

reviews

Historical Atlas of Central America

By Carolyn Hall and Héctor Pérez Brignoli

Cartography by John V. Cotter

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The *Historical Atlas of Central America* provides a unique look at the history of Central America by linking its political, social and economic development over the past five centuries to its distinct geographic characteristics. Central America's tantalizing location as the narrowest point of passage between two great oceans has made it an object of intrigue and contention for much of its rich history.

The authors, Carolyn Hall, retired Professor of Geography at the Universidad de Costa Rica, and Héctor Pérez Brignoli, Professor of History at the Universidad de Costa Rica, bring a combined total of over fifty years of academic experience to this authoritative collection of essay-style subchapters. John V. Cotter, Assistant Professor of Geography at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, provides the integral cartographic support needed to create a truly comprehensive reference volume that can be useful for years to come.

The book is divided into five generous chapters, and each chapter is further broken down into approximately twenty-four two-page subchapters. Each subchapter is essentially a self-contained essay on a particular aspect of the chapter's subject matter and includes extensive maps, charts and photographs for in-depth illustration and reference.

Chapter One, Environment and Territory, deftly paves the way for what follows by introducing the reader to the pivotal location of the Central American isthmus, and by providing a general overview of its varied terrain, resources and climate. Through maps as well as text, the reader is imbued with a thorough understanding of how these combined factors have encouraged exploration and settlement by a variety of cultures throughout the centuries.

Although inhabited for many years prior to the arrival of European explorers, our geographical understanding of Central America begins with the Spanish

expeditions in the early sixteenth century. The first expeditions to Central America were for the purpose of colonization, but beginning in the eighteenth century explorations were conducted strictly to gain knowledge of the region. It is from these later French, Spanish, British and American adventurers that we learn about the mountainous interior, the coastal lowlands, the volcanic activity and the tropical rain forests, each locale with its own distinct climate and culture. Generous maps and illustrations show the reader this land of contrasts, including the many areas of seismic activity along the isthmus. The varied geography of Central America seems to have had as much influence on the region's cultural diversity as any of the explorers that have tried to conquer or otherwise subdue it. Maya, Hispanic and Caribbean cultures continue to co-exist there today.

Chapter Two, People and Places: The Patterns of Cultural Change, examines the cultural diversity of Central America more fully; beginning with a brief overview of the region and the arrival of the first settlers who crossed the Bering Strait into North America and ultimately migrated southward. Various Indian cultures and lifestyles were well established prior to the Spanish Conquest, but experienced a gradual decline thereafter. The Maya civilization is examined, and this subchapter includes a map of principal Maya archeological sites.

As the sixteenth century progressed, the Spanish Conquest occurred. This was not an instantaneous process, but was hindered by rugged and unfamiliar terrain, fragmented communities that required individual defeat, and even rivalry among the Spanish factions themselves. The maps for the Spanish Conquest trace the routes of exploration and occupation as well as the timetables for its progress. The influence of Catholic missions on the cultural whole is also explored in this chapter. I was particularly intrigued with the subchapters discussing the population growth, both collectively and by race. These subchapters are illustrated by a sobering progression of maps.

In Chapter Three, Colonial Societies, the reader is taken chronologically through the period of Spanish Colonialism, beginning in the sixteenth century and moving through the mid-eighteenth century. The maps and associated text examine the effects of religion, trade, Indian culture, pirates and even the American Revolution on Central America's development. Piracy and wars kept much of the population inland and away from coastal shores during this period. The inland areas sheltered the Spanish towns, Indian villages and agricultural pursuits of the region. Transportation systems began to develop. As early as 1530, thoughts of a great canal that would one day connect the Caribbean Sea with the Pacific Ocean were emerging. Maps show the reader what crops and livestock were being

cultivated for food during this period, as well as other products being raised for export and the routes that would bring them to market. During this time period, natural dyes were highly prized by European markets. The export of indigo dye in particular moved Central America onto the global scene.

Struggles for land and power between Spain and England often spilled over into Central American territory. Fortifications and regular military forces were established to protect Spain's interests. Beginning in 1585 and continuing sporadically through much of the eighteenth century, the English worked to found colonies in nearby Jamaica and the Bahamas, from which they could oversee their commercial pursuits on the Central American isthmus. At one point in 1762, English forces occupied Havana, Cuba to the east and Manila, Philippines to the west, but their attempt to establish a ground route across southern Nicaragua to link the two was unsuccessful. Spain ultimately remained in control of Central America throughout the entire period.

Chapter Four, *The Formation of National Societies*, begins in the mid-eighteenth century as changes occurring throughout the Western World ultimately impact Central America as well. Political revolutions created free societies in France and the United States, and the move toward industrialism changed the way goods were manufactured and sold. Central America lagged behind the surrounding nations in modernization to some degree, but still sought its rightful place in the new world order. Independence from Spain was seen as the key to the region's future.

Political independence occurred in 1821, but did not bring the prosperity that was once envisioned. The next few decades were spent infighting to establish alternate governments among the former Spanish provinces. Attempts at a Federal Republic failed, and economic difficulties ensued during the ongoing struggle for independence and identity. The maps in this chapter continue to keep the reader apprised of changes in boundaries and economic production that occur during these critical years. The meanderings between conservative and liberal rule are extensively covered, as well as the coffee and banana economies, and the establishment of better trade routes between regions and countries. But even as Spanish control dissipated, other countries, such as England and the United States, continued to exert their influence on Central America well into the twentieth century. This culminated with the opening of the Panama Canal, and the various treaties surrounding its control.

Chapter Five, *The Challenge of Development*, takes the reader into the twentieth century as the Central American states moved toward autonomous governments. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, social rebellion began to reshape political ideologies. The outcome

of World War II encouraged the emergence of democratic reforms and participation in the political election processes. As Communism began to threaten Central America, the United States intervened, often through support for military regimes that promised anti-communist rule. The defense of the Panama Canal also became a high priority for the United States.

The second half of the twentieth century saw increased urbanization and economic growth in Central America through industrialization and divergent exports. But change did not come easily. Poverty remained an issue throughout this period, often fueling uprisings and guerilla activity, including the Sandinista Revolution. The 1980s were particularly volatile, sending more than a million refugees to neighboring states and even abroad in search of peace and safety. The end of the twentieth century saw Central America struggling with overwhelming environmental issues, such as deforestation and its ensuing erosion and flooding. The book leaves its readers with the understanding that Central America, whatever its future may be politically, will continue to play an important role in world events through its very location, astride two great oceans.

The *Historical Atlas of Central America* includes extensive notes organized by chapter, a helpful glossary of terms and a detailed index. Complete information has also been provided regarding preparation of the original maps illustrating this volume.

I would highly recommend this book to anyone with even a passing interest in Central America. The *Historical Atlas of Central America* provides a complete feel of the region in every sense, as if you could turn it over and over in your hands and examine it closely from every angle. It manages to be comprehensive without being boring. The chapters are very well organized, and each subchapter is presented in stand-alone format, making the book equally suitable for casual browsing or in-depth reference purposes. The maps are clear and well constructed, perfectly complementing the vivid text. Even the presentation style of the book is pleasing, with its off-white pages featuring cartographically inspired borders and fonts.

The main theme throughout the book is how pivotal Central American geography has been to the history, development and cultural diversity of its people. It will be interesting to see how this same geography will influence the region's future.