



A Brief History of Central America

By *Hector Perez-Brignoli*

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This is the first interpretive history of Central America by a Central American historian to be published in English. Anyone with an interest in current events in the region will find here an insightful and well-written guide to the history of its five national states—Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. Traces of a common past invite us to make generalizations about the region, even to posit the idea of a Central American nation. But, as Hector Perez-Brignoli shows us, we can learn more from a comparative approach that establishes both the points of convergence and the separate paths taken by the five different countries of Central America.

The author offers a concise overview of the region's history from the sixteenth century to the present, beginning with human and cultural geography in the first chapter and ending with the present crisis in the last. He deals with the fundamental themes and problems of the area: the characteristics of the colonial heritage, independence and the crisis of the Federal Republic, the formation of nation-states during the nineteenth century, and the development of export agriculture based on coffee and bananas. The narrative moves finally into the twentieth century to look at the growing impoverishment that multiplies inequalities and leads to the shipwreck of liberal democracy. The case of Costa Rica, exceptional in more ways than one, receives special attention.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Resource-poor Central America, except for its proximity to the Panama Canal, had been ignored by most of the world until the 1979 Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua. Dictatorship, repression, and poverty in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and neighboring Belize and Panama, or the fragility of democratic Costa Rica, little interested the average American until Reagan made the region an international issue. Since then, studies and commentaries, most of them partisan, have multiplied. In contrast, Perez-Brignoli's brief history is balanced. Ralph Lee Woodward Jr.'s *Central America: A Nation Divided* (LJ 6/15/76; 1985. 2d ed.) is still the best history in English, but this Costa Rican scholar offers a judicious Central American viewpoint. In his view, the seeds of the current crisis were and are sown by shortsighted, selfish local elites, sometimes aided by the United States and other nations. For interested laypersons, this is an excellent introduction with an accurate sense of the region, past and present.

- Donald J. Mabry, *Mississippi State Univ., Mississippi State*

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From the Inside Flap

"The *Breve Historia* offers a Latin American point of view . . . and a more explicitly political focus on the twentieth century. . . . It is stimulating reading and usefully controversial in some places. For now, it is probably the best single short history available."—Brian Loveman, San Diego State University

"He demonstrates a fine talent for isolating and depicting major themes in the history of an area otherwise portrayed with great confusion. . . . I think he offers a masterful synthesis."—E. Bradford Burns, University of California, Los Angeles

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