



NAVARRA CENTER  
FOR **INTERNATIONAL**  
**DEVELOPMENT**

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

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BOOK AUTHOR: ROBERT H. HOLDEN

**BOOK REVIEW**  
**JOSÉ MANUEL CUEVAS**

# W

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 that appeared, disappeared, or mutated throughout time. In the well-documented *Armies Without Nations: Public Violence and State Formation in Central America, 1821-1960* (2004, Oxford University Press), historian Robert H. Holden shows this reality as a common denominator in Central American history, which developed in each state according to the context.

To gather his ideas in a theoretical framework, in the introduction 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, which he later amplifies to give a better justification of its use, 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

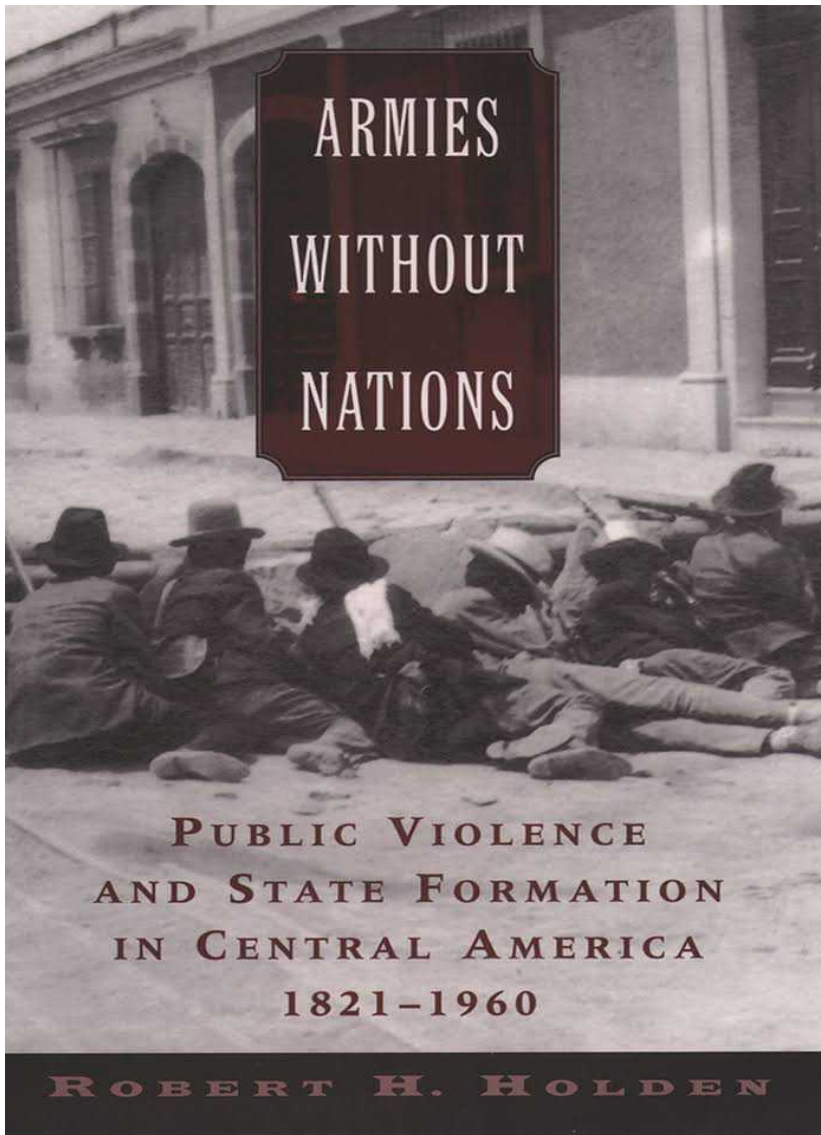
The author develops his thesis in two parts corresponding to two historical periods for the topic: 1821-1939 and 1940-1960. 1821 because it is the year in which Central America became independent as an individual state that later divided, and 1960 because the reality in the last decades of the twentieth 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. Therefore, it does not mean that during the first century of the new republics, public violence was a smaller issue. This phenomenon was a matter of specific interest groups that could grow and rise until reaching power, while after 1940, the emerging new international rules became inevitable guidelines to such small countries.

In each half, there are chapters for the shared history of the region about public violence. Chapter 1 gives a Latin American framework to the topic, and the second places it in Central America with a clear title: *Binding Hatreds: Public Violence, State, and Nation in Central American History*. Central America’s particularity with independence was that it got it peacefully, first from the Spanish Empire and then from Mexico. The violence came later, with a civil war between 1826 and 1829 that finally divided the Federal Republic of Central America into independent republics, which then lived their own political (and violence) processes in their nation-state emerging. Meanwhile, Chapter 8 talks about the transformations of the region and the international context during times of the Second World War, the post-war period, and the beginning of the Cold War, which affected directly to Central American countries with the new international blocks, during McCarthyism and after the Cuban revolution.

## GLOBALIZATION OF PUBLIC VIOLENCE BLURRED BORDERS BETWEEN WAR AND PEACE

Also, there are specific chapters for each Central American state in both parts, going from north to south, excepting for Belize, which was still a colony, and Panama, which was part of Colombia until 1903. In Part I, those five chapters focus firstly on the role of the armies and violence for the initial configuration of each country, and establishes a thread on each political history around *caudillos*, armies and violence, considering specific economic (mainly commercial) and social issues, and related regional trends, like the liberal boom of the 1860s and 1870s. Then, in Part II, the chapters for each country are framed on the internal changes in politic that occurred in each country with the beginning of the Cold War, which modified how the United States exercised its influence on them.

Nevertheless, before those chapters for each country in Part II, there is also a common one dedicated to the political and military relations of the region with the U.S., as a lucid introduction called *Defining Collaboration: The United States and Central America*. Each Central American country, despite being all of them under United States influence and sometimes direct intervention, developed different relations with the northern country depending on each government’s interest coincidence. With the background of Monroe’s Doctrine, plus the support needs of the Second World War, and a developing anti-communism discourse mixed with the economic interests, that “collaboration” ended in



more prepared and lethal armed forces that had a leading role in politics, which cut many civil political aspirations.

Those relations deserved a specific chapter 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 place 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 also 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.

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 attempt 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. However, all of them have in common the constant confrontations that destabilized each country, and the constant presence of armies around or directly in power that granted stability, but that in the long run was a paper tiger.

#### REGION OF A REGION, VIOLENCE OF 'VIOLENCES'

Latin American countries share historical and cultural backgrounds, and most of them also their primary language. Central America has lived the same situation on a smaller scale. This reality, combined with the geographical isolation from other continents and despite globalization, has contributed to particular (but not always exclusive) manifestations of politics, governance, or violence, in approximately two hundred years of republican history. In the last two centuries, not only Latin America experienced charismatic military leaders who held the hope of part of the people, but according to historiography, *caudillismo* is a mainly Latin American phenomenon. Those *caudillos*, acting from, against, or cooperating with the state, were the public violence initial protagonists in the region after the 1820s.

That concept which Holden reinterprets to joint independent but related types of violence, is also not exclusive of Latin America, but is a particularity in the western hemisphere considering that the region, after the independence processes, has not experienced practically absolute divider

internal civil wars or large-scale international wars (like the World Wars) as the United States or some European countries, despite the twentieth century was worldwide “humanity’s golden age of killing, in both the monumental scale and the astonishing inventiveness of the planning, organization, financing, execution and legitimization of killing” (p. 10). This resulted historically in countries that, until 1960, generally did not have to reinvent identities or remake institutions, but that continuously had to build it with few and fragile cohesion element, and with (or despite) episodes of violence that came and went, which destroyed and built nations and states at the same time.

Latin American internal public violence, and in particular Central American one, has been an amount of bigger or smaller but constant clashes of forces acting from power, seeking it or taking advantage of the relations or the coincidence of interests with it. The fact that power has been at the center or around these kinds of public violence contributes to explain why they have essential participation in the states and nations building. That is why the author, even though he brings together different types of violence, distinguishes the characteristics and processes of each case. For that identification and common explanation, he does not use only a Latin American framework, but a focused one on the Central American region, which developed with difficulty, including its violence, between internally divided interests and the ones, or at least the attention, of external agents, especially the United States before the Cuban revolution, which later had the shadow of the Soviet Union.

### ESSENTIALISM AND HISTORICITY

In his book, Holden does not fall in essentialist arguments about how the social and economic conditions supposedly doomed Latin America 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 legitimizes public violence in Central America despite the nature of the agent. Holden explains its historical processes related to politics and, as the title suggests, state formation, through a perhaps 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 in the 1960s and 1970s, historians from outside of the region study common phenomena in the corresponding countries. Therefore, his risky neutrality with the actions against the civil population by all agents,

or the depth of the military relations between each Central American state and the United States, obey the objective of explaining and comparing facts and processes, 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 lived its internal war, the Sandinistas had taken power in Nicaragua, Panama was under Noriega’s dictatorship, migration issues because of poverty and violence developed in the later known gangs or *maras*. These and other topics on the political history of the region are currently more attractive for researchers in social and hu-

## THE TWENTIETH CENTURY WAS WORLDWIDE “HUMANITY’S GOLDEN AGE OF KILLING”

man sciences, but none of them can be understood without knowing their background and origins.

### FOR FUTURE READERS

*Armies Without Nations* is highly recommended for historians and other researchers who want to go deeper into Central American history through a general topic that involves some others as the lack of strong institutions, relations with the United States, or the role of armies in contexts of weak democracies. Even though it is a 2004 book, it is recommended not only for experts but also for an interested public in the political and military history of Central America because it provides a complete view on how the active presence of armies influenced the formation of current countries. Also, considering the author’s equidistance between opposite violent sides, some of those out of the institutions, his plus is that he does not try to convince through arguments nor make a fake balance, but to help the readers understand the complexity of an issue. For that purpose, he bases his qualitative analysis on numerous and diverse bibliography, official documents, among other sources than include useful quantitative data about the evolution of military collaboration between the United States and Central America.

# AUTHOR

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**ROBERT H. HOLDEN** is an American historian, with a B.A. in Journalism from the University of Missouri (1970), M.A. in Latin American History from the Pennsylvania State University (1977), and a Ph.D. in History 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. The other ones are *Contemporary Latin America: 1970 to the Present* (2013, Wiley-Blackwell Publishing), *Latin America and the United States: A Documentary History* (2010, Oxford University Press), and *Mexico and the Survey of the Public Lands: The Management of Modernization, 1876-1911* (1994, Northern Illinois University Press). Holden's research interests include state formation, legitimacy and authority, the rule of law, violence, history of Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and U.S. relations with Latin America. His latest publication is the chapter *Violence, the State and Revolution in Latin America*, for *The Cambridge World History of Violence* (2019).