



NAVARRA CENTER
FOR **INTERNATIONAL**
DEVELOPMENT

**ARMIES WITH
OUT NATIONS:
PUBLIC
VIOLENCE
AND STATE
FORMAION
IN CENTRAL
AMERICA,
1821-1960**

BOOK AUTHOR: ROBERT H. HOLDEN

BOOK REVIEW
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hen the Central American countries experienced internal conflicts, revolutions or dictatorships during the last decades of the twentieth century, armed violence was not new in the region at all. It was constant since the end of the independence process. That violence came by institutional, counter-institutional and para-institutional forces which appeared, disappeared or mutated throughout time. In *Armies Without Nations: Public Violence and State Formation in Central America, 1821-1960* (2004, Oxford University Press), historian Robert H. Holden shows this historical reality as a common denominator in Central American history, which developed in each state according to its context.

To gather his ideas in a theoretical framework, Holden defines public violence as “killing, maiming, and other acts of destruction committed by rival *caudillos*, guerrilla “liberators,” death squads, and state agents such as the armed forces and police, all of whom act within [...] the “field” of state power” (p. 4). Based on that concept, his central argument is that all those manifestations of armed violence were crucial for the construction of Central American nations and states through their leading roles in political processes. His approach is in political history, with a clear focus on regular and irregular armies in a general context of patrimonialism in the political culture and national scale violence.

A MATTER OF CONTEXT

Throughout the book, the author develops his thesis in two parts corresponding to two historical periods for the topic: 1821-1939 and 1940-1960. 1821 because is the year in which Central America became independent as an individual state that later divided, and 1960 because the reality in the last decades of the twentieth century involved other actors (like Cuba) and a new geopolitical context. The division by the beginning of the Second World War and the later Cold War is because of the differences in the number of sources and because both events meant the beginning of what Holden calls the “globalization of public violence,” which blurred borders between national and international contexts, and between war and peace. In each part, there are chapters for the shared history of the region about public violence, also for each Central American state (except Belize, which was still a colony, and Panama, which was part of Colombia until 1903), and nevertheless for the political and military relations of the region with the United States.

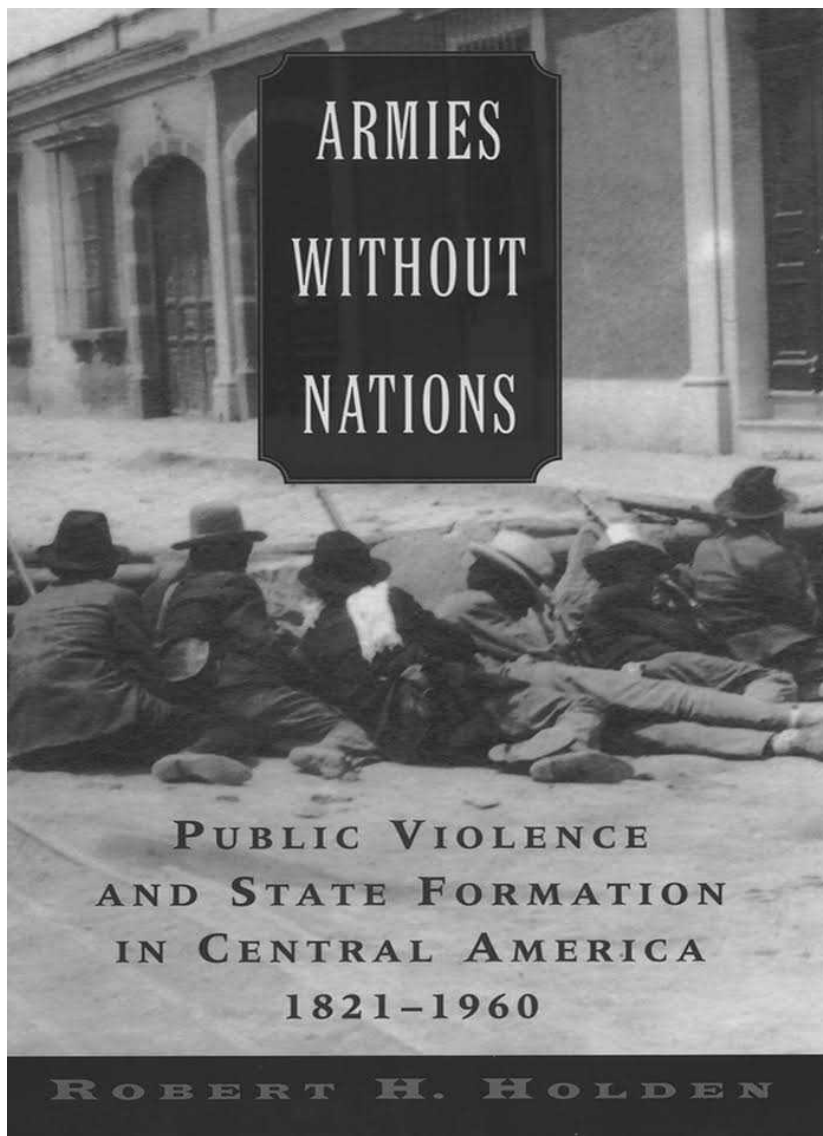
These relations deserved specific chapters and attention not because of the apparent remarkable role of the United States in terms of public violence in Central America as in their economic relations, for example, through the United Fruit Company in the early 1900s, but because Holden pretends to put that role in the right place. Based on diverse and an extended amount of sources, which he had also been collecting in the previous book *Latin America and the United States: A Documentary History* (2000, Oxford University Press), the author does not deny that the United States partly directed military policies of Central American states, first in favor of economic interests and later because of geopolitical strategy. His point is that, even though the United States’ dominance was relevant in more than one field in Central America, when it comes to public violence and its relations with politics, the processes in each country developed not only but mainly because of internal factors.

GLOBALIZATION OF PUBLIC VIOLENCE BLURRED BORDERS BETWEEN WAR AND PEACE

Of course, it was not always the case. In Guatemala, “show-case of Latin America,” as Holden states in the title of one chapter, the United States intervened directly through the CIA’s support to the National Liberation Movement that overthrew Jacobo Árbenz from the presidency in 1954, after the attempts of deep agrarian reform and a gradual inclination to socialism. However, Holden identifies the particularities of each country to explain the evolution of public violence in more than one century. Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica experienced *caudillismo* and have lived under patrimonialism, which developed differently according to each country. For example, a long tradition of military presidents in Guatemala developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a different political tradition than the one in Nicaragua, where few families, like the Chamorros and the Somozas, dominated the political scene.

ESSENTIALISM AND HISTORICITY

In his book, Holden does not fall in essentialist arguments about the social and economic conditions of how supposedly Latin America was doomed directly to violence, as other authors can suggest when they try to identify or analyze the causes of armed violence or conflicts in the region. He neither condemns nor legitimize military violence in Central



America, but explains its historical processes related to politics and, as the title suggests, state formation, through a not pursued but inevitable compared history between each country's case, of course in a regional context.

Holden's narrative is partly framed in the "Latin Americanist" tradition of European and American historians. In this current, which began between the 1960s and 1970s, historians from outside of the region study common phenomena in the corresponding countries. Therefore, his apparent and risky neutrality, for example, in the actions against civil population by armies, guerrillas, or paramilitary forces, or in the depth of the military relations between each Central American state and the United States, obey to an objective of showing (sometimes with quantitative data), comparing and trying to explain facts, more than a purpose of false objectivity.

At the same time, by compiling part of the history of a complex reality such as public violence, the book helps to fill the void on political-military history in Central America, because it brings the historical roots of a changing phenomenon that historians and other researchers have studied with more focus on the 1980s and later. In that decade, Guatemala experienced its worst years of the armed conflict, El Salvador also had its internal war, the Sandinistas took power in Nicaragua, Panama was under Noriega's dictatorship, migration issues because of poverty and violence developed in the later known gangs or maras, which have changed the paradigm of armed violence in the region. These and other topics on the political history of the region are currently more attractive, according to historiography, but all of them cannot be understood without knowing their background and origins.

FOR FUTURE READERS

Armies Without Nations is highly recommended for historians and professionals in related careers who want to know more about the Latin American and specifically Central American history through a general topic that involves topics as the lack of strong institutions in the region, the relations with the United States, and the role of armies in contexts of weak democracies. Hence, the book is also recommended

for an interested and expert public in political and military history in Latin and Central America, because it contributes a complete view of how the active presence of regular and irregular armies influenced the formation of their countries.

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Robert H. Holden is an American historian, Ph.D. from the University of Chicago (1986). He is currently a Professor at the Old Dominion University, and he is an expert on Latin American political and military history and the history of the United States' policy in the region. Holden received from the American Library Association the 2005 Outstanding Academic Title for *Armies Without Nations*, the second of his four books, and his latest publication is the chapter *Violence, the State and Revolution in Latin America*, for *The Cambridge World History of Violence* (2019).