

When States Kill. Latin America, the U.S., and Technologies of Terror. Edited by Cecilia Menjívar and Néstor Rodríguez. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005. Pp.374. \$55.00 (cloth); \$ 22.95 (paper).

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When States Kill is an interdisciplinary collection of case studies that document U.S. involvement in state-sponsored terror campaigns against Latin American populations in the latter part of the twentieth century. The unifying theme of the volume is that United States' policy actively facilitated pervasive state violence against civilians throughout Latin America. Without suggesting that U.S. influence is entirely responsible for political violence in contemporary Latin America, the case studies in this volume together reveal that U.S. policy deliberately and systematically contributed to the development, transfer, and widespread use of violent repressive tactics by Latin American states.

The fact that the U.S. was involved, in various ways, in the state terror campaigns in Latin America in recent decades does not come as news to those familiar with the region. As the editors of When States Kill recognize, many prior studies have documented the complicity of the U.S. with perpetrators of state terror in individual Latin American countries in this period. The distinctive contribution of the volume is the presentation together of several country studies focused on the interplay and tensions between U.S. and domestic sources of state-sponsored terror. Read side by side, the contributions to this volume illuminate (1) the regional pattern of U.S. sponsorship of political violence; (2) the intra-regional networks that facilitated political repression across borders; and (3) the specific historical, sociopolitical and ideological conditions that shaped the nature and extent of state terror in individual countries -- from mass imprisonment and torture in Uruguay, to mass torture and disappearance in Argentina, to systematic annihilation of entire villages in Guatemala.

In the introductory chapter, the editors (sociologists Cecilia Menjívar and Néstor Rodríguez) argue against the idea that the strategic use of terror by Latin American states from the 1970s is an artifact of the region's violent history of conquest and colonialism. They argue instead that "state-directed political violence developed as a product of a regional political structure in which U.S. political interests have weighed heavily" (p.3). The U.S., in alliance with military and political allies in individual countries, constructed a "regime of terror" (p.6) in the region. The U.S. provided organizational, technological, financial, and ideological support for the development of Latin American states' coercive capacities, in many cases with prior knowledge that such capacities would be directed against states' own civilian populations.

The evidence for a region-wide "regime of terror" is presented most directly and persuasively by J. Patrice McSherry in her chapter on "Operation Condor as a Hemispheric 'Counterterror' Organization" (Chapter 2). Condor was a covert program that linked the intelligence and coercive apparatuses of several Latin American militaries

in the 1970s and 80s. McSherry describes how “the Condor militaries carried out combined, illegal, extraterritorial operations using disappearance, torture, and extrajudicial execution to eliminate political enemies” (28). Further, she presents an array of new evidence, including recently declassified official memos and communiqués, which indicate that Operation Condor, and its dirty-war methods, was not only condoned by top officials in the U.S. government, but was actively supported by U.S. agencies which “provided intelligence and logistical support for those operations” (p.36).

When States Kill includes ten individual country studies which address various aspects of U.S. influence on states’ use of political violence. Of these, chapters on Nicaragua, El Salvador, Colombia, Peru, Uruguay and Argentina stand best on their own to illustrate the volume’s central point for teaching purposes (the book is appropriate for undergraduate and graduate courses in political sociology, U.S. foreign policy, Latin American Studies and Legal Studies/Human Rights). A chapter on Guatemala brings into focus the “culture of fear” inculcated by state terror through an analysis of cadaver reports. A chapter on Mexico illuminates the new, post-Cold-War face of U.S. military influence in the region. The inclusion of chapters on Costa Rica and Honduras, two countries often seen as exceptions to the regional propensity for political violence, is particularly notable. Read together, these two case studies point to the conditions of possibility for resistance to U.S. and domestic pressures for militarization of politics (Costa Rica) and the limits of such possibility (Honduras). Several of the country studies are written from a position of solidarity with victims of human rights abuses, and are likely to resonate with audiences beyond academia. A weakness of the volume is the absence of a chapter on Chile. Granted that no edited volume can cover all bases, the neglect of Chile is curious given that the Chilean case has been emblematic in the literature on U.S. intervention and state terrorism in the hemisphere.

Taken together, the contributions to When States Kill provide extensive evidence in support of the editors’ claim that state terror in Latin America derived from “a common policy” (p.6) which reflected U.S. interests and geopolitical hegemony in the region. At the same time, the chilling descriptions of specific forms of repression and state-sponsored brutality in individual countries point to significant variation in how that common policy was carried out in different contexts. The combination of a regional framework and original case studies makes this volume an important addition to research on the nature of U.S. involvement in state violence and human rights violations in Latin America.

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