

THE MEANINGS AND EXPERIENCE OF VIOLENT DEATHS IN TWENTIETH- CENTURY LATIN AMERICA*

Patrick Timmons
San Jose State University

THE INFERNO: A STORY OF TERROR AND SURVIVAL IN CHILE. By Luz Arce. (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004. Pp. 360. \$65.00 cloth.)

DISAPPEARED: A JOURNALIST SILENCED: THE IRMA FLAQUER STORY. By June Carolyn Erlick. (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2004. Pp. 256. \$15.95 cloth.)

THE LAST COLONIAL MASSACRE: LATIN AMERICA IN THE COLD WAR. By Greg Grandin. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004. Pp. 336. \$57.00 cloth, \$22.00 paper.)

REMEMBERING PINOCHET'S CHILE: ON THE EVE OF LONDON 1998. By Steve J. Stern. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. Pp. 280. \$29.95 cloth.)

JUAN SOLDADO: RAPIST, MURDERER, MARTYR, SAINT. By Paul J. Vanderwood. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. Pp. 352. \$79.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper.)

INTRODUCTION

People first become aware of Latin America and its history through stories of violent death. Aztec ritual sacrifice provides a fascinating initial exemplar of the region's changing traditions associated with bloodletting. Spanish practices also warrant early mention. Historian David Brading's *First America*,¹ published to coincide with the quincentenary

* The author was a visiting scholar for 2005–2006 at the Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies, University of Texas at Austin and a 2005 Mexico-North Transnationalism Fellow. He thanks Ken Mills and Rick Halpern at the University of Toronto, Canada. He acknowledges the encouragement and criticism of Everard Meade, University of California, San Diego.

1. D. A. Brading, *The First America: The Spanish Monarchy, Creole Patriots and the Liberal State, 1492–1866* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Latin American Research Review, Vol. 42, No. 1, February 2007

© 2007 by the University of Texas Press, P.O. Box 7819, Austin, TX 78713-7819

of European presence in the New World, begins with an 1843 statement by historian Lord Macaulay, which includes mention that every English school boy knew the story of Atahualpa's execution by Pizarro in Peru. The region's well-known penchant for breeding stories of violent death has persisted for more than a century. Observers and participants of the large oppositional political and economic forces of the twentieth century have sometimes used this sanguinary image to explain the persistence of violence and death across the region's historical trajectory.

Historians practicing today continue to draw upon stories of bloodshed as they write the twentieth century into the breadth and depth of Latin American history. The books under review in this essay avoid discussions of the Conquest but deal directly with various forms of fatal violence in the twentieth century. As a result, violent death often becomes a central theme. Consider the following titles: *Juan Soldado: Rapist, Murderer, Martyr, Saint* by Paul Vanderwood; Greg Grandin's *The Last Colonial Massacre*; and the macabre moniker of *The Inferno: A Story of Terror and Survival in Chile* by Luz Arce. Other titles that imply death, rather than offering it up directly, include *Remembering Pinochet's Chile: On the Eve of London 1998* by Steve Stern, and June Carolyn Erlick's *Disappeared: A Journalist Silenced*. The titles in which the reference to death seems more muted also imply it because, as Peter Kornbluh explained in *The Pinochet File: A Declassified Dossier on Atrocity and Accountability*, throughout the world since the 1970s both Pinochet's Chile and the words "disappeared" and "silenced" came to stand for the death-soaked terror they invoked.² Could it be that violence makes the region's history accessible and appealing? And if so, what does the preoccupation with violent death imply for the writing of the region's history?

The immediate implication of this death-centrism for the writing of Latin American history means that observers might perceive a place of unchanging violence. A sweeping historical interpretation, it flattens difference and effaces variation. It is a fatalist vision that raises few questions about how violence helped articulate and define power relations over time, and instead assumes an unchanging relationship between violence and power. Tina Rosenberg's 1991 book *Children of Cain: Violence and the Violent in Latin America* provides the clearest example of the immutability of violent death in Latin America: "Considering the way the continent was conquered and colonized, it is miraculous that violence is not more pervasive and that Latin American societies function at all."³ Violent death strengthens the persistence of a long-standing trope about Latin America's historical trajectory.

2. Peter Kornbluh, *The Pinochet File: A Declassified Dossier on Atrocity and Accountability* (New York: New Press, 2003), xi.

3. Tina Rosenberg, *Children of Cain: Violence and the Violent in Latin America* (New York: W. Morrow, 1991), 187.

Make no mistake: violent death plays an important, perhaps central role in Latin American life. A recent collection of essays and articles edited by the late Susana Rotker exploring the significance of the region's urban violence includes data from international organizations that suggest that since the 1980s Latin America sustains the highest homicide rate in the world.⁴ But does the presence of violent death imply that Latin Americans instinctively repeat the past? Could we not argue that Latin Americans shape the meaning of their experiences with violent death in particular ways? Historians need to reexamine the hollow invocation of past violence to understand the region's present ills. This critical perspective asks a different question: what are the implications of how the living experienced and crafted meanings from the presence of violent death? An approach to violent death that focuses on the experience and its meaning will avoid characterizing the region as fatalist. This approach demonstrates that death itself can be a category of analysis, open to historical methodology about changes and continuities over time.

This review attempts to examine the issue of violent death by grouping some of the books mentioned at this essay's outset in three ways. Focusing on Tijuana in the 1930s, the first section explores how the generation of a new religious devotion associated with the victims of violent death helped those living close to the U.S.-Mexico border to make sense of an unstable world. The review continues by reflecting upon how Chileans in the late twentieth century fashioned experiences of violence, instability, and trauma into their world view. Historian Steve Stern examines how the traumatic experiences during the Pinochet dictatorship continue to colonize the memories of the living. The essay's final section examines several works by scholars and participant-observers that document and explain brutality in Chile and Guatemala, countries deeply affected by the left- and right-wing divisions of the Cold War. The purpose of the review essay is to scrutinize some of the different ways scholars write about violent death in twentieth-century Latin America.

This grouping and focus on the large subject of violent death risks not being comprehensive—Venezuela, Brazil, and Colombia all warrant, and yet escape, mention. The essay also chances significantly distorting the authors' achievements. No writer explicitly stated an intention to examine the meaning and experience of violent death in Latin America. However, all the works manage sources and stories about different forms of violent death in a way that avoids rendering Latin American history through the lens of unchanging fatalism.

4. See Table 4.1 in Alberto Concha-Eastman, "Urban Violence in Latin American and the Caribbean: Dimensions, Explanations, Actions," and chapter 4 in Susan Rotker, ed., *Citizens of Fear: Urban Violence in Latin America* with Katherine Goldman (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 42.

STATE KILLING IN CONTEXT: THE GENESIS OF POPULAR RELIGIOSITY

Paul Vanderwood's *Juan Soldado: Rapist, Murderer, Martyr, Saint* documents the relationship between two brutal deaths in Tijuana in 1938—a rape-murder of an eight-year-old girl and, after a swift trial, the “state” killing of the alleged culprit. These deaths demand scrutiny because the executed man's grave became a site of folk Catholic veneration. Vanderwood explains a multiplicity of factors that contributed to the cult of Juan Soldado, as Castillo Morales became known.

After a shoddy military tribunal placed the blame for the rape-murder of little Olga Camacho on twenty-four year-old Juan Castillo Morales, the lowly enlistee in the Mexican army faced a firing squad in front of Tijuana's in the town cemetery. These events occurred within the context of violent unrest in Tijuana sparked by trade unionists who harnessed the popular outrage over Camacho's death to urge the government to meet their demands for labor reforms. The worker protests transformed themselves into a violent mob that threatened to lynch the suspect, burning the police station where they thought he was being held.

At five o'clock in the morning on 17 February the tribunal issued an unusual sentence, a public execution in the town's graveyard by military firing squad. Later that morning, Castillo Morales's fellow soldiers escorted him to the cemetery. Once Morales was there, an officer ordered he run from two stationary firing squads of seven soldiers, a variant of the *ley fuga* (law of flight). Two salvos ripped through his body. The commanding officer finished off Castillo Morales with a *tiro de gracia*, a mercy shot to the head. Soldiers buried his corpse in a hastily dug grave and soon after somebody placed a cross on it. Within months of these events Castillo Morales's grave began to seep blood, energizing the dynamics associated with a popular veneration focused upon the soldier's grave. This new belief rooted itself in popular Catholic understandings about the presence of the divine, justice and injustice, and the need for local spiritual intercession.

Which type of analysis should the historian pursue when confronted with the brutal, the violent, the outlandish, and the extreme? Vanderwood tells us that he could not believe that in death the murderer could become a folk saint. His book suggests a method by which popular beliefs may be rendered comprehensible to the skeptical. Certainly Vanderwood does not rely solely upon popular religiosity to explain the veneration to Juan Soldado (133). Instead Vanderwood situates the response to Camacho's murder and Castillo Morales's execution in a “field of forces.”⁵ These forces include the dubious legitimacy of Castillo Morales's prosecution; a Tijuana buffeted by the influx of American tourists lured from prohibition-era California; and disputes between

5. The phrase appears in David Garland, *Punishment and Modern Society: A Study in Social Theory* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990).

local, state, and federal governments and the Catholic Church, organized labor, and local businesses, especially the owners of gambling concerns. The tripartite expository structure provides sections on the crime, the circumstances, and the beliefs the faithful expressed at the shrine. The structure reflects the argument that circumstances and belief shape popular veneration of particular religious icons (169).

Vanderwood returns often to the outlandish execution orchestrated by the Mexican military in the town cemetery according to the *ley fuga*.⁶ In Vanderwood's words, Castillo Morales died by "a ritual of execution that had long been reviled and outlawed in much of the Western world as barbarous and of uncertain deterrent effect" (174). A focus on the way in which Castillo Morales died remains central to the book's narrative and analytical strategies. Shortly after the execution, popular opinion turned against the authorities in favor of the conscript because the evidence seemed so tenuous and the method of death so extreme. The tribunal's abuse of a right to due process, along with curious phenomena at the gravesite in a time of political, social, and economic uncertainty, helped make relevant a popular religious belief that the unjustly punished, especially the executed innocent, sit closer to God (247). Over time, and for reasons that not even today's faithful remember or remain aware of, hundreds if not thousands of people a year began to visit the soldier's shrine, believing him capable of advocating on their behalf or performing miracles.

Vanderwood has lived along the U.S.-Mexico border for many years. His work has always demonstrated a concern with state violence and the experience of popular actors. His contribution lies in the sincerity of his treatment of the faithful. He also reinforces the view that the study of extreme events can help historians understand the mundane. *Juan Soldado* will help historians of society, culture, and politics to think beyond the binary framework of crime and punishment, a model that has become increasingly imposed on Latin American examples.⁷ The book goes beyond a description of the crime and the punishment to analyze what they occasioned. Vanderwood contributes to the study of violent death by demonstrating that it continued to cause shifts in systems of belief.

MEMORY AS STRUGGLE: THE MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF VIOLENT DEATH

Somehow tangible meanings emerge from death, especially violent ones. But what if the documentary history about such demise has been

6. The name is erroneous because the law of flight is a practice, usually of extrajudicial execution, not a law per se.

7. The "crime and punishment" approach may be found in: Ricardo D. Salvatore, Carlos Aguirre, and Gilbert M. Joseph, eds., *Crime and Punishment in Latin America: Law and Society since Late Colonial Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Carlos A. Aguirre and Robert M. Buffington eds., *Reconstructing Criminality in Latin America* (Wilmington,

effaced, or cannot be found, or is totally out of place because there are no graves at which to venerate? Answers to some of these questions may be found in Steve J. Stern's *Remembering Pinochet's Chile: On the Eve of London 1998*, a book that explores how a society makes sense of a type of violence that tried to erase bodies through disappearance, torture, and violent death during Latin America's Cold War.

Stern's book provides a framework to understand the dynamics of memory in the wake of collective trauma associated with the Pinochet dictatorship. Stern looks at memory—which he defines as the meaning human beings make out of experience—in Chile from 1973 to at least 2001. The work is sophisticated and ambitious: Stern proposes that it is to comprise three volumes written to be read on their own or as part of a greater whole. The first volume, *On the Eve of London 1998*, explains how, up until that year, Chileans had reached what Stern terms a “memory impasse”—that is, the existence of competing memories about the dictatorship.⁸

To examine the emergence of the memory impasse, Stern formed his analysis from interviews conducted with a variety of Chileans in 1996 and 1997: two members of the upper class, two mothers of disappeared left-wing partisans, two rural schoolteachers, and an army colonel and a conscript. Stern explores how a variety of historical actors—both on the left and the right, in rural and urban settings, and of different social classes—sought to make sense of their experiences and in so doing evinced memories that became emblematic. Stern also carefully scrutinized that which did not become emblematic, the “lore” that floats about in the “memory box.” Thus, his attachment to describing and analyzing emblematic memories is not so strong that he discards memories that do not fit the general categories derived from his oral history interviews.

Stern's nuanced treatment of differing memories of Pinochet's Chile reveals no general or national consensus about how to remember the period's experiences. Some Chileans remember that the army's removal of Allende prevented greater tragedy. The middle-aged upper class woman and the well-to-do woman who was a child in 1973 still viewed

Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2000); Gabriel Haslip-Viera, *Crime and Punishment in Late Colonial Mexico City, 1692–1810* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999); Elisa Speckman Guerra, *Crimen y castigo: Legislación penal, interpretaciones de la criminalidad y administración de justicia, Ciudad de México, 1872–1910* (México: El Colegio de México, Centro de Estudios Históricos: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 2002).

8. Stern's approach may be usefully contrasted against those of Ariel Dorfman, *Exorcising Terror: The Incredible Unending Trial of General Augusto Pinochet* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002) and Julio Scherer García, *El perdón imposible: No solo Pinochet* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2005).

Allende's downfall not as a coup, but as a *pronunciamiento*—an uprising designed to save the country from the chaos of the Popular Unity government. The upper-class woman, whom Stern refers to as Doña Elena, remembers the army's actions in September 1973 as saving the country from further ruin. In the 1970s, those who saw the military's intervention in politics as salvation denied claims that security forces engaged in widespread repression and abuse. But by the 1990s, when the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission began to investigate and legitimate claims of human rights abuses, the emblematic memory of intervention as salvation changed in subtle ways. In light of the Commission's findings, those who viewed Allende's downfall as salvation conceded the reality of abuse but argued that the country's stability came at a "modest social cost" (30). Such intransigence to admit and then prosecute gross human rights abuses are effects of the memory impasse that Stern investigates.

But investigating the impasse also reveals that those Chileans who participated in state repression remain significantly traumatized by the dictatorship's use of violence. Trauma prevents Chile's memory box from containing every memory. Striking proof of this observation comes from Stern's interview with a former army conscript forced to participate in sweeps for subversives in Santiago's working-class communities in September 1973. Stern's interviewee—referred to as Cristián—would only talk outside of Santiago and even then only at a roadside, in a car, beyond earshot, and as the traffic roared by. The reason for such reticence to remember becomes clear: early on in the dictatorship, during a sweep of a shantytown in southern Santiago, the unpredictable imminence of violent death might be wrought upon soldiers who refused to obey a superior's orders. During the raid, Cristián's unit entered a home where a young child incessantly cried. As Cristián rendered the story, his lieutenant ordered another conscript to kill the child's mother:

Then the soldier [Cristián begins to sob]—the conscript doesn't, doesn't obey, he takes his weapon, the rifle, and he throws it at the feet of the lieutenant. He says he's not a murderer, and the lieutenant pulls out his revolver and says, "If you don't kill her, you'll be the one I kill." The moments are so terrible, think of it. . . . So the lieutenant steps forward and shoots the conscript [Cristián is crying more fully], he killed our *compañero*!

Such trauma shaped Cristián's memory through to the present. Stern recounts that the interview skirted around specifics and mostly dealt with generalities until he asked a direct question about what Cristián did on night patrols after curfew:

I, [a short pause] . . . I don't know, I give thanks to God, and I tell you truly, geez [puchas], I don't know, I tell you—Look, I believe there is a God, there's a Supreme Being, and I ask of this God many [with some emotion] things. I shot at other people [his voice begins to drop], I fired. I shot when—at moments when

my life was in danger, you're cornered in one place and see that over there they're firing at you . . . I shot, I wounded people also. Killed? I don't know [a pause] . . . and maybe I did, I don't know [he starts to cry], I don't want to know either. But [crying more] that's the, that, that's the remorse and suffering I carry inside. I'll carry it until I die maybe. You understand? So—[Now he is crying fully and cannot continue talking.] (141)

When the memory box cannot contain every memory, those that do not fit cannot relate to the other memories that are more widely accepted. Stories like Cristián's become lore and cannot be contained by the memory box. They become, as Stern notes, "a personal problem" (142). In post-Pinochet's Chile the violent death occasioned by the dictatorship continues to colonize the memories of the living.

Stern's original and provocative work provides historians with a suggestion for the study of the implications of collective trauma. He does this by advancing fertile concepts that, he says, he drew from his interviews, rather than imposing a framework upon them. His work builds upon, and also significantly enriches, more conventional sources on the dirty wars, such as survivor testimonies and investigative exposés. His capacity to see how memories collide, congeal, and collapse helps the student of Latin American history realize the bankruptcy of searching for a single experience and common meaning of violent death during times of unprecedented change.

DOCUMENTING AS A WAY TO CREATE MEANING OUT OF VIOLENT DEATH

Survivor testimonies and investigative exposés have significantly advanced our understanding of the Cold War in Latin America.⁹ The effectiveness of these recent works—the testimonies of Luz Arce from Chile, a biography of Guatemalan journalist Irma Flaquer, and an interpretative work by Greg Grandin—lies in the way they document the ruptured, unfinished lives of those people who experienced the violence and died during the dirty war, brutal fights between right-wing governments and left-wing insurgents comprising Latin America's version of the Cold War. The importance of these works rests on their ability to convince the reader of the necessity of documenting the disastrous personal costs of transnational anti-communism.

Luz Arce's survivor testimony confirms that the Cold War in Latin America may also be understood by probing the psychological trials and moral dilemmas of those on the left who did not disappear but survived their incarceration and torture and emerged to explain their place in the

9. One classic is Jacobo Timmerman, *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*, translated by Timothy Talbot (New York: Vintage Books, 1981). For a different perspective of Dirty War violence in Argentina see Andrew Graham-Yool, *A State of Fear: Memories of Argentina's Nightmare* (London: Hippocrene Books, 1986).

dirty war. The survivors—on either side of the ideological divide, and even those who stood somewhere in the middle—led lives transformed by the violence of the dirty war. Arguably the most troubling accounts of this legacy come from those, such as Arce, who had to collaborate with the state's apparatus of repression to prevent dying from torture or as a way to stop threats against their family. A militant of the Socialist Party under the Allende government, Arce describes her capture and how torture, brutal beatings, the constant threat of death, rape, and co-dependence on individual security agents contributed to her decision to join the Chilean intelligence service, the Dirección de Información Nacional (DINA). Arce's testimony—like that of Argentine Captain Adolfo Francisco Scilongo, who broke silence to reveal his role in dumping the bodies of the disappeared from airplanes—draws from her direct proximity to and experiences of the machinery of violent death.

Arce's will to speak comes from her experiences in places of violent death and torture, such as the infamous Villa Grimaldi. In one particularly harrowing case she remembers the death of Sergio Pérez Molina, the national director of organization for the Movimiento Izquierdista Revolucionario (MIR):

Sergio survived fourteen days of atrocious torture. The guards talked near the door to my room about how they had beaten his testicles to pieces. We heard his screams when that happened. . . . For a while I wondered if it was a sound my mind had invented, but the guards yelling "Shut up, you bastard!" or telling each other "This asshole is really screwed" told me that his screams were real. . . . Suddenly, I couldn't hear him for a few seconds, and then I heard a kind of loud gasp, like someone gasping for breath but unable to breathe, as if he were drowning . . . and I never heard him again. . . . His begging and crying remained with me for months, and I can still hear it when I remember him as a brutal testament to what my friends in the MIR suffered. (165)

The distance between Arce's will to speak and the reticence of Stern's conscript Cristián to talk reinforces the point that violent death during Latin America's Cold War has not created a single, uniform response amongst the people who had to live through it. Some are willing to talk, others try to forget, and still others refuse to talk about any aspect of the period. It also demonstrates, if proof were needed, the bankruptcy of assuming that Latin Americans embrace death. Arce's capacity to remember and document the last moments of people like Sergio Pérez Molina proves the spurious nature of this fallacy. It also suggests the obstacles to assimilating these experiences into a national past.

But what if ongoing disappearances make documenting and remembering other experiences of violent death impossible? What if the type of violence results in the absence of a body—living or dead—through which meaning, whether at an individual or a collective level, can be constructed? June Carolyn Erlick's biography of Irma Flaquer, a Guatemalan journalist disappeared either by state security forces or the insurgent

Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR) in 1980 suggests that research, writing, and publication can itself become a site of memory. That is, such work can help to create meaning out of unknown tragedy. Born in 1938, Flaquer's tragic trajectory through the twentieth century illustrates what happened when a life became dominated by experiences of death. Erlick notes that Flaquer was one of 3,000 victims of state repression from 1979 to 1980; the United Nation's Truth Commission report on Guatemala's genocide assessed that the country's security forces were responsible for 95 percent of the disappeared and dead. This research enables Erlick to frame Flaquer's experiences and her memory as critical formations of state power: "To understand the life and presumed death of Irma Flaquer is to understand the institutional violence that suffocated the voices and lives of so many people during the 1980s."¹⁰

Why was Flaquer, the daughter of European immigrants, at such risk from state persecution, and why did she eventually disappear in 1980? A self-trained, outspoken journalist whose considerable clout grew as she took greater and greater risks as a reporter and commentator on Guatemalan political life, Irma Flaquer experienced a number of violent attacks prior to her disappearance. Early evidence of how extremely she could be threatened appeared in a 1960 *Time* magazine photo: waiflike, she sat with an obvious black-eye, victim of a group attack by market women.¹¹ What she lacked in physical weight she made up for by hewing close to a truth founded on the rock of her moral fortitude. Within two decades she went from famed investigative journalist to public enemy number one: low-level intimidation turned into assassination attempts. Her use of newspaper columns to engage critically with Guatemala's powerful brought her pleasure, pain, and occasionally caused her to withdraw from the public sphere, only to return again.¹² Her reaction through survival to a serious attack on her life, a car bomb in 1969, explains the way in which the threat of violent death increasingly energized her political commitment:

The people who believe—like my executioners—that ideas can be battled with machine guns, that freedom and justice can be thrown away on the whim of a tyrant, should understand that they are mistaken. . . . I was on the verge of dying a few days ago, but because I want democracy, justice, and freedom, I get up from my sickbed to keep struggling. (109)

Flaquer refused to fear death. As the political situation hardened through the 1960s, relaxed somewhat in the mid-1970s, only to worsen again later

10. June Carolyn Erlick, *Disappeared: A Journalist Silenced: The Irma Flaquer Story* foreword by Stephen Kinzer (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2004, 315).

11. Erlick reproduces the *Time* photograph in her biography.

12. A collection of Flaquer's articles may be found in Irma Flaquer, selección de textos Mirena Martínez, *La que nunca calló: Artículos periodísticos* (Guatemala: COPREDEH, 2002). Her letter to the assassin who planted a bomb in her car may be found in Irma Flaquer, *A las 12:15 el sol* (Guatemala: Editorial El Sol, 1970).

that decade, Flaquer continued to play a decisive role in the country's search for truth. When she left journalism in the mid-1970s, she established Guatemala's first human rights organization as a way to challenge the descent into chaos. The organization died before she disappeared. Her combativeness, the beacon of hope she perceived in the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua, and the hardening of the government's stance this provoked in Guatemala, along with her relationship to the guerrillas, seems to have brought about her disappearance.

And yet her conception of death, which she revealed to her sister Anabella through a recording discovered after her kidnap, may have also brought her closer to danger:

My life, Anabella, is not mine alone. It does not belong to my children or anyone else except for the revolution. And I don't know if I am going to go or if I am going to stay. I am going to do what is convenient for the revolution. Kike's death has sealed for me forever like an oath my dedication to the cause, to his blood; if he has shed his blood, fifty, sixty, a thousand *compañeros* have also died. My sister, there is no reason I should value my life more than theirs. (308)

She continued,

Please try to understand me . . . Anabella, if it is necessary to die, I will die, and I will die happy, because this is what I want, and when one dies for what one wants, really, then you don't die, you just go on to another stage.

Please try to understand this, and whatever happens, please don't worry, please don't cry. Please don't suffer. I am happy carrying my cross uphill, my cross of cadavers and cadavers and cadavers of my brothers and sisters. Just living for them and struggling for them, I feel happy; I feel fulfilled. (311)

In less deft hands such statements might support the notion that Latin Americans have fatalistic tendencies. But coming after more than two decades of increasing brutality, after going into a desperate, imposed reclusion in her downtown apartment, Flaquer's statement tries to recapture life through death. In her 1980 kidnap, her son was killed outside his home and her grandson witnessed the shooting of his father. In 1995, the Inter-American Press Association's (IAPA) project, *Unpunished Crimes against Journalists*, took up Flaquer's case for investigation. Erlick investigated Flaquer's case, which "was chosen to keep alive the memory of journalists who were victims of crimes that had gone unpunished" (314).

Irma Flaquer's experiences of repression were not unique. Historian Greg Grandin, who worked on Guatemala's truth commission in the 1990s, draws from these now amply documented atrocities in the *Last Colonial Massacre*, which argues that the way the United States fought the Cold War in Latin America changed the very meaning of democracy in the region. Democracy went from affirming citizen participation in politics and civic life to the veneration of the free market and an individualistic conception of electoral democracy. The book's title refers to the 1978 massacre of

peasants in a village called Panzós, killed because they made demands for land reform and justice from the Guatemalan state. As it must, violent death appears throughout Grandin's documentary evidence. He writes that a witness to the Panzós massacre reported "that just before the shots, [a] soldier yelled, 'If it is land you want, land you will have, but in the cemetery'" (150). It was the last such massacre of its type—in which the military killed peasants for trying to engage the state—because after that point, state forces systematically killed indigenous people for a perceived relationship to the guerrilla. Chapters document the expansion of this violence throughout the twentieth century. Grandin analyzes the lives of individual activists who suffered repression and sometimes violent deaths, showing that the brutality of their treatment as a strategy of the Cold War emptied Latin American democracy of its participatory dimensions. The book's evidence, argument, and structure reveal that Cold War repression in Guatemala—supported by the United States from 1954 onwards—had dramatic, devastating effects: by 1978 the nature and tenor of violence in Guatemala had changed beyond recognition, opening a path to genocide.

The left's experiences facing violence and death led to an early awareness of the direction of change. Huberto Alvarado Arellano, who was one of the founders of the Guatemalan Communist Party and who sought refuge in Mexico in the late 1950s, commented that "there are new roads to destruction and death" (90). Grandin demonstrates and explains how new forms of violence came into being as part of the U.S. government's strategy to fight the Cold War. Such work is necessary, as Grandin observes that at the time these new forms of violence emerged, U.S. agents argued that Guatemalans were "naturally" given over to violent brutality. He details how U.S. support girded the repression. John Longan, a police trainer sent to Guatemala about a decade after the U.S.-backed coup that toppled the democratic reformer Jacobo Arbenz, trained agents of the Guatemalan state in the use of counter-insurgency strategies. Longan arrived in 1965 at the request of the U.S. ambassador to help orchestrate Operación Limpieza (Operation Cleanup), which joined police and military operations targeted at guerrilla insurgents both in the countryside and in urban areas. These operations resulted in brutal, violent deaths. The judicial police "interrogated, tortured, [and] executed" the labor leaders Víctor Manuel Gutiérrez and Leonardo Castillo Flores, "their bodies then placed in sacks and dropped in the Pacific." Grandin reports that Longan "recalled that some of their remains washed back onto the shore" (98). Of this violence Longan remembered the standard refrain furnished him by the U.S. government's tendentious reading of the evidence: "I'm not sure I can explain it . . . it is inbred in them and they hate pretty deeply" (71).

Agents like Longan enabled the U.S. government to refuse to consider the violence as new. In 1986 the State Department wrote that the country's

politics embraced violence. This interpretation of the country's comfort with violence deployed a Guatemalan variant of the "Latin America as fatalist" thesis, articulated by Longan to obscure the origins of Operation Cleanup. Grandin writes that we can observe how agents of the United States helped the Guatemalan state fight the Cold War, thereby exploding the familiar adage that Latin Americans have been and are naturally violent. Grandin reveals that the fatalism of Latin Americans was an argument favored by the U.S. government as it sought to mask its role in shaping violent death (100). That myth and its propagation by the U.S. government warrant examination by those who teach or write about Latin American history.

CONCLUSION

Exploring the devices, such as violent death, that we use to help us explain Latin American history in the twentieth century must assume a central place in American college classrooms. Out-of-the-way places like Guatemala and Chile become central to the relevance of the interpretation of sources, a foundational method of the historical enterprise. Their examples enable students to consider the human costs associated with living in a hemisphere dominated by a superpower. And, given the concerns of this essay, the role of the U.S. government in supporting extreme forms of political violence in twentieth-century Latin America forces students to confront questions about how and why outsiders' perceive the region as only a place of violent death.

This review essay ends with Guatemala because its experiences in the twentieth century demand urgent investigation, not only by Latin American historians, but also by those committed to understanding the nature of U.S. involvement in foreign countries during times of transnational unease. From the year of the U.S. coup in 1954 to the peace accords of the mid-1990s, Cold War violence in Guatemala killed at least 300,000 people. In the early 1980s, the Guatemalan Army exterminated at least 30,000 Quiché Maya in massacres confirmed as genocide by the truth commission.¹³ Even prestigious scholars such as Samantha Power in her Pulitzer prize-winning book, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, fail to make any mention of Guatemala or of systematic violence in much of Latin America touched by the United States.¹⁴ Somehow, as observers we mention violent death when we want to, and we ignore its presence when it serves our purpose not to pay the region any attention.

13. Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, *Guatemala, Memory of Silence* (Guatemala: CEH, 1988).

14. Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002). Conversations with Everard Meade have shaped my orientation towards Power. Telephone conversation, Meade and Timmons on 16 November 2005.

Without a focus on the nuances behind the etiology of violent death in the region, we can make no sense of its bloody twentieth-century history, nor can we help laypeople move beyond the perception of the region as *only* a violent place.

The authors of the books under review avoid the gross exaggerations associated with coding Latin America as “fatalist.” The number of deaths in the region, including the region’s ever increasing homicide rate, and the festivities associated with Mexico’s Día de los Muertos, will do little to shift the association between Latin America and death in the popular mind. But the books under review confirm that analysis of violent death in Latin America can move the history of the region in dynamic ways, towards attempting to understand experience and how that experience creates meaning, whether out of executions, or in the realm of memory, or as a spur to document infamy. Explicitly addressing those issues helps to make Latin American history less familiar because it reveals that the study of violent death is a fertile place to begin a type of inquiry that foregrounds multiple, rather than unitary, interpretations. Death becomes irreducible to any one cliché; if treated with care by historians, violent death can move from a hollow rhetorical stereotype to a category of analysis. What this all means is that violent death plays an important role in helping us identify the catalysts of change.