

Chapter 18: The Promises and Realities of Decolonization: 18-4b Revolutions, Repression, and Democratic Reform in Latin America

Book Title: The Earth and Its Peoples: A Global History 7th Edition Update, AP® Edition

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18-4b Revolutions, Repression, and Democratic Reform in Latin America

In the 1970s Latin America entered a dark era of political violence. When revolutionary movements challenged the established order, militaries in many countries overturned constitutional governments and instituted repressive measures. A region of weak democracies in 1960 became a region dominated by military dictatorships with little patience for civil liberties and human rights fifteen years later.

The ongoing confrontation between Fidel Castro of Cuba and the government of the United States (see [Chapter 17](#)) helped propel the region toward crisis. The fact that the Cuban communist government survived efforts by the United States to overthrow it energized the revolutionary left throughout Latin America. Fearful that revolution would spread across Latin America, the United States increased support for its political and military allies in that region, training many of the military leaders who led coups during this period.

This period also witnessed a great increase in world population and in levels of international immigration. Population growth and the spread of industrialization had a dramatic impact on the global environment, with every continent feeling the destructive effects of forest depletion, soil erosion, and pollution. Wealthy nations with slow population growth found it easier to respond to these environmental challenges than did poor nations trying to meet the challenge of rapid population growth by expanding their mining and commercial agriculture sectors.

Brazil was the first nation to experience the region-wide conservative reaction to the Cuban Revolution. Claiming that Brazil's civilian political leaders could not protect the nation from communist subversion, the army overthrew the constitutional government of President

João Goulart (**ju-wow go-LARHT**) in 1964. Once in power, the military suspended the constitution, outlawed all existing political parties, and exiled former presidents and opposition leaders. Death squads—illegal paramilitary organizations sanctioned by the government—detained, tortured, and executed thousands of citizens. The dictatorship also undertook an ambitious economic program that promoted industrialization through import substitution, using tax and tariff policies to successfully compel foreign-owned companies to increase investment in manufacturing, especially in the auto industry.

AP® Exam Tip

Understand the impact of the development of military dictatorships in the twentieth century.

This combination of dictatorship, violent repression, and government promotion of

industrialization came to be called the “Brazilian Solution.” Elements of this “solution” were later imposed across much of the region. In 1970 Chile’s newly elected president, [**Salvador Allende**](#) ([Socialist politician elected president of Chile in 1970 and overthrown by the military in 1973. He was killed during the military attack on the presidential palace.](#)) (**sal-VAH-dor ah-YEHN-day**), undertook an ambitious program of socialist reforms and nationalized Chile’s heavy industry and mines, including the American-owned copper companies that dominated the economy. From the beginning of Allende’s presidency the administration of President Richard Nixon (served 1969–1973) sought to undermine the Chilean government. Afflicted by inflation, mass consumer protests, and declining foreign trade, a military uprising led by General Augusto Pinochet (**ah-GOOS-toh pin-oh-CHET**) and supported by the United States overthrew Allende in 1973. President Allende and thousands of Chileans died in the uprising, and thousands more were jailed, tortured, and imprisoned without trial.

The Nicaraguan Revolution Overturns Somoza

A revolutionary coalition that included Marxists drove the long-serving dictator Anastasio Somoza from power in 1979. The Somoza family had ruled Nicaragua since the 1930s and maintained a close relationship with the United States.



John Giannini/Getty Images

Once in power Pinochet rolled back Allende’s socialist innovations, dramatically reducing state participation in the economy and encouraging foreign investment. In 1976 Argentina followed Brazil and Chile into dictatorship. Juan Perón had been exiled in 1955 after a

military uprising, but with Argentina torn by rising levels of political violence he was allowed to return and was then elected president in 1973. Perón had insisted that his third wife, Isabel Martínez de Perón (**EES-ah-bell mar-TEEN-ehz deh pair-OWN**), be elected vice president, and she inherited the presidency after his death in 1974. Her weak administration faced a potent leftist guerrilla insurgency, a wave of kidnappings, high inflation, and labor protests. Impatient with the policies of the president, the military seized power and suspended the constitution in 1976. During the next seven years it fought what it called the [Dirty War \(War waged by the Argentine military \(1976–1983\) against leftist groups. Characterized by the use of illegal imprisonment, torture, and executions by the military.\)](#) against terrorism. More than 10,000 Argentines lost their lives, and thousands of others endured arrest and torture before democracy was restored.

The authoritarian regimes of Central and South America often procured their weapons from international trade and sometimes directly or indirectly from the United States where a massive military industrial complex had not only prepared for conflict with the Soviet Union, but also profited from arming other conflicts worldwide. U.S. president Jimmy Carter (served 1977–1980) championed human rights in the hemisphere and stopped the flow of U.S. arms to the military regimes with the worst human rights records, like Argentina. Carter also agreed to the reestablishment of Panamanian sovereignty in the Canal Zone at the end of 1999, but his effort to find common ground with the Sandinistas of Nicaragua failed due in large measure to their intransigence. Carter was defeated in the next election by Ronald Reagan, who was committed to overturning the Nicaraguan Revolution and defeating a revolutionary movement in neighboring El Salvador. With the memory of the Vietnam War still strong (see [Chapter 17](#)), the U.S. Congress resisted any use of U.S. combat forces in Nicaragua and El Salvador and put strict limits on military aid. As a result, the Reagan administration tried to roll back the Nicaraguan Revolution through punitive economic measures and the recruitment and arming of a proxy force of anti-Sandinista Nicaraguans, called *Contras* (counter-revolutionaries).

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