

Modern Latin America

After the Latin American Revolutions of the 1800s, the struggle for nationalism, independence and industrial expansion revolved around emerging domestic dictatorships and foreign influence exerted by the United States of America.

The Great depression assisted Latin American nations as it allowed them to diversify their economies that had once been strictly controlled by European colonial powers. When World War II began, some of the inter-war dictators that had previously risen to power were forced out of power. However the post-war period brought about new changes within the region and in most cases, they were not for the better.

Any modernization and movements toward democracy that started in the 1940s and 1950s were reverted back to exploitive economies and dictatorship governments over the next thirty years. The wealthy elite reemerged and the lower and working classes and indigenous people suffered many social and legal injustices. The newly formed military governments and dictatorships took over most of Latin America. By the mid-1970s only Colombia, Costa Rica and Venezuela were truly democratic nations and these nations were not much better as military and political corruption abounded.

Argentina and the Peróns

In 1943, military rule was established in Argentina. After several unsuccessful takeovers, Juan Perón came to power in 1946. His power came as a result of his appeal to the poor people of Argentina (the “*shirtless ones*” or *descamisados*) which was greatly helped by his wife Eva. During the 1950s, Juan Perón became increasingly right-wing and eventually ended up being a dictator. After his wife Eva died from illness, Juan Perón was overthrown in 1955 and sought exile in Spain. Perón was always remained popular with the masses and in 1973 he returned to rule Argentina but only for year until he also died.

From 1974 until 1983 Argentina was run by brutal military regimes. Intellectuals, leftists and other dissidents “disappeared” off the streets daily, never to be seen again. It is believed that over 30,000 people were killed during these fifteen years.

Today Argentina is politically stable and boasts of a new democracy even though corruption cases and scandals are reported on a regular basis. The nation still has close ties to several European countries and classes itself as an ally of the United States. It is constant struggle with Great Britain over claims that Argentina has over a group of islands off the coast. The Falkland Islands or the *Malvinas* were the subject of a short war that Argentina lost in the 1980s but recent governments have reignited claims against Britain for these islands.

Chile and General Augusto Pinochet

Both Brazil and Chile had military regimes from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s but the worst of affairs was seen in Chile. In 1970 a Marxist by the name of Salvador Allende came to power. He was one of the first politicians in Latin American to have been elected by a democratic election. Unfortunately, Allende was not seen as an ally to the United States so in 1973 the CIA backed a coup in Chile and put General Augusto Pinochet in power. Similar to Juan Peron, Pinochet used brute force to rule the country and used force and violence to remove any and all opponents. He was finally deposed and sought exile in Britain but was charged with crimes against humanity and found guilty.

Mexico

This nation was often considered to be a democracy but in fact it was really an authoritarian oligarchy ruled by one political party, the PRI – the Institutional Revolutionary Party. Their less than democratic political practices were accepted by the people as the nation's economy was healthy during the 1950s and 1960s due to profitable oil exports. However, by the end of the 1960s the nation faced resentments from the Indians, Mayans and other minorities that caused national protests, strikes, and student demonstrations in Mexico City and other larger cities. The support for the PRI faded quickly and some reforms were gradually granted to the lower classes.

Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution

In January 1959, the dictatorship that was ruled by the right-wing dictator Fulgencio Batista was overthrown by a left-wing dictatorship led by Fidel Castro. Within months Castro had begun to industrialize and modernize the nation. He eliminated social inequality and improved literacy rates through public schools.

Castro and his Argentine second-in-command Ernesto "Che" Guevara also started a campaign against United States imperialism in Latin America. The Cuban revolutionaries began to call themselves Marxist and allied the nation with the Soviet Union. This created a major problem for America as it was in the midst of the Cold War and the close proximity of Cuba meant that a new threat of Communist expansion was on the horizon.

The failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 saw the United States embargo Cuban goods and the Soviet Union keep close economic and political ties to the country. Castro's regime did benefit Cuba to a degree. Industry improved, the people became better educated but the tactics used against dissidents forced many to flee and seek exile in America. Cuban women received more rights but human rights violations and Castro's dictatorship continued decisively for three decades.

Civil War in Nicaragua

Since 1933, the United States had funded the political rule of the Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza. In 1979, Communist Sandinista rebels overthrew Somoza's son from power. Ironically, and in an attempt to keep peace within the region, both the United States and the Soviet Union backed the Sandinistas and their leader Daniel Ortega.

The United States were tricked by Ortega as he began backing socialist rebels in El Salvador. The United States wanted to keep democracy in El Salvador so it was decided that the United States now back anti-Communist rebel forces in Nicaragua called the Contras (short for contrarevolucionarios). The American interference caused a civil war in Nicaragua that lasted ten years and economically devastated the nation.

Finally, in 1990 President Ortega who was still in power, granted free and fair elections in Nicaragua. He was defeated by Violeta Chamorro. His reign of power was short but the nation stayed "democratic" when José Lacayo was voted President in 1997.

Latin America during the Cold War

Latin America had become a major Cold War battlefield. Most of the dictatorships in power faced severe economic problems. Most of them carried large debts, especially to the United States. Cuba constantly tried to promote Communist values throughout the region. In response, the United States willingly backed any anti-Communist regime that wanted to take over their country. Unfortunately most of the pro-America regimes turned out to be right-wing and dictatorships. Very little economic and social benefit was felt by the common people and lower classes that lived in these nations.

Recent Democracy in Latin America

Democracy swept across Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s. This was in part due to the OAS – Organization of American States that promoted democracy, peace and security within its forty country members. Argentina's dictatorship fell in 1983; Brazil's dictatorship collapsed in 1985; the 1988 elections in Mexico saw the PRI lose majority control over the country; and in 1989 Pinochet lost his exclusive power over Chile.

Latin American democracy is far from perfect. Cuba still remains Communist. Corruption and drug-lords rule several countries, especially Colombia. Massive urbanization and population growth exists throughout the continent leaving many still in poverty, uneducated and living in derelict housing. All of this makes the illegal drug trade attractive to many. The move toward democracy is still a struggle in Latin America.