

establishment of the Escuela Politécnica, or military academy, in 1873. Lamentably, publications concerning this institution—Samayoa Coronado (1964) and Acuña G. (1973) are typical—consist of anecdotes and do not address such issues as socialization and the cultivation of an esprit de corps. Grieb (1976) admirably describes the professionalization of the armed forces under the dictatorship of Jorge Ubico (1931–44) and shows how the better-educated, junior officers launched the revolution of October 1944 and proclaimed the necessity of wide-ranging socio-economic reform. This was the first articulation of a political role for the military as guardian of the constitution and marks the emergence of the officer corps as an institutional force.

Studies of the revolutionary years (1944–54) generally focus on communism and socioeconomic change, treating the armed forces only tangentially. Frankel (1969, pp. 122–68) devotes a chapter to the military elite, competently summarizing its role during this period. Silvert's excellent *Study in Government: Guatemala* (1954) also contains useful information, as does Blasier's *Hovering Giant* (1976), a first-rate analysis of U.S. responses to the Guatemalan and other revolutions. Most writers agree that the officer corps was never wholly committed to radical reform, despite the rhetoric of 1944 and the fact that President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán (1951–54) was himself a professional officer. Explanations of the military's abrupt refusal to defend the regime against the U.S.-supported invasion of Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas vary. Schneider, *Communism in Guatemala, 1944–1954* (1959, pp. 313–17), asserts that the officer corps belatedly became concerned about the participation of Communists in the Arbenz government. Baker (1966, pp. 77–115) finds an explanation in the status deprivation suffered by the military, placing special emphasis on Arbenz's decision to arm a people's militia. Frankel (1969, pp. 159–63) rejects both these interpretations and suggests that U.S. opposition to the regime led the officer corps to abandon Arbenz. All three authors stress institutional motivations.³

The period of direct military rule from 1963 to 1966 has been analyzed in a series of articles by J. L. Weaver (1969a, 1969b, 1969c, 1969–70). These describe the major factions within the officer corps, the alliances with civilian technocrats and "managers of the economy," and the techniques of control through repression and cooptation. Although the articles overlap in information and even prose, they are essential to an understanding of this crucial period.

Johnson's (1971) analysis of the 1966 and 1970 presidential elections shows that Julio César Méndez Montenegro's ostensibly civilian government was actually "a prisoner of the military establishment from the outset and maintained itself by keeping its hands off the military" (p. 35). As a consequence of rising guerrilla violence and official repression, the electorate turned away from Méndez Montenegro's 1966 prom-

ises of a pacific solution and in 1970 elected Colonel Carlos Arana Osorio, who had close ties to right-wing paramilitary groups. In a subsequent article, Johnson (1973) attributes the extraordinary level of political violence to *ladino* psychology and to deliberate policy on the part of the armed forces. He contends that a faction of the officer corps fomented right-wing terrorism as a means of justifying military rule. "It is a psychological violence designed to allow the regime to perpetuate itself by terror under a permanent de facto state of siege" (p. 79). He echoes Adams in suggesting that U.S. assistance has given the Guatemalan military the capability of erecting and maintaining this system of repression.

Aguilera Peralta (1972) provides a similar analysis of what he calls "the process of terror."⁴ In a separate, book-length study—*La violencia en Guatemala como fenomeno político* (1971)—he traces the development of left-wing guerrilla groups and of right-wing counter-guerrilla bands. He sees the latter as agents of the "establishment," which includes the armed forces, aggressively staving off a serious challenge to the status quo. Another valuable work is Gott's *Rural Guerrillas in Latin America* (1973, pp. 59–149); the chapter on Guatemala shows the origins of the guerrillas in disaffected army officers and the links between the military and the right-wing organizations. Turcios Lima (1969) contains a biography of, and writings by, the late leader of the Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes.

Sereseres (1971) provides a brief institutional history of the armed forces since 1954 but concentrates on the question of U.S. military assistance. The author testifies that U.S. aid has had a substantial impact on the Guatemalan military, particularly in terms of centralization, emphasizing rural operations, and cultivating better relations with civilians. He challenges the notion of U.S. control or manipulation, however, and characterizes the relationship between the U.S. and Guatemalan militaries as one of bargaining, in which two autonomous parties with divergent interests trade for mutual advantage. This point of view is elaborated further by Jenkins and Sereseres (1977), who argue, "While there may often be a relationship between U.S. military aid and domestic politics in Guatemala, it is seldom direct and it is seldom decisive" (p. 588).

Other studies of Guatemalan politics touch on the role of the armed forces. Sloan (1970) discusses the system of electoral fraud that maintains the status quo and says that revolution is the only road to change. Jamail's dissertation (1972) surveys the political scene since 1944 and takes a pessimistic view of the possibility for improvement. The analysis of the 1978 elections by Aguilera P. (1978) also displays little hope for an opening of the system. Solórzano Martínez (1978) foresees the emergence of a new intellectual "bloc" that will supercede the coun-

terrevolutionary elite in power since 1954, but at the same time he points to the military and to U.S. imperialism as obstacles to change. Seminario Latinoamericano *La Democracia en Crisis* (1974) and Thesing (1971) are liberal critiques of the military-dominated political system. More radical critiques are offered by Galeano (1967), Melville and Melville (1971), and North American Congress on Latin America (1974).

El Salvador

Military rule in El Salvador dates from December 1931. For almost fifty years, no civilians have occupied the highest executive offices save in a provisional capacity, either to provide ornamentation to a military junta or to permit an officer to assume the presidency with a semblance of legitimacy.

Elam's dissertation (1968) is an institutional history of the Salvadoran army from 1931 to 1964. The author emphasizes two benchmarks: the Communist revolt of 1932, which terrified the oligarchy and sealed its alliance with the officer corps; and the coup of December 1948, which initiated a policy of moderate reform tempered by repression. Elam carefully traces the institutionalization of the military and its involvement in politics. The 1932 revolt, an event of crucial importance in the development of anti-Communism and military rule in El Salvador, is recounted at length in Anderson's *Matanza* (1971). De la Selva (1962) briefly surveys the revolt and the subsequent three decades in a piece highly critical of the armed forces.

General treatments of Salvadoran politics necessarily address the role of the military. Webre's *José Napoleón Duarte and the Christian Democratic Party in Salvadoran Politics, 1960–1972* (1979), based in part on interviews with Duarte, describes the rise of a civilian opposition led by the Christian Democrats. His analysis considers issues and personalities leading up to the confrontation of the 1972 presidential elections, in which the regime apparently defrauded Duarte of a victory. An epilogue traces the Guatemala-like pattern of rising violence, repression, and polarization to 1977. Another valuable work is White (1973), who includes a lucid overview of politics. López-Trejo (1974)—a collection of anti-Communist newspaper articles written between 1959 and 1972 by a career officer—provides some insight into military attitudes. A chapter of Blutstein et al. (1979, pp. 191–217) provides information on the armed forces as of 1970.

The extensive literature on the 1969 "Soccer War" between El Salvador and Honduras concentrates, for the most part, on the economic and demographic causes of the conflict and on its consequences for the Central American Common Market. Carías et al. (1971) consider

the military aspects, but only briefly. Works published in the two countries tend to be highly chauvinistic; typical are Lovo Castelar (1971) for the Salvadoran view and Henríquez (1972) for the Honduran.

Honduras

The Honduran military is a relatively new institution. This fact is reflected in Stokes's book (1950), which does not deal with the armed forces as an autonomous political force. Although no detailed study is available, Ropp (1974) has written a perceptive article that lays out the general outline of institutional development. Ropp describes the late professionalization under Tiburcio Carías Andino (1933–49) and dates the emergence of a unified and politicized officer corps from the coup of 1957. The political dominance of the military is therefore rather recent, and Ropp is fairly sanguine about the possibility of the future restoration of civilian rule.

Leiva Vivas (1969) comprises essays on Honduran politics, 1963–69. Syndicalism gets most of the attention, but these pieces are not irrelevant to the political activities of the officer corps. Blutstein et al. (1971, pp. 181–99) contribute a chapter on the general characteristics of the armed forces.

Nicaragua

Goldwert's brief history (1962) of the establishment of the Nicaraguan constabulary has been superseded by Millett's *Guardians of the Dynasty* (1977). The latter is a well-researched, sometimes passionate study of the national guard. Sharply critical of the guard and the Somoza regime, Millett emphasizes the period up to 1936 but carries his narrative to 1974, through the official appropriation of international relief supplies following the 1972 earthquake and including the resurgence of the Sandinista guerrillas who would eventually topple the dictatorship. Although the guard underwent professionalization in terms of training and equipment, institutionalization never took place, for the officer corps never developed its own values and decisionmaking processes separate from those of the dynasty. Millett's is a moving account of the Somozas' use of the guard as condottieri.

Ropp (1972a) briefly analyzes the attitudes of national guard cadets, based on fifty questionnaires. He demonstrates the existence of a preoccupation with internal security and a basic contempt for the public that help explain both the popular support for the Sandinistas and the determination of the guardsmen to fight to the finish. Ryan et al. (1970, pp. 327–50) contains a superficial chapter on the military.

The best account of the origins of the national guard and the

inspiration of the Sandinistas is *The Sandino Affair* by Macaulay (1967). In his well-written and well-researched work, Macaulay narrates the attempts of the United States Marines to defeat the guerrilla leader Augusto César Sandino from 1927 to 1934. Macaulay's objective study may be contrasted with the elder Somoza's self-serving book, *El verdadero Sandino* (1936), and with two works favorable to the martyred guerrilla: Ramírez (1978), an anthology of texts and documents by Sandino along with a biography written by a member of the Nicaraguan junta, and Ibarra Grijalva (1973), by a former Guardia officer in exile.

Panama

Ropp (1972b) describes the tardy professionalization of the Panamanian military, which in fact became a military institution only in 1954, when the national police force was transformed into a national guard. In the late 1960s, the guard was "a newly created organization in search of an ethically acceptable mission" (p. 52), which it found in a program of national development following the 1968 coup. Ropp questions the guard's commitment as an institution to reform; he suggests that General Omar Torrijos and his supporters may be a "temporary aberration" (p. 61) in an officer corps that has traditionally looked after its own parochial interests and those of the oligarchy.

A similar judgment appears in the excellent dissertation by Miller (1975). Comparing the post-1968 military regimes of Peru and Panama, he concludes that the Panamanian officer corps is essentially opportunistic and more concerned with protecting institutional prerogatives than with pursuing a far-reaching reform program. Like Ropp, he believes that, in the absence of Torrijos and his clique, the military might revert to the old pattern of corruption and pseudo-democracy in collaboration with the oligarchy. Miller's study abounds with information on the government's developmental projects and on the characteristics of the officer corps; it also includes a good analysis of the 1968 coup.

Pippin's narrative (1964) of Panamanian politics from 1946 to 1957 focuses on José Antonio Remón Cantera, the man responsible for the professionalization of the national police force and its conversion to a national guard. Although nonanalytical, the book contains useful information on institutional development and the political use of the guard. Weil et al. (1972, pp. 347–63) have a chapter on national security.

Conclusions

Sparse though it may be, the extant literature on the Central American militaries at least provides the general outlines of the historical development of the institution in each country. In the case of Guatemala, rather

detailed studies of the armed forces' internal organization and political role have been written, although a one-volume monograph using this material as a springboard to a more exhaustive analysis is very much needed. The history of the Nicaraguan national guard is known, but the story of its eventual disintegration and the creation of the new Sandinista People's Army are topics worthy of consideration.

Researchers will hopefully address themselves to some of the following issues for each of the Central American countries: The attitudes of the officer corps toward the armed forces' mission(s), internal security, civilian rule, labor organization, and national development; the military's relationships with other groups and institutions, such as the oligarchy, the urban middle class, professional and business organizations, the peasantry, and the Catholic Church; military linkages (institutional and personal) to specific political parties; the degree of corporate identity within the officer corps and the bases of internal factionalism.

NOTES

1. The same charge is made by Torres-Rivas and González (1972, p. 53) and Etchison (1975, pp. 49–50).
2. Adams (1968–69) is essentially the same.
3. For a survey of contemporary literature on the 1944–57 period, see Rey (1958).
4. This article also appears as an appendix to Aguilera Peralta (1971).

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