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The Americas during the Cold War (1945–1991)

Taylor B. B. Bingle



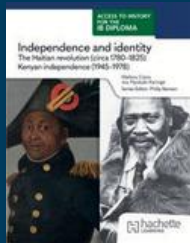
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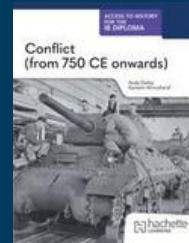
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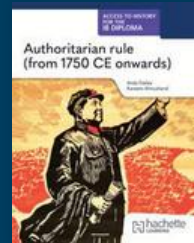
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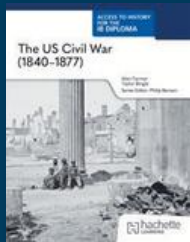
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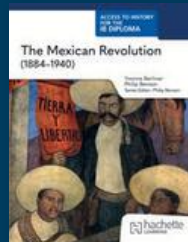
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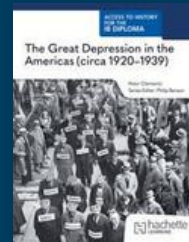
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The impact of the Cold War on one country in Latin America

The Cold War was not merely a distant superpower rivalry confined to Washington and Moscow – it was a force that reshaped the political, economic and social landscapes of Latin America. From the signing of the Rio Pact in 1947 to the formation of the Organization of American States (OAS, see page 000), the region became entangled in US-led efforts to enforce hemispheric unity against perceived communist threats. This global confrontation left a distinct imprint on domestic politics, fuelling authoritarianism, civil war, revolutionary movements and mass repression. Latin American countries found themselves caught between alignment with the USA, cautious engagement with the Soviet Union and the pursuit of their own national interests. In this context, Cold War dynamics generated both cooperation and conflict with the superpowers, often mediated through regional institutions and ideological battles at home.

This chapter will consider the following questions:

- ★ To what extent did the Rio Pact, OAS and regional collaboration affect the Cold War experience of one Latin American country?
- ★ To what extent did the domestic political impact of the Cold War change society and governance in one Latin American country?
- ★ To what extent did cooperation and tension with the USA define the Cold War trajectory of one Latin American country?
- ★ To what extent did cooperation and tension with the USSR influence internal and external policies in one Latin American country?

KEY DATES

Nicaragua

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>1947 Signs Rio Pact; aligns with US security system</p> <p>1948 Founding OAS member; supports hemispheric anti-communism</p> <p>1954 Backs US coup in Guatemala; strengthens Somoza ties</p> <p>1961 Sandinista Front (FSLN) founded; inspired by Cuban Revolution
Bay of Pigs invasion: Nicaragua is a staging ground</p> <p>1962 Supports OAS expulsion of Cuba; anti-communist stance</p> <p>1972 Earthquake; Somoza embezzles aid, sparks unrest</p> <p>1978 Chamorro assassination triggers protests; OAS debates Nicaragua</p> | <p>1979 Sandinistas overthrow Somoza; USA wary, OAS limited</p> <p>1981 Reagan cuts aid; funds Contras against Sandinistas</p> <p>1982 OAS condemns Nicaragua; Sandinistas denounce US dominance</p> <p>1984 Ortega wins elections; USA rejects, USSR supports</p> <p>1985 USA mines harbours; Nicaragua wins ICJ case</p> <p>1986 Soviet aid sustains Sandinistas against US sanctions</p> <p>1987 Signs Esquipulas Peace Accords; regional collaboration grows</p> <p>1989 Soviet aid declines; economy collapses under sanctions</p> <p>1990 Chamorro wins; US-backed transition ends Contra war</p> <p>1991 USSR collapses; Nicaragua pivots to OAS, USA</p> |
|--|--|

KEY DATES

Brazil

- 1947** Signs Rio Pact; aligns with US hemispheric defence
- 1948** Founding OAS member; backs anti-communist resolutions
- 1954** Vargas' suicide; political instability amid Cold War pressures
- 1958** Kubitschek launches Operation Pan America for regional development
- 1961** Goulart presidency; cautious non-alignment with USSR
- 1962** Supports OAS expulsion of Cuba; under US influence
- 1964** Military coup ousts Goulart; USA provides covert backing
- 1965** Brazil commands Inter-American Peace Force (IAPF), Dominican crisis
- 1968** AI-5 decree; harshest period of military repression
- 1970** Military regime consolidates; repression framed as anti-communist
- 1974** Geisel presidency; begins 'pragmatic' ties with USSR
- 1977** Ends military pact with USA; asserts national autonomy
- 1978** Expands trade with USSR; balances USA ties
- 1980** Joins condemnation of Soviet invasion of Afghanistan
- 1982** Debt crisis; US economic pressure influences policy
- 1985** Military exits; civilian rule returns under Sarney
- 1986** Maintains cautious OAS alignment; resists full US dominance
- 1989** First direct presidential election since 1960; democracy restored

Note on chapter organization

This chapter is organized thematically around the four key dimensions of the Cold War's impact on Latin America: regional collaboration through the Rio Pact and the Organization of American States (OAS); the domestic political consequences of Cold War dynamics; cooperation and conflict with the USA; and engagement with the Soviet Union. Each thematic section includes case studies from both Nicaragua and Brazil. This approach provides an organized framework for exam preparation, rather than profiling the country's entire experience throughout the Cold War. By exploring both countries under each theme, you can more easily evaluate which case study best supports your response to different exam questions, allowing for a more targeted analysis.

Introduction

This chapter examines how the Cold War shaped Latin America through the case studies of Nicaragua and Brazil – two countries that experienced the same global conflict in very different ways. Nicaragua became a Cold War battleground, where US-backed dictatorship, revolutionary struggle and proxy warfare culminated in decades of instability. Brazil, by contrast, leveraged its size and geopolitical significance to navigate Cold War

pressures more strategically, engaging with both superpowers while pursuing its own developmental agenda. Together, these examples highlight the varied and far-reaching impact of Cold War politics on Latin America's regional alliances, domestic transformations and international relationships.



Latin America

Nicaragua

The Cold War's impact on Nicaragua represents one of the most dramatic transformations in Latin American politics during the second half of the 20th century. From the US-backed Somoza dictatorship through the Sandinista Revolution (see page 000) and subsequent Contra War (see page 000), Nicaragua became a central battleground where superpower rivalries played out with devastating consequences for the Nicaraguan

people. This chapter examines how Cold War dynamics shaped Nicaragua's political development, international relations and domestic society from 1945 to 1991.

Brazil

Brazil's trajectory through the Cold War illustrates one of Latin America's most complex efforts to navigate and balance superpower competition with independent development and regional leadership. Between 1945 and 1991, the country shifted from a democratic US ally to a military dictatorship pursuing an independent foreign policy and eventually back to democracy amid economic crisis. Brazil engaged pragmatically with both Cold War camps: it hosted the Rio Pact signing, led the Inter-American Peace Force (IAPF) and supported hemispheric collective security, while also maintaining trade with the Soviet Bloc and resisting US pressure on nuclear policy and human rights. Massive US aid fuelled the military regime's '**Economic Miracle**', but Brazil consistently prioritized its own strategic and developmental goals over strict ideological alignment.



KEY TERM

Economic Miracle A period (late 1960s–70s) of rapid economic growth under Brazil's military government, marked by high industrial expansion, but also social inequality and repression.

Research skills

Create a short country fact file for Nicaragua and Brazil (1920–91), including key details such as language, population (including the percentages of rural and urban dwellers) and main areas of economic activity. Compare the two countries and discuss how their economic and social structures may have influenced their experiences during the Cold War.

ATL

ACTIVITY

As you read through this chapter, create two timelines by adding to the list of key dates provided on pages 000 and 000: one for Nicaragua and one for Brazil. Make a note of key events and turning points on each timeline.

1 The Rio Pact, OAS and regional collaboration

▶ **Key question:** To what extent did inter-American agreements, such as the Rio Pact and OAS, enhance or undermine national sovereignty during the Cold War in one country in Latin America?

To what extent did Cold War tensions shape inter-American security cooperation and regional organizations in Latin America?

The inter-American system

The end of the Second World War marked a watershed moment in hemispheric relations in the Americas, as Latin American nations sought to balance their desires for economic development, regional security cooperation and concerns about maintaining sovereignty. The Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, known as the Rio Pact, embodied this complex, nuanced dynamic by establishing the principle written in Article 3, that 'an attack against one is to be considered an attack against them all'.

The Rio Pact (1947) and the OAS (1948) were direct products of the Cold War and US and Latin American efforts to protect the hemisphere from Soviet expansion. They were both the products of earlier inter-American

systems and their origins were just as much Latin American attempts to contain US imperialism and provide a means for collective action as they were a tool for continued US hegemony in the region. The post-Second World War inter-American system established the framework within which Latin America and the USA would operate throughout the Cold War.

The creation of these regional institutions represented what historians have described as Latin American efforts to limit American power, as the institutions of the inter-American system were devised not to legitimize but rather to contain US regional hegemony. However, these same institutions quickly became bastions of anti-communism and US hegemony. The Rio Pact preamble declared that the treaty was dedicated not solely to mutual defence but also to upholding democratic ideals and the fulfillment of peace. The OAS went even further in institutionalizing anti-communist measures.

SOURCE A

Excerpt from 'The "Cuban Question" and the Cold War in Latin America, 1959–1964' by Tanya Harmer in the *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 2019. Harmer is a professor in Latin American international history at London School of Economics

The inter-American system rested on the regional framework established after World War II. Comprising the 1947 Rio Treaty and the OAS, created in 1948, they committed the United States and Latin American states to non-intervention, regional governance, and collective defense of each other's territory. Member-states had also agreed to a resolution on the 'Preservation and Defense of Democracy in America,' which stipulated that international Communism was 'incompatible' with the inter-American system.

In the 1950s, anti-communism became a rallying point for unity in the Americas. In 1954, at the **Tenth Inter-American Conference** in Caracas, Venezuela, countries across the region agreed to take action to defend their political independence from the influence of 'international communism'. They declared that any attempt to control the political systems of American nations would be seen as a threat to their sovereignty and a danger to regional peace.

SOURCE B

Excerpt from *Caracas Declaration of Solidarity* signed at the Tenth Inter-American Conference in Caracas, Venezuela, 28 March 1954

The American republics ... declared that international communism, by its antidemocratic nature and its interventionist tendency, is incompatible with the concept of American freedom and resolved to ... eradicate and prevent subversive activities ... [including] the determination ... to take the necessary measures to protect their political independence against the intervention of international communism. The domination or control of the political institutions of any American State by the international communist movement ... would constitute a threat to the sovereignty and political independence of the American States.

TOK

To what extent can historical narratives be shaped by the perspectives that create or dominate them? (Perspectives.)

What can you learn from Source A about the significance of the Rio Treaty and OAS in shaping the inter-American system after the Second World War?



KEY TERM

Tenth Inter-American Conference 1954 meeting of American states in Caracas, Venezuela, aiming to strengthen cooperation against communism in the western hemisphere during the Cold War.

Explain how the content of Source B can be used to show why and how American states acted against international communism.



However, the practical implementation of these agreements often fell short of their idealistic origins. For example, countless instances of misapplication, non-application or outright non-compliance with provisions of the Rio Treaty eroded its effectiveness. During the Cold War, the treaty's collective defence principle was unevenly applied. When the USA intervened unilaterally in places like the Dominican Republic in 1965 or Grenada in 1983, it justified its actions afterward by appealing to the OAS, but it did not first seek multilateral approval under the Rio Treaty. Conversely, when Argentina sought hemispheric solidarity during the Falklands/Malvinas War in 1982, the USA declined to invoke the treaty because of its alliance with the UK. Such cases show how signatories repeatedly acted on their own interests and then turned to the OAS for political cover, rather than engaging in genuine collective security or strategic cooperation. The Rio Treaty and OAS legacy reflects the broader tensions between Latin American aspirations for multilateral security cooperation and the realities of US hemispheric dominance during the Cold War era.

ACTIVITY

As you read the following section, make notes to help you answer the following questions. Write short answers to each question at the end of the section.

- 1 Was there a gap between the idealistic goals of hemispheric cooperation and the practical realities of US hegemony? How significant was this?
- 2 How did Latin American nations use multilateral institutions to attempt to constrain US power? In what ways did those institutions simultaneously align with US security interests?
- 3 Evaluate the effectiveness of collective security agreements when major powers act unilaterally.
- 4 How far did regional organizations become vehicles for legitimizing rather than preventing intervention?

Case study: Nicaragua

The Rio Pact, OAS and regional collaboration

► **Key question:** *How did Nicaragua use its participation in inter-American organizations to project regional leadership while navigating superpower competition during the Cold War?*

The organized regionalism of the Rio Pact and OAS created both opportunities and constraints for Nicaragua. Under the Somoza dynasty, the Rio Pact meant automatic alignment with US security interests and participation in the broader anti-communist alliance system.

Nicaragua's role as a regional proxy

Under **Anastasio Somoza García** and his successors, Nicaragua became one of the most reliable US allies in Central America. Thomas Walker documents how 'Somoza's foreign policy was entirely submissive to US dictates, including declaring war on the Axis powers in the Second World War and implementing an anti-communist agenda during the Cold War.' This compliance extended to active participation in US-sponsored interventions throughout the region.

SOURCE C

Anastasio Somoza García of Nicaragua signs the Declaration of Panama at a formal meeting of the presidents of the American republics, confirming Nicaragua's alignment with US Cold War objectives. Panama City, Panama, 22 July 1956



Nicaragua's role as a staging ground for US operations grew during the Cold War. For example, the Somoza regime helped in the 1954 invasion of Guatemala, and Nicaragua was a staging area for the Bay of Pigs attack

KEY FIGURE

Anastasio Somoza García (1896–1956) was, as Nicaragua's dictator from 1936 until his assassination in 1956, a staunch US ally and used a strong policy of anti-communism to secure American support during the early Cold War. He established a family dynasty, consolidated military and political power, and positioned Nicaragua as a reliable partner for US regional interests against potential leftist uprisings.

Research the Declaration of Panama and then analyse how the context of Source C influences how it can be used to answer the question: 'To what extent was Nicaragua's foreign policy aligned with US and other regional signatories in their Cold War objectives?'



on Cuba in 1961 (see page 000). These actions demonstrated how the Rio Pact and OAS framework could be manipulated to serve US interests, with Nicaragua serving as a willing accomplice in regional interventions.

SOURCE D

Excerpt from *Latin America in the Era of the Cuban Revolution* by Thomas Wright, 2018. Wright is a professor of history at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Unwavering US support was a second pillar of the Somoza dynasty. With the advent of the Cold War, the Somozas' value to Washington increased: they were aggressively anti-communist at home and reliably pro-United States in the United Nations and the OAS. Nicaragua provided the embarkation point for the US-sponsored invasion of Cuba in 1961 and was one of six Latin American countries to send troops to the Dominican Republic in 1965. In return, Washington gave generous military and economic aid, a succession of friendly and unquestioning ambassadors, and the stamp of approval that dissuaded most Somoza adversaries from action.



Analyse how Source D can be used to understand the causes and consequences of Nicaragua's foreign policy decisions in this period.

How did Nicaragua respond to the Cuban Revolution and actions taken against Cuba in the 1960s?

The OAS and collective action against Cuba

The Cuban Revolution of 1959 transformed the dynamics of inter-American relations and tested the newly formed Rio Pact and OAS. Nicaragua, under Luis Somoza Debayle, not only fully supported OAS actions against Cuba but was one of the staunchest voices. Latin American countries including Nicaragua condemned Castro and pushed Cuba to virtual isolation in the Americas after 1963. Nicaragua participated enthusiastically in this isolation campaign, viewing it as both an expression of loyalty to the USA and a means of combating the spread of communist influence in the region, as well as a way to suppress dissent at home and maintain power.

The OAS sanctions against Cuba had important implications for how Cold War conflicts would be managed in the Americas and Somoza understood this. As Tanya Harmer observes, despite the pressure and diplomatic isolation, 'Castro's regime survived, continued to sponsor revolution abroad and attracted support from Latin American populations.' This provided a great deal of uncertainty for Somoza and influenced how he, and regional states, responded to internal revolutionary movements, including the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

How did Nicaragua use regional security agreements like the Rio Pact and OAS to support US policies in Latin America?

Regional security and the containment doctrine

Nicaragua's participation in regional security arrangements reflected the broader application of containment doctrine to Latin America. The Rio Pact provided a multilateral framework, but it primarily advanced US security interests, raising questions about how much agency Latin American countries truly exercised. Historian Thomas Walker explains that 'the US government was willing to work with authoritarian leaders if it served its imperial interests', and the Somoza regime was a perfect

example. The OAS, meanwhile, provided a collaborative forum for states like Nicaragua to align with the USA on regional security issues, particularly as anti-communism served as the unifying principle behind collective support and justification for US interventionist policies. In return, Nicaragua's consistent support for US initiatives, especially under Somoza, helped secure increased political and economic backing from the USA.

The regional framework also provided legitimacy for US actions in Central America. When revolutionary movements emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, the USA could invoke collective security provisions and seek OAS support for its interventions. However, this approach became increasingly problematic as Latin American states began to question US hegemony and seek more independent foreign policies.

Case study: Brazil

The Rio Pact, OAS and regional collaboration

Key question: *How did Brazil use its participation in inter-American organizations to project regional leadership while balancing superpower competition during the Cold War?*

← How did Brazil support the Rio Pact in the early Cold War?

Brazil played a foundational role in creating the Rio Pact, with the treaty signed in Rio de Janeiro on 2 September 1947. As one of the original signatories alongside twenty other American republics, Brazil ratified the treaty on 5 March 1948, which aligned with Brazil's desire for hemispheric stability while providing security guarantees from its more powerful US neighbour.

During the early Cold War, Brazil consistently supported Rio Pact initiatives. When Venezuela requested assistance in 1960 following the attempted assassination of President Rómulo Betancourt by the regime of Rafael Trujillo from the Dominican Republic, Brazil voted for sanctions against the Dominican Republic. This marked the first application of collective action under the treaty and demonstrated Brazil's commitment to democratic governance in the hemisphere, even as its own democracy faced internal pressures.

Brazil's leadership in the IAPF (1965–66)

Brazil's most significant multilateral military engagement during the Cold War came with the Dominican Republic crisis of 1965 (see page 000). Following the US intervention on 28 April 1965, the OAS created the Inter-American Peace Force (IAPF) on 23 May 1965 (see page 000). Brazil assumed command of this multinational force.

← How did Brazil's leadership in the IAPF help show its role and experience in regional peacekeeping?



Examine how Source E might help historians understand civilian experiences during the OAS intervention in the Dominican Republic.

SOURCE E

Troops from the OAS control a crowd of residents queuing for food and water supplies on a street in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, 1 April 1965



Brazilian leadership of the IAPF served multiple purposes:

- It legitimized the intervention through multilateral participation.
- It demonstrated Brazil's capacity for regional leadership.
- It provided valuable peacekeeping experience.

As one Brazilian diplomat noted, 'Our command of the IAPF showed that Brazil could lead hemispheric peace efforts, not just follow US directives.'

Number of troops per country in the IAPF during the Dominican crisis

Country	Troops contributed	Role
Brazil	1,130	Command and peacekeeping
Nicaragua	160	Civil affairs
USA	12,400	Combat and support

In what ways does our interpretation of numerical evidence shape our understanding of power and control in history? (History, Evidence, Power, Interpretation.)

**T
O
K**

The Brazilian-led IAPF successfully maintained peace until its dissolution in September 1966, establishing a precedent for multilateral peacekeeping in the Americas. This experience would later inform Brazil's approach to regional mediation.

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