
In *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*, New York University Professor Greg Grandin traces the history of Guatemala’s old Left in the Polochic Valley from the late nineteenth century to the early 1980s. He argues that the terror unleashed on Guatemala’s old Left pushed a redefinition of Guatemalan democracy from a political idea that emphasized the link between the individual and the community, to one that focused on personal freedoms rather than social welfare. In the updated edition, Grandin adds a new preface and an interview with author and social activist Naomi Klein highlighting the ways that new political movements are starting to recover the ideals of the old Left lost during the terror of the Cold War.

The heart of *The Last Colonial Massacre* is its analysis of the old Left’s evolution in the Polochic Valley from the end of the 19th century to the Panzós Massacre of 1978. Grandin begins his introduction with a short reconstruction of the 1978 massacre by government soldiers of over 35 Q’echi-Mayan men, women and children who had gathered in the town square demanding better representation, land reform and higher wages. Grandin asserts that the 1978 massacre foreshadowed the transformation of political struggles from relatively peaceful protest to violent patterns of insurgency and counterinsurgency. The remainder of the introduction examines how the repression and violence from right-wing governments in Latin America during the Cold War transformed Latin American democracy, shrinking the space for political action and pushing leftist groups to insurgency. Through a series of case studies, the next five chapters examine the ways that this conflict took place in Guatemala’s old Left.

The first case study takes José Angel Icó, a Q’echi Maya leader of Guatemala’s Left in Alta Verapaz, as its subject. Born in 1875, Icó died the day after leftist President Jacobo Arbenz’s official victory in 1950. A non-conformist, Icó never married, worked as a folk doctor and lawyer, dressed outrageously and went under a series of different surnames. Grandin uses the complexity of Icó’s personal, political, social, and sexual life to examine the ways that the shifting boundaries of race, class and gender affected political power in Guatemala during the first half of the 20th century. Similar to his other case studies, Grandin leans heavily on interviews and small collections of sources to reconstruct Icó’s admittedly eccentric life. Icó spent his adult life fighting for the rights of peasants against vagrancy laws, voting restrictions and the power of the local coffee barons. Icó used every avenue available, outside of violence. These included forged vagrancy exemptions, personalized calls to action, union organizing and local demonstrations. Though Icó was never able to break the coffee barons’ hold on Alta Verapaz, his non-violent politics demonstrated a way for leftists in pre-Cold War Guatemala to pursue their political goals.

The second chapter begins with Alfredo Cucul, a former member of Guatemala’s Communist party, the Partido Guatemalteco de Trabajo (PGT). Like his great uncle, José Icó, Cucul was a leftist activist who worked for the election of Jacobo Arbenz. In 1952 Arbenz passed an Agrarian Reform law that promised to buy land from the large landowners and give it to the peasants to farm. The United State’s State Department and Central Intelligence Agency saw this as the beginning of a communist takeover and funded a military coup in 1954. Following Arbenz’s overthrow, government agents expropriated Cucul’s fortune, livestock and faith in politics. Grandin uses Cucul’s disillusionment as a framing device to analyze how Arbenz’s overthrow eroded the trust of leftist activists in politics and initiated the use of violence by the government and local power brokers to silence political opponents.
Unlike the first two, the third chapter focuses less on an individual, and more on the 12 years between Arbenz’s ouster and the US-sponsored “Operation Cleanup.” During Operation Cleanup, Guatemalan forces trained by US military advisors raided the homes and offices of Guatemalan leftist leaders, killing more than 30. It was the culmination of more than a decade of escalating government violence towards the leftist opposition. Grandin traces this process through US State Department memorandums, Guatemalan politicians’ speeches, interviews and internal Guatemalan government documents. Unlike its government, Guatemala’s Left did not immediately resort to violence. Grandin uses similar sources to demonstrate that the Left’s road to violence was not really set until the mid-1960s. Though various political parties like the PGT made attempts to take a peaceful route, government violence cemented the insurgency.

The fourth chapter uses lifelong Guatemalan communist and agrarian reform advocate Efraín Reyes Maaz as the primary informant to examine the changing patterns of land ownership in the Polochic Valley from 1950 to 1983. Here Grandin argues that land reform—the very thing central to the old Left’s political project and the event that sparked the United States’ intervention in 1954—resulted from the government’s scorched earth campaign against Guatemala’s peasants. Following military campaigns to suppress “dissidents” in the rural highlands, the government resettled Guatemalan peasants, often giving them land. Through bloody defeat, Guatemala’s land reform advocates achieved a measure of victory.

The final case study returns to the 1978 Panzós massacre, elaborating on the lead-up to the massacre and the local consequences. Grandin uses the life of indigenous and women’s rights activist Adelina Caal as a guide. Born in 1915, Caal marched at the head of the peasants in 1978 and died at the hands of the soldiers. For over three decades prior, Caal and her family had been at the forefront of the struggle for land reform in the region. After her death, she became a symbol of the military’s injustice for Guatemalan peasant and women’s rights group seeking justice. Though the Guatemalan military participated in the massacre at the behest of the planters, following the massacre military leaders started to express doubt over the importance of defending the planters’ interests. This foreshadowed developments in the coming decade, during which the military, while always defending “order,” would often find itself at odds with the planters, since order sometimes meant taking land from the planters and giving it to the peasants.

Grandin concludes with a short essay examining the effect of Cold War violence on post-Cold War Latin America. Taking stock of the post-Cold War left, Grandin despairs that the old definition of a community-based democracy in Latin America is lost forever, replaced by one that places the rights and freedoms of the individual far above the safety and security of society. The new prologue and interview with Naomi Klein in the updated edition offer a helpful corrective, as Grandin examines political developments in Latin America since the first edition’s publication in 2004. He and Klein find reason to hope in the electoral victories of left and center-left parties committed to social and economic reforms in Argentina, Bolivia, Venezuela and Latin American countries.

The Last Colonial Massacre is a complex book. It is a series of case studies that provides a new perspective on Guatemala’s old Left, one that demands that historians look at the effect of violence on redefining the Left’s goals. It is also a political treatise on how democracy has been defined throughout the 20th century—one that clearly favors democracy as defined by the old Left, rather than the new. Sometimes, the former argument is obscured by the latter, but this should not take away from what is a fine work of history crucial for any historian’s understanding of the political and social history of Guatemala during the second half of the 20th century. While it would make a fine addition to any graduate or upper-level undergraduate Latin
American reading list on its historical merit alone, one of the most valuable aspects of *The Last Colonial Massacre* is that readers can feel Grandin going through the historical process. He painstakingly pieces together interviews, government documents, speeches and obscure archives to craft his narrative. A close reading of any of the chapters, but particularly those on Icó and Cucul, is sure to spark valuable conversations on how historians pursue their craft and the various ways in which sources and stories can be unearthed and told. For these reasons, and many others, this book is heartily recommended.

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