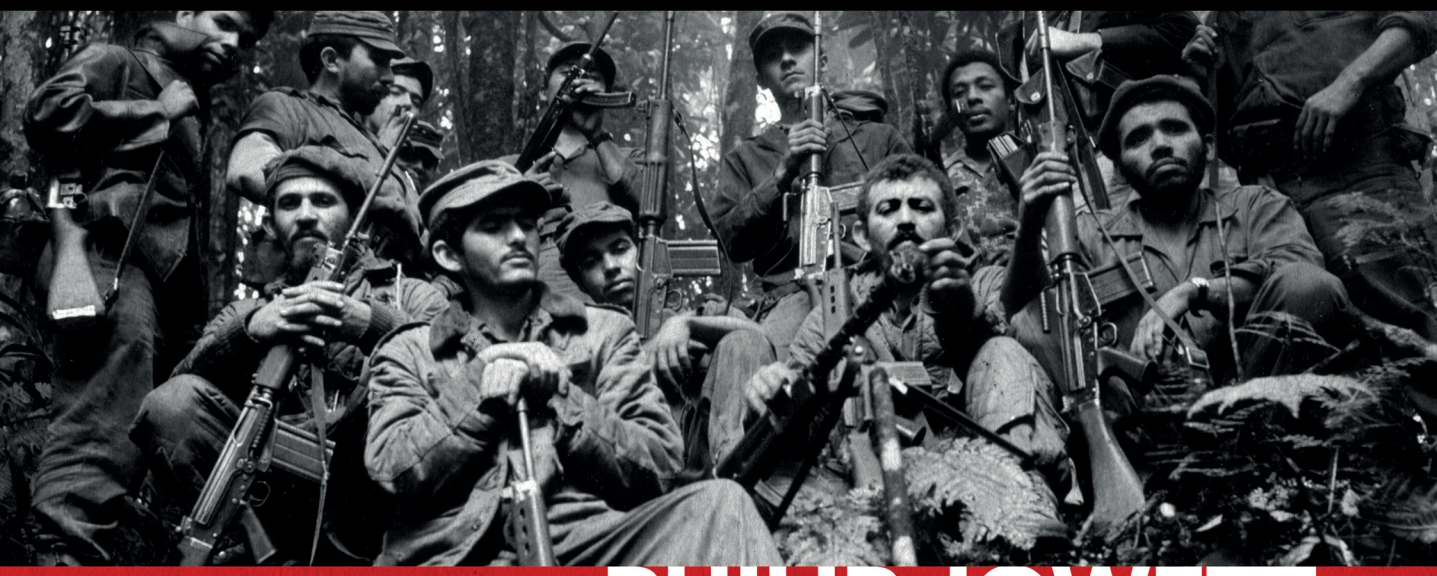
LIBERTY OR DEATH

LATIN AMERICAN CONFLICTS, 1900–70



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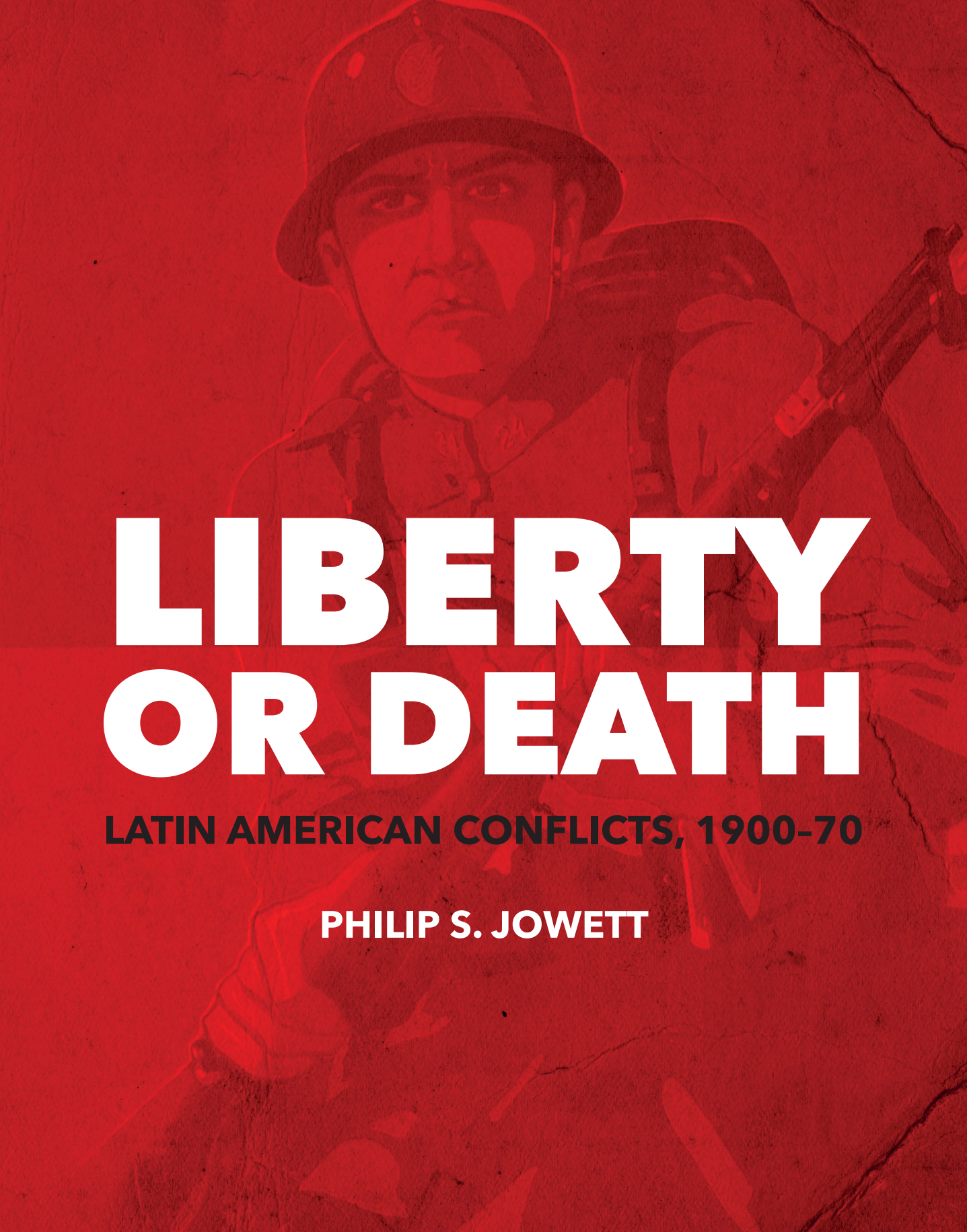

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OSPREY PUBLISHING
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PO Box 883, Oxford, OX1 9PL, UK
1385 Broadway, 5th Floor, New York, NY 10018, USA
E-mail: info@ospreypublishing.com
www.ospreypublishing.com

OSPREY is a trademark of Osprey Publishing Ltd

First published in Great Britain in 2019

This electronic edition published in 2019 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB 978 1 4728 3352 5; eBook 978 1 4728 3353 2; ePDF 978 1 4728 3354 9; XML 978 1 4728 3355 6

Maps by Bounford.com
Index by Alan Rutter

Front cover: (top) Brazilian troops march past the reviewing stand during their country's independence celebrations on 7 September 1936. (Cody Images); (bottom) A well-armed group of Venezuelan FALN guerrillas rests in the jungle. (Cody Images)
Title page: A soldier of the Federal Army from a Mexican poster of 1942. (Cody Images)
Page 6: Image from a Soviet propaganda postcard of 1962. (Cody Images)

DEDICATION
This book is dedicated to my wife.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
My first thanks must go to my wife Tracey who has supported me over the years with my passion for military history. Thank you, as always, to Paul V. Walsh for his research on my behalf and for information on Brazilian military history. Thanks also to Mayra Rosalina Barraza Dominguez, Dan Hagedorn, Ted Nevill, Carlos Planas, Carlos Rosa Mejia and Javier Yubi. My thanks also go to a number of Latin American military attachés in London and Madrid for helping me find information. I must also credit people like Adrian English and Terry Hooker who began the serious study of Latin American history in the West in the 1960s.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

This book covers an interesting period of military history in Latin America. Some of the most fascinating conflicts in Latin American history took place between 1900 and 1970. During this 70-year period most Latin American countries, and their often-impoverished populations, suffered from political and military conflict. Latin America is generally defined as the regions of the American continent where Latin languages – Spanish, Portuguese and French – are spoken. Geographically, we understand Latin America to be the southern part of North America or Mexico, the Central American Isthmus, and the South American sub-continent. Usually included in geographical Latin America are the Caribbean islands of Cuba

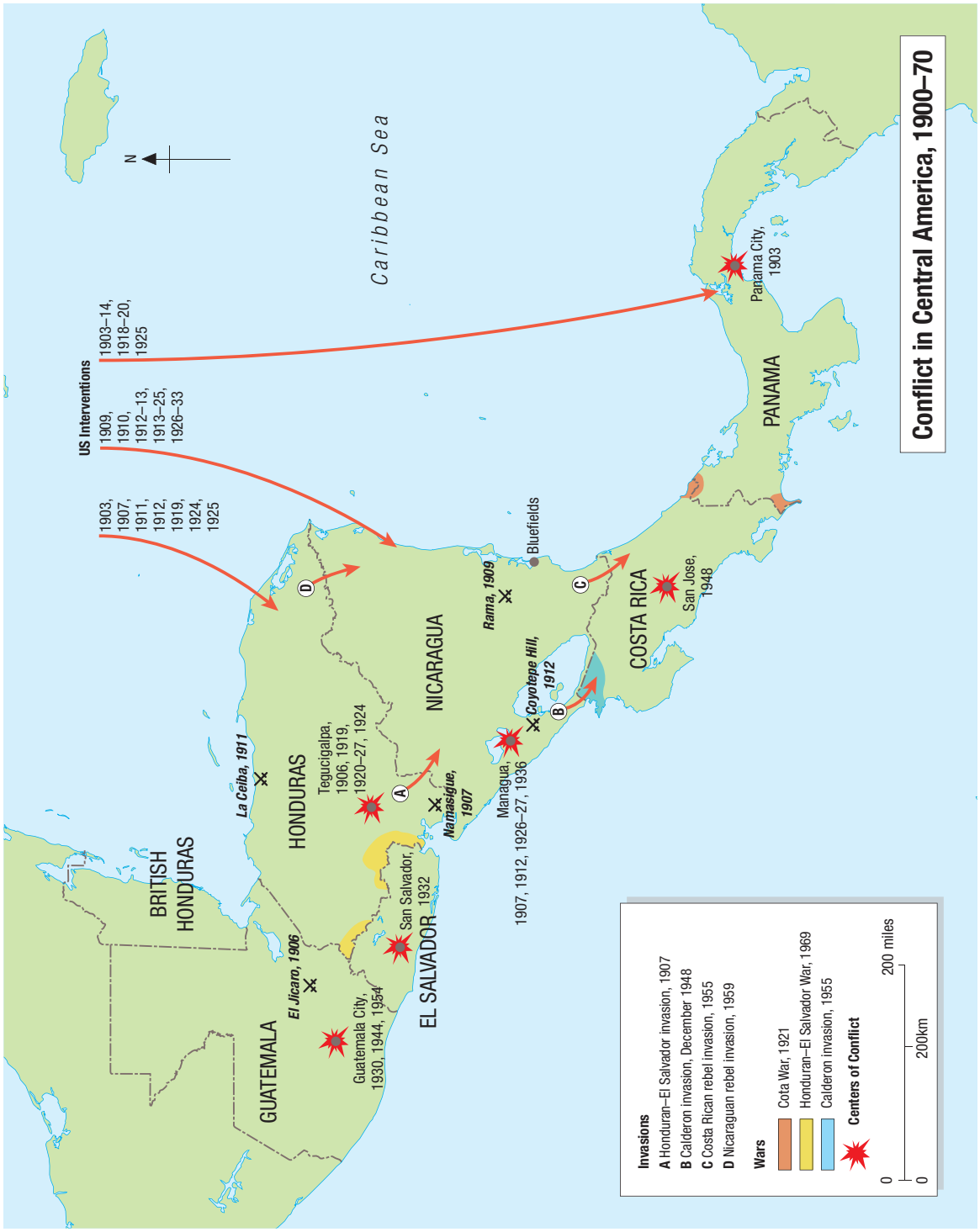
and Hispaniola. The latter is divided between the Spanish-speaking Dominican Republic and French-speaking Haiti. Wars have taken place in Latin America for centuries, but the independence of the provinces of the Spanish and Portuguese empires won in the early 19th century brought a new dimension to the conflicts. The wars were now fought between the newly independent Latin American countries over territory and borders drawn by colonial powers before the 1820s. Nearly all of the new states were republics and these jealously protected territory won in years of struggle with the Spanish Army. The only exception was Brazil where, from 1821 to 1889, direct Portuguese rule was replaced by a Portuguese emperor ruling the Empire of Brazil. When the last emperor was deposed, the whole of Latin America was, at least nominally, ruled by civilian governments. In almost every country, these governments were dominated by their respective liberal or conservative party. The two main parties in most countries fought politically and often militarily for control. Between the 1820s and 1860s there were a number of civil wars in Argentina, while Chile had a civil war from 1829 to 1830 and a revolution in 1851. Chile also fought the War of Confederation against an alliance of Peru and Bolivia between 1836 and 1839. Peru had previously fought a war against Gran-Colombia in the late 1820s, while the Brazilian Empire was threatened by Republican revolts between 1845 and 1855. Uruguay was plagued by a series of wars, fought over control of the government by its Liberal and Conservative parties, which lasted from 1839 to 1863. From 1859 to 1863, Venezuela was torn apart by the so-called Federal War, fought by armies of a few thousand men but with a high attrition rate amongst the Federalist and Conservative armies. In the last few decades of the 19th century, there had been a large number of conflicts in Latin America, two of the largest involving three or more nations. The first, in 1864, involved an alliance of two of the most powerful nations in the region, Argentina and Brazil. With the assistance of Uruguay, this so-called Triple Alliance totally destroyed Paraguay. By the end of the War of the Triple Alliance in 1870 the already impoverished Paraguay, led by the megalomaniac President Francisco Solano Lopez, had been bled dry and there were only 28,000 males left in the country. The next pan-South American conflict, in 1879, was again fought for territory and dominance. In a four-year war against the dual alliance of Peru and Bolivia, Chile fought to gain valuable land on the Pacific coast from the weaker of its adversaries, Bolivia. Chile's victory left Bolivia landlocked, sowing the seeds for Bolivia's attempt to seize territory from Paraguay in order to gain

control of the Paraguay River – and thus access to the Atlantic Ocean – during the Chaco War of 1933–35 nearly 50 years later.

At the beginning of our period, there were a number of wars that had erupted in the last years of the 19th century which were to continue into the 20th century. For the next 70 years, Latin America witnessed a wide variety of conflicts, from skirmishes between a few hundred men to wars involving 100,000 troops. The combatants ranged from poorly armed guerrilla fighters and irregulars with machetes to conventional armies equipped with tanks, jets and all the paraphernalia of modern war. Although I have generally charted events chronologically, the complex nature of Latin American military history means that conflicts were sometimes intertwined. Civil wars in Latin America, especially in the first two decades of the 20th century, often saw interference from neighboring states. Equally, some Latin American nations appear more than others. This is simply because some countries, like Honduras, were at war more often. Similarly, some conflicts, like the Chaco War, require a whole chapter to describe them, while the ten-year Mexican Revolution requires two. Superficially, some of the conflicts covered in this work may appear trivial and small-scale, but it is important to remember that for some of the smaller nations, arming and equipping a few hundred men was an expense that they could ill afford. Some of these "Comic Opera" conflicts were regarded, especially in the Western Press, as "just another revolution." But for the people involved, prepared to face death in order to gain their liberty, they were deadly serious affairs. In many cases the price of failure for those willing to fight for liberty was to stand with their back to an adobe wall and face a firing squad. This book covers over 60 conflicts, including 16 civil wars, 14 revolutions, eight border conflicts and 22 anti-government rebellions, as well as a number of coups. Some of these conflicts, like the Mexican Revolution of 1910–20 and the Cuban Revolution of 1956–59, are well known. Other wars, like the Coto War of 1921, between Panama and Costa Rica, fought for a small piece of jungle, were hardly featured in the press. The Zarumilla War of 1941 was fought during the early stage of World War II and involved tanks, bombers, and submarines. Few outside Latin America were even aware of the conflict, which was a "life or death" struggle for Peru and Ecuador.

It is hoped that the reader will find the military history of Latin America of interest and, given the ongoing instability, poverty, and bloodshed in the region, that the subject will receive wider exposure.

Conflict in South America, 1900–70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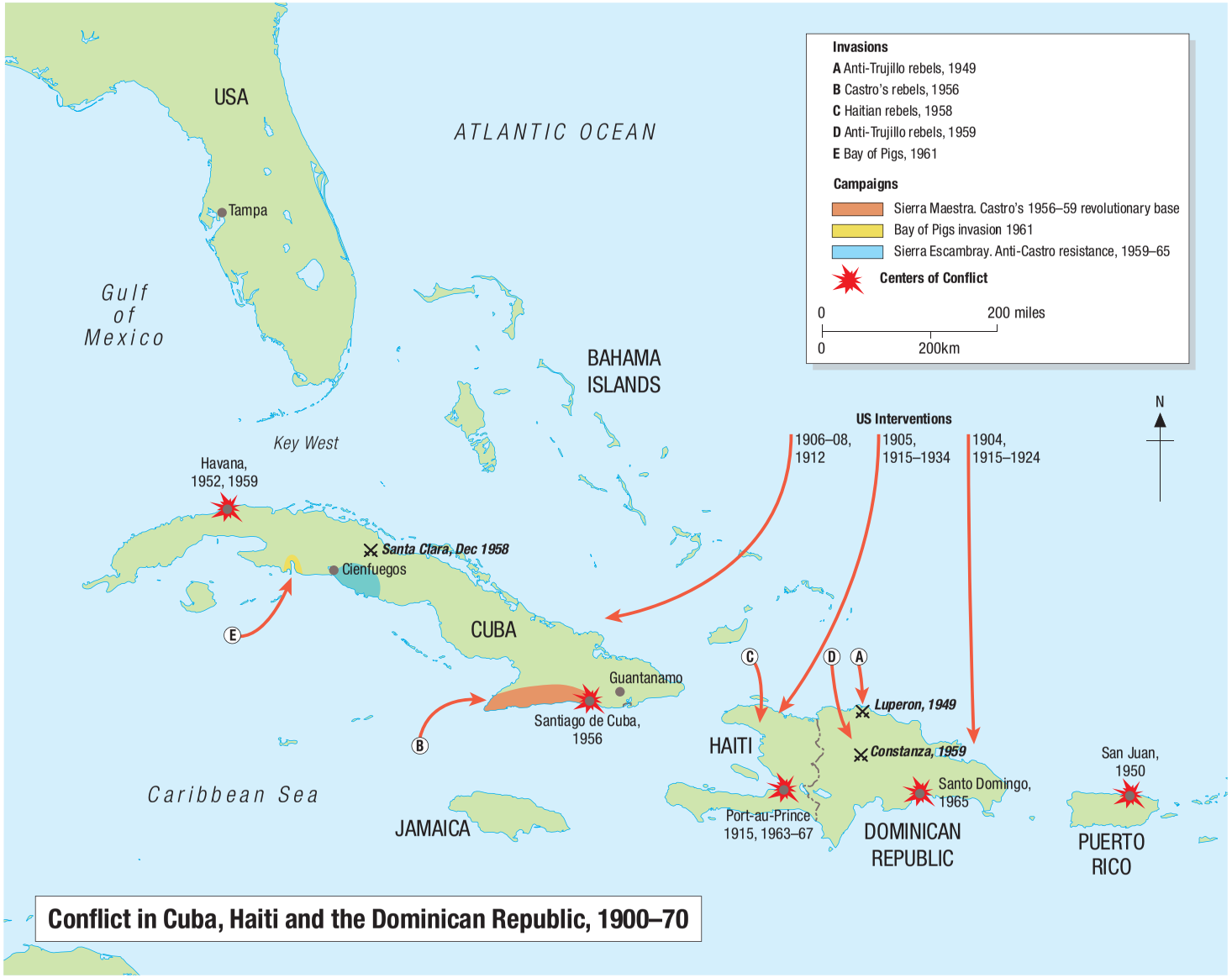

Conflict in Cuba, Haiti and the Dominican Republic, 1900–70

CHAPTER 1
TWENTY YEARS OF CONFLICT

1900–20

Latin America in the late 19th and early 20th century was often divided politically along liberal and conservative lines. The Catholic Church was also divided, with the hierarchy being supportive of the conservatives, while the local priests were often pro-liberal. Many said that, in reality, there was little real difference between the two political parties, although the conservatives usually ended up as the party in power. In most countries these political divisions led to armed conflict between a country's two factions at one time or another during the 1900–20 period. The failure of liberalism to bring improvements to the lives of people in Central and South America led to the decline in its influence. During the many civil conflicts which took place during 1900 and 1920 in Central and South America, the combatants still aligned themselves with either the liberals or conservatives. The greatest conflict of the period, which took place in Mexico between 1910 and 1920, was a civil war that saw loosely aligned liberal revolutionaries fighting for ten

OPPOSITE This illustration from a French magazine of the period shows a skirmish between shirtless Colombian Liberal troops and the Conservative government forces in 1902. As both armies wore the same uniform the Liberals generally had hat bands and sashes in red. In this case the Liberals have stripped to the waist so that there is no confusion over which side is which. (Photo by Art Media/Print Collector/ Getty Images)

years against reactionary right-wing forces (see Chapters 2 and 3). During this same period the USA continued its dominance over Central America and the Caribbean with military interventions that had begun in the 19th century and continued in the early 1900s (see Chapter 6). On the world political front, the Great War in Europe of 1914–18 had little real effect on Latin America. Cuba and Brazil did eventually contribute to a small extent to the Allied cause with limited military and naval forces. The entry of the USA into the conflict in 1917 had an adverse effect on other American countries' support for the Allies. Resentment against US interference in Latin America meant that only eight nations actually declared war on the Central Powers before the end of the war in November 1918.

The "War of a Thousand Days," Colombia 1899–1902

Colombia had been divided politically into liberal and conservative factions for most of the 19th century. During the 1800s, the two political parties had frequently armed their supporters and fought civil conflicts for control of the country. In 1899 the incumbent Conservative government was accused by the Liberals of election fraud. As was usual in the highly partisan and confrontational politics of Colombia, the Liberals sought an armed resolution to the dispute. The Liberal-supporting General Rafael Uribe had planned to launch a rebellion against the Conservatives on October 20, 1899. His supporters armed themselves and brought out their old rifles and muskets from their hiding places. Although they were going to be outgunned, Uribe and his fellow commanders hoped that pro-Liberal army units would soon join their rebellion. Some Liberal commanders had already jumped the gun and begun the revolt on October 17 in Socorro in the department of Santander. The leader of this pre-emptive revolt, General Paolo Emilio Villar, had forced Uribe to move his plans forward. This meant that not all the rebel plans were in place but, regardless, the Liberals gathered their irregulars and began to attack government garrisons. At the start of the conflict, the Liberals had managed to raise a total of 35,000 troops, while the Conservative government forces totaled 75,000 men. Fortunately for the Liberals, there were a number of friendly Latin American states with liberal governments at the time. The presidents of Nicaragua, Venezuela and Ecuador were enemies of the Colombian Conservatives and recognized Uribe as the Colombian president. For the rest of 1899 and into early 1900, there followed a series of conventional battles between the two factions that

were usually one sided. By mid-August 1900, after ten months of this kind of fighting, there had already been 20,000 deaths.

The "Gentleman's War" 1899

The first few months of the war, in late 1899 and early 1900, is often referred to as the "Gentleman's War." This was a relatively civilized opening phase of what was to become an extremely vicious civil war. In the first months of the war the two factions were looking around for arms from abroad and foreign supporters and allies. Liberal politicians were relieved to find that the Liberal government of neighboring Venezuela was happy to support them. With fewer troops and arms and a general lack of war materiel, they would need all the help they could get. One of the first engagements of the war was fought on the Magdalena River on October 24, when a fleet of converted river boats was organized by the Liberals. After arming the river boats the Liberals had sailed northwards up the river until they came across two well-armed government gunboats. In a brief one-sided battle, all of the Liberal ships were sunk. A large number of troops was lost with them, with 204 drowning. Amongst the dead was a significant number of Liberal political and military leaders, which severely weakened the rebel cause. The next major battle took place between November 11 and 13 at Bucaramanga in the department of Santander, when 3,000 poorly armed Liberals defeated a stronger, better-armed Conservative army. Most of the Liberals were armed with old mid-1800s muskets, and some were armed only with machetes. The Liberal commander, General Uribe, sent his men into battle with little ammunition, but their initial charge caught the Conservatives completely off-guard and they won the day. After the battle, Uribe combined his army with that of General Benjamin Herrera, and on December 15 they marched their joint force towards the Conservative stronghold at Peralonso. The Conservatives had 5,600 men at Peralonso and their commander sent a number of his men to ambush the advancing Liberals. Although the ambush was well prepared, the astute General Uribe recovered the situation and ordered a frontal assault on the Conservative lines. As before, many Liberals were armed with machetes and the traditional Colombian short sword, which they used to good effect. The Conservatives broke and fled the battlefield, leaving 700 dead behind them as well as many wounded, cruelly injured by the Liberals' machetes. The Liberals, although victorious, lost 750 men in the two-day battle, and their losses in men and armaments were harder to make up.

NEXT PAGES Colombian Liberal troops pose before going into battle against their Conservative foes in the early 20th century. The Liberal army was always at a disadvantage against the better-supplied and armed Conservatives. Less than 50 percent had modern rifles and many were armed with muskets dating back to the mid-19th century, while others only had machetes. This group of commanders are relatively well armed, however, with Mausers and Winchester repeating carbines. (Cody Images)


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The Battle of Palonegro

After a few months of Liberal victories, the Conservatives were desperate to reverse their fortunes. Their chance came in May 1900 when a confident force of 10,000 Liberals prepared to face the demoralized Conservatives. This was the largest Liberal army put into the field during the civil war and was under the command of General Vargas Santos. On May 11, the Liberals advanced towards a Conservative army of about 5,000 men, which was dug in behind 26 kilometers (16 miles) of trenches. The fighting would last 15 days and would see repeated desperate Liberal attempts to break the Conservative defenses. Fighting in searing heat, the two armies suffered terribly from a shortage of water and from having to sleep in the open for two weeks. During the battle, the large number of rotting corpses on the battlefield became a major health hazard, but the fighting was too intense for burial parties to operate. The fighting was medieval in its ferocity, with both sides using the dreaded machete, and the injuries suffered were horrific according to eyewitnesses. With no medical facilities, the smallest wound could be fatal. Although the Liberals nearly broke the Conservatives defenses on several occasions, they were hampered by their usual shortage of ammunition. On the 25th, after days of fighting without respite, Liberal morale broke when 15,000 Conservative reinforcements arrived on the battlefield. Leaving 1,500 dead on the field, the Liberals withdrew, losing

During the War of a Thousand Days, a group of Conservative troops waits to go into battle at Palonegro in May 1900. During the war the only way to tell the two sides apart in battle was by the wearing of hat bands in their party colors. The variety of hats in this photo reflects the diverse regions that both armies drew their soldiers from in the three-year-long conflict. Only a few of the men are wearing regular army uniform, with the rest wearing their own clothing. (Cody Images)

hundreds more men to desertion during the retreat. A Conservative force then cut the Liberals off; now reduced to 3,400 men, they were forced to take to the jungle. More troops began to drift away and before long Santos' Liberal army was reduced to only 1,000 men. Although the Conservatives had lost 1,000 men, they were in a much better state and their troops now tracked down the last of the Liberals and killed them all. The Conservatives took no prisoners, and the Gentlemen's War was well and truly over. The Liberal defeat at Palonegro effectively ended their hopes of winning the conflict. Having led a military coup in August 1900, Conservative President Jose Manuel Marroquin was declared president for the second time. As a committed Conservative, and given his strong position, Marroquin had no interest in negotiating peace with the Liberals. For the next few years the conflict was to be characterized by a destructive guerrilla war, with at least 400 battles or skirmishes taking place all over Colombia.

Foreign Support for the Liberals

In the wake of the Liberal defeats of May and June 1900, their allies in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and to a lesser extent Ecuador tried their best to rejuvenate liberal forces. Nicaraguan President Jose Santos Zelaya and Venezuelan President Jose Cipriano Castro Ruiz were determined to help their fellow liberals. Venezuela in particular did all it could, sending 200 "volunteers" and a few small ships to help create a Liberal navy. Materiel help to the Liberals from Venezuela included the gift of 10,000 modern rifles from an order of 40,000 bought for the Venezuelan Army. However, it was clear to the Liberals that they were losing the war, and despite foreign support, they were only able to raise a 1,800-strong army to continue the conflict. Eventually a total of 1,400 Venezuelan "volunteers" were also fighting alongside the Liberals, but they were simply unable to raise the numbers they had had in 1899. The Colombian Government wanted to punish the interfering governments of Nicaragua, Ecuador, and Venezuela for supporting their Liberal foes. In July 1900 they decided to support the Venezuelan Conservative exiles preparing to "liberate" their country. A force of 4,000–6,000 Conservative Venezuelans under the command of Rangel Garbiras crossed the border in late July and were joined by Conservative guerrillas under General Narin. They were faced by 10,000 loyal Venezuelan troops, who defeated them at the two-day battle of San Cristobel that began on July 28. The battle cost the Conservatives 800 dead while the Venezuelan Government troops lost 300, and the invaders retreated back to the shelter of Colombian territory.

Just over a year later the Venezuelan Government decided to exact revenge on the Colombian Government by launching an invasion of Colombia with 1,000 of their own troops. When they crossed the border on August 4, 1901, they were disappointed to be met by only 100 Colombian Liberal troops. The Colombians urged the Venezuelans to turn back as, given their poor situation, the Colombian Liberals could offer the Venezuelans no support. The proud Venezuelan commander, General Echeverria, refused to retreat and some six weeks later, on September 23, the Venezuelans were defeated by an army of 1,200 Colombians. The battle of Riohacha ended with over half of the Venezuelan invaders dead and 300 troops taken prisoner, along with their commander. This defeat virtually ended Venezuelan support for the Liberals, but at the same time, Nicaragua was supporting a separate campaign in Panama.

The Panamanian Campaign 1900–02

From March 1900 until the end of the war, the Liberals fought a "sideshow" campaign in the Colombian department of Panama, which unlike the rest of the country was geographically in Central America. They were backed in Panama, where Liberal support amongst the population was relatively strong, by the Liberal Nicaraguan Government. The rebels hoped to use the department as a base for continuing the civil war. On March 31, 1900, a force of 2,000 Liberals landed on the Panamanian coast from Nicaraguan boats and attacked and took the city of David. Taking town after town, they then advanced towards Panama City, the department capital. The tortuous advance involved several months of jungle fighting and the Liberals did not arrive at Panama City until July 4. Although the strong Conservative garrison had been well prepared and its troops counterattacked in force, the Liberals were victorious after eight hours of fighting. Despite their victory, the Liberals were unable to take the city, and the garrison, although defeated, was able to resist the rebel assault. The Conservatives were better armed, with a few machine guns and light guns, while the Liberals had been given older, inferior weapons by their Nicaraguan allies. On July 24, the Liberals began a series of all-out frontal attacks on the city's defenses that lasted for two days. These assaults cost the Liberals dearly, with at least 1,000 of their troops killed and many wounded. Overall, the battle of Calidonia Bridge was a total disaster for the Liberals and saved the Conservatives from complete annihilation. When the victorious Conservatives advanced, the demoralized Liberals had little choice but

to surrender. A peace treaty, signed on July 26, was swiftly broken by the Liberals, who now began a guerrilla campaign in the Panamanian jungle. Liberal reinforcements under General Belisario Porras Barahona arrived in Panama in August 1901 and were joined by a large number of Indian volunteers. The Conservative army had spent the previous few months attacking Indian villages, and the Indians were only too happy to join the Liberals and seek revenge. Although the Liberals did manage to take the city of Colon, supplies soon ran low and the collapse of morale forced them to accept a second treaty, signed on November 29, 1901. Less than a month later, the persistent Liberals invaded again, this time with an army of 1,500 men and a navy of a few small river boats converted into gunboats. The Liberal army advanced slowly towards Colon again, their ultimate goal being the conquest of Panama City. A number of small battles and skirmishes took place in what turned out to be another long, drawn-out jungle campaign. While the Liberals were advancing, the Conservatives under General Salazar had raised a 5,000-strong army. This time the Conservatives were determined to end the Liberal threat in Panama for good. Several thousand Panamanians had, however, flocked to the Liberal cause, and by the end of 1902, their commander, General Herrera, had 8,000 poorly armed men. Before he could commit them against the Conservative army, he received a message, on October 28, from General Uribe in Colombia. This message informed Herrera that Uribe had been defeated and that he advised his Panamanian commander to surrender immediately.

The 1902 Campaign and the End of the War

By June 1902, General Uribe was growing weary of the one-sided war with the Conservatives and despaired at the suffering of his troops. He began to look for a peaceful solution to the conflict, while at the same time organizing one last effort to revive Liberal fortunes. He began a new campaign in the Magdalena Department in August but simply did not have the resources to continue it. His troops were fighting in rags and, in most battles and skirmishes, had only a few bullets each. Liberal troops were no longer willing to make suicidal charges against the Conservative lines armed only with machetes, and their morale plummeted. Lacking any effective international support, Uribe was pragmatic enough to see that the sooner the fighting ended the better. By October, the dismal condition of his Liberal troops had brought his last-ditch effort in Magdelena to an end. He surrendered in the final days of October and the

This postcard dated July 31, 1903 is of a group of former Colombian troops who have been "persuaded" to fight for the new state of Panama and are stationed in the town of Colon. The caption to the photograph claims that some of the boy soldiers are as young as seven years old. Boy soldiers saw service with many Latin American armies in the early 20th century, and not in the drummer boy role they had in European armies. (Author's Collection)

long and bitter civil war ended in a relatively civilized manner. The conflict had cost the lives of around 100,000 soldiers, with approximately half succumbing to disease. Some estimates say between 53,000 and 55,000 Liberal soldiers were killed during the war, while about 47,000 Conservatives troops died. Many reports said that in many towns and villages almost the whole of the male population had been lost. It was also estimated that at least 100,000 civilians lost their lives, mostly from hunger and disease caused by the depredations of the civil war.

The Independence of Panama 1903

The end of the civil war in Colombia in 1902 left the Conservative government weakened and unable to meet a new threat from the Central American department of Panama. Panama was part of Colombia, but it was on the Central American Isthmus, while the rest of the country was in South America. Panama had been earmarked, along with Nicaragua, as a possible site for the proposed canal which was to link the Caribbean with the Pacific Ocean. In 1901 the USA had secured the sole rights to build the canal and chose Panama as the preferred site. The US Government of President Theodore Roosevelt then began negotiations with the Colombian Government for the lease of land on which to build the canal. When these negotiations broke down in 1903, the local Panamanian authorities began preparing to make a unilateral declaration of independence. A Frenchman, Philippe Banau-Varilla, was one of the main organizers of the breakaway from Colombia. He later went on to negotiate the Canal Treaty, and single-handedly wrote the Panamanian Constitution. The rebels were supported in their declaration of independence by a ten-ship fleet of the US Navy in a classic example of gunboat diplomacy. It was common knowledge that, in their desire to begin building the strategically important canal, the USA had fomented the rebel breakaway from Colombia. The Colombian troops in Panama were expected to resist any breakaway by Panama but they were neutralized by Banau-Varilla, with the help of US funds. He raised a "Patriot Army," under the command of Colombian General Esteban Huertas, almost

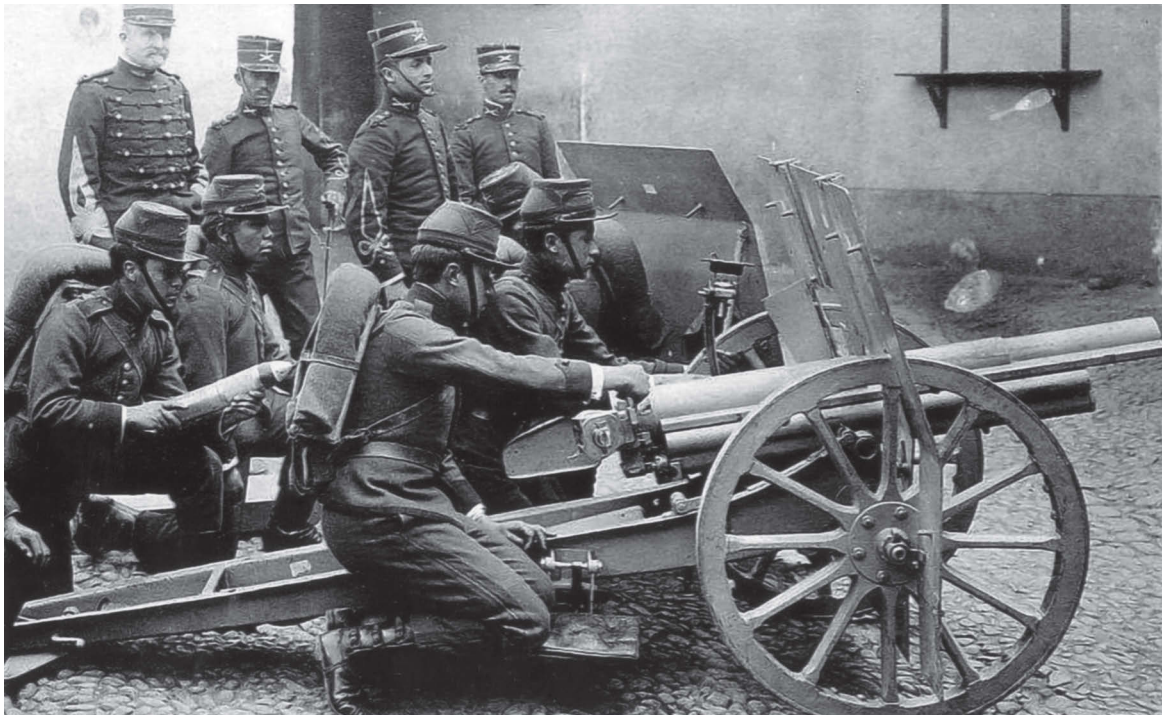
overnight by offering him and other commanders of the army garrison in Panama a bribe of $100,000. This bribe ensured the loyalty of any Colombian troops stationed in Panama, as well as any local Panamanian forces, to the breakaway movement. The infuriated Bogota government gathered Colombian forces on the Panama–Colombia border. Their only way to cross the isthmus to Panama City was via the American-owned railway, and its owners would not grant them permission to use it. In the Colombian capital, the government of President Jose Manuel Marroquin knew its position was weak. It only had a few hundred troops in Panama that it could rely on, and the army in general was still divided after the civil war, with the first loyalty of most units being to their commanding officer. With only a few old gunboats to counter the powerful US Fleet it had little chance of stopping the secession of Panama. On November 4, Panama declared its independence, and although the Colombian troops who had not been bribed tried to stop it, they were outnumbered. The two loyal Colombian officers and their 473 troops left Panama on a gunboat to return to Colombia. The Colombians had been given no choice in the matter and the USA could, and did, continue to claim that they had merely supported the Panamanians' right to self-determination. One of the first acts of the newly independent Panama was to sell the rights to the Canal Zone to the USA for $10 million. This gave the USA the right to treat the zone as an unincorporated territory of the USA, with a lease that ran from 1903 until 1979. They controlled a 5-mile strip of land either side of the canal for the whole of its length, and the first ship traversed it on January 7, 1914.

A patriotic postcard from 1903 shows the new flag of Panama that emerged from the breakaway of that department from the rest of Colombia. It was supposed to have been designed using the colors of the two dominant political parties at the time, the Colorados or "Reds" and the Conservatives or "Blues." The first flag was sewn by the wife of the first president, Manuel Amador Guerrero, and he smuggled it into Panama in time for the declaration of independence. (Author's Collection)

The Acre War 1899–1903

Another Latin American conflict that began in the 19th century and ended in the 20th was the Acre War, which lasted, with intervals, from 1899 until 1903. The Acre region, in the north-east of Bolivia, was one of the world's main sources of the new product of rubber in the late 19th century. This product was cultivated mainly by some 80,000 Brazilian immigrant workers who moved into Acre in the late 1800s. In 1899, Brazilian workers saw an opportunity to use the high price of rubber on the world market to finance a secessionist movement in Acre. The Acre region had been ceded to Bolivia

by Brazil in 1867 and their government had no intention of returning it without a fight. In June 1899, a group of Brazilians took the Bolivian town of Puerto Alonso, which they renamed "Puerto Acre." They then declared the independent Republic of Acre from their new capital and began to raise an army to defend it. A Spanish adventurer, Luis Galvez Rodriguez de Arias, was hired to raise this army and brought other Spaniards with him to act as the army's core. Galvez and his men were all veterans of the recent Spanish–American War of 1898 and certainly knew how to fight. Even with only a few hundred men, the Acre Army was capable of defeating the small number of Bolivian troops in the region. In the Bolivian capital, La Paz, the minister of war, Colonel Ismael Montes, took it upon himself to raise an expeditionary force to fight in Acre. He put together a 500-strong force and they began to march towards distant Acre, moving through some of the world's most impenetrable jungle. The horrendous conditions during their march meant that by the time they reached Acre few of the Bolivians were fit to fight. It was the Brazilians, however, who decided the fate of the First Republic of Acre, by sending a flotilla of river gunboats to crush the secessionist movement. The Brazilians were worried that the Bolivians might ask the USA to honor a long-



The Bolivian Army had been defeated by the Acre rebels between 1899 and 1903, who had the support of the Brazilian Army. In 1905 attempts were made to improve the state of the Bolivian Army by employing a five-strong French military mission. By the time the military mission left Bolivia in 1909 the army had grown to 4,300 men and officers with 5,000 new rifles and carbines, 16 Maxim machine guns, and light artillery like this Schneider mountain gun. (Cody Images)

forgotten agreement that pledged them to defend Bolivia from foreign aggression. When the flotilla arrived at Puerto Alonso on March 15, 1900, the Acre Republic was abolished and Galvez and his men were sent back to Spain. Only a few months later, however, in November 1900, a second Acre Republic was proclaimed under the leadership of Rodrigo Caraulho. This second secessionist movement raised a 500-strong army whose men were armed mainly with Winchester repeaters and the odd captured Bolivian Mauser. The army's "heavy" weaponry was made up of an old light cannon and a single M1895 machine gun. They did, however, have a river steamer, the *Solomoes*, donated to them by the Brazilian governor of Amazonas State, which they armed with the cannon. This improvised gunboat was used to capture a Bolivian launch, the *Alonzo*, which they renamed the *Rui Barbara*. After recruiting a few more troops, the rebels attacked the Bolivian-held fort at Puerto Alonso but were beaten back, losing their precious cannon and machine gun in the process. When a Bolivian gunboat, the *Rio Afua*, arrived at Puerto Alonso, the rebels gave up their halfhearted rebellion on December 29, 1900.

The Second Campaign 1902–03

After the collapse of the second Republic of Acre in the final days of 1900, the Bolivians offered a compromise solution by which the Acre region would be leased to a private Bolivian company. The Brazilians did not accept this compromise solution, and neither did the Peruvian Government, which also thought it had a claim on Acre, and the territorial dispute rumbled on. In August 1902, a former Brazilian Army officer, Placido de Castro, organized a band of 35 supporters to launch a new rebellion. They traveled by canoe to the river town of Xapuri, captured it from the Bolivian garrison, and proclaimed a new Acre Republic. De Castro's rebellion was challenged in mid-September, when a 180-strong Bolivian expeditionary force attacked Xapuri. The poorly armed rebels, who now had 70 men, were defeated and retreated into the jungle but their leader's ambitions were far from over. Somehow de Castro was able to find the backing to raise a new 1,000-strong army armed with machetes and Winchester repeaters. De Castro proved himself adept at jungle warfare, even though he came from the open plains of southern Brazil. He was a natural leader, and before long he had expanded his forces to 1,400 and was laying siege to several Bolivian-held forts. His rebels took the fort at Vuelta de La Empressa with its 230-strong garrison on October 15, 1902, after a three-week siege.

The Siege of Puerto Alonso

By January 1903, Placido de Castro and his 1,300 men were laying siege to the 194-strong Bolivian garrison at Puerto Alonso. The rebels were successful in capturing some of the outer defenses of the town, and they also captured the Bolivian gunboat *Rio Afua*, which they renamed *Independencia*. De Castro was content to try and starve the garrison out, but the Bolivians put up a hard fight, fearing execution if they surrendered. For nine days the rebels fired thousands of rounds into the beleaguered garrison, causing heavy casualties amongst the Bolivians. In total the rebels used 600,000 rounds of ammunition during the siege, and by January 24, the Bolivian commander, Colonel Rosondo Rojas, asked for terms. During the siege his men had suffered six dead and 15 wounded but the besiegers had suffered 200 dead, mainly from disease. Rojas bravely demanded from de Castro that the surviving Bolivians should be given full military honors, and the rebel commander gladly agreed. The Bolivian troops marched out of the fort and into the forbidding jungle but few lived through their ordeal to reach friendly lines. After his victory, de Castro was feeling confident and his forces were reported to have expanded to 2,000 men. To arm his forces, he arranged to sell 30 tons of good quality rubber, enabling him to buy some modern rifles for his men.

Bolivia and Brazil at War

President Jose Manuel Pando of Bolivia, smarting from the defeats suffered by his troops in Acre, decided to take direct action. He organized a relief column of 700 troops in the Bolivian capital La Paz and personally led them in a march towards Acre. He was an experienced officer who had fought in the Acre region in earlier years and knew that a small force like his could tip the balance in the Bolivians' favor. Pando was unaware that the defenders of Puerto Alonso, who his column was marching to relieve, were on the verge of surrendering. When the Bolivian column arrived at the city of Riberalta in the Acre region in March 1903, they found that the Acre forces were in the ascendancy. Pando divided his force in two, leaving half in Riberalta while the other half dug forward defensive positions at nearby Puerto Rico. These new Bolivian positions came under heavy attack from de Castro's forces but the defenders successfully resisted them. The Brazilians, in response to the arrival of the Bolivians, had already mobilized a 4,000-strong army to go to Acre. They also threatened to increase their forces to 8,000 men, which would have given them at least a 10:1 advantage over the Bolivians. Castro and his irregulars were now sidelined as the

Soldiers of the bodyguard unit of President Cipriano Castro of Venezuela parade outside his palace in Caracas in 1907 wearing archaic-looking uniforms. The shako hats worn by the other ranks belong to the previous century, while their officer's kepi is a little more contemporary. Latin American armies spent most of their time in the early 20th century ensuring that their employer stayed in control of the country. (Library of Congress)

Brazilian and Bolivian armies prepared to go to war. Bolivia now had the choice to send more troops to Acre from its weakened army or to seek a diplomatic solution. Pando's army, having suffered losses from disease already, was now down to only 450 men and he knew that further resistance was impossible. The pragmatic Bolivians chose diplomacy and a truce was agreed between the two countries on March 21. Lengthy talks between Bolivia and Brazil followed, ending with the signing of the Treaty of Petropolis on November 17, 1903. Under the treaty Bolivia ceded Acre (73,000 square miles of Bolivian territory) to Brazil. Bolivia was, however, compensated with a payment of £2,000,000 – a not-inconsequential sum for a piece of jungle in 1903. Acre losses during the fighting were estimated at 250 dead and 750 wounded, and the Bolivians claimed theirs as 50. Both sides certainly suffered many more deaths from tropical diseases, but the Bolivians were particularly vulnerable to these. Their troops came mainly from the Andes region of Bolivia and soon succumbed to the various tropical diseases they encountered in the jungle.

Venezuela's Liberative Revolution 1901–03

In December 1901, the Venezuelan General Manuel Matos rebelled against the brutal dictatorship of President Cipriano Castro. Castro had ruled the South American country since 1899 and any opposition to his regime was met with the most severe measures. Castro was supported by his loyal general, Juan Vincente Gomez, who was to command the government forces against Matos. The two armies fought a grueling 66-day campaign in western Venezuela with no quarter given. On October 12, 1902 the decisive battle of the war began at La Victoria and lasted nine days. The 6,000-strong government army defeated a rebel force of 14,000, with the total casualties reaching 3,000. Rebel troops retreated to their stronghold at Ciudad Bolivar on the Orinoco River, where they awaited the inevitable attack of Gomez's army. In July 1903 a government army of 3,000 men was moved up the Orinoco on river steamers to attack the rebel stronghold. Although the defenders had a similar number of troops, they were outgunned by the attacking force. In a 50-hour battle the rebels were outfought by Gomez's troops, who probably feared his wrath more than the enemy. Government losses totaled 250 killed and

Uruguayan National Guardsmen supporting the incumbent Liberal Government parade for their officer during the 1904 civil war. They are fighting against the forces of the Conservative "Blanco" Party under the command of the legendary cavalry leader Aparicio Saravia. Although Saravia was a brilliant cavalry commander, his brave men could not defeat determined soldiers dug in behind machine guns. (Cody Images)

400 wounded, while rebel losses were about 800 dead and wounded. Amongst the rebel weapons captured were 3,275 rifles, four artillery pieces, their solitary machine gun, and nearly 1 million rounds of ammunition. The defeated rebels were quickly rounded up and executed, with only a few managing to find sanctuary in their jungle hideouts. Gomez's victory earned him the gratitude of President Castro, who he was to follow as the country's leader in 1908. The general was to rule Venezuela until his death in the mid-1930s and was to prove to be one of the most brutal dictators that Latin America had ever seen. Medieval torture was the norm for political prisoners, and ordinary Venezuelans lived in constant fear of arrest for the slightest transgression.

The Uruguayan Civil War 1904

Although Uruguay has been described as the "Switzerland of Latin America" due to its relatively peaceful history, it did see a vicious civil war in 1904. In the previous year the Liberal "Colorado" candidate had been elected to the presidency, much to the disgust of the Conservative "Blanco" Party. Blanco militants decided to demonstrate their opposition to the Liberal president, Jose Battle y Ordonez, with military force. The rebels' military leader was a half-Brazilian "Gaucho,"* Aparicio Saravia, who gathered his elite cavalry into a 9,000-strong army. He was able to expand his force to 15,000 men, largely by the force of his personality, to confront the government army of 36,000. Although outnumbered, the Blanco rebels had the advantage that many of the Liberal troops were poorly trained and armed militia. The main problem for the rebels was that the Liberal troops had a small number of machine guns, which were to prove the decisive weapons in the coming fighting. Skirmishes between Saravia's cavalry and the government troops occured throughout early 1904, before the decisive battles took place in the summer. Although the rebels could rely on Saravia's Gaucho cavalry, the government forces had modern Mauser rifles and a few M1895 machine guns to counter them. During the first half of 1904, small-scale battles and skirmishes took place throughout Uruguay. One such skirmish took place in late January at Milo, with the rebels suffering 200 dead and 300 wounded, compared to 60 government

* The Gauchos were the cowboys of Latin America who herded the beef cattle of the region, and were superb horsemen with their own distinctive culture. They were present in Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina, and in the 1800s and early 1900s often formed the cavalry elements of the armies of these nations.

soldiers killed. The first major battle in the civil war took place at Tupambae between June 22 and 24. It involved the 6,500-strong government Army of the North under the command of Colonel Pablo Galorza, which was faced by 5,000 Gaucho cavalry. The Gauchos recklessly attacked Galorza's dug-in infantry, and many of Saravia's men were mown down in front of the government machine guns, with total casualties reaching 2,300. A final battle took place a few months later at Masoller on September 1, 1904. The remnants of Saravia's brave but outmatched cavalry faced the government Army of the South of 7,500 men. General Vasquez, the government commander, again used his machine guns to good effect, routing the Gaucho horsemen. It was estimated that 1,000 were killed and 4,000 were wounded, with one correspondent saying simply, "the slaughter was terrible." Saravia was mortally wounded during the battle and his death effectively marked the collapse of the Blanco rebellion.

Central American Wars 1900–11

Central America in 1900 was the poorest region of Latin America and was made up of the smallest and least-populous nations. The region was divided into a group of small nations that continuously struggled to survive as separate entities. There had been several attempts during the 19th century to form a federation of three of these states – Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador. In 1842 they were united, but this federation only lasted until 1845 and ended in war between Nicaragua and the two other nations. There was another, even shorter-lived federation in 1895 and any further attempts at unifying the three countries would be by military force. Most Central American countries were to go to war with their neighbors at least once during the first ten years of the 20th century.

The Guatemala–El Salvador War 1906

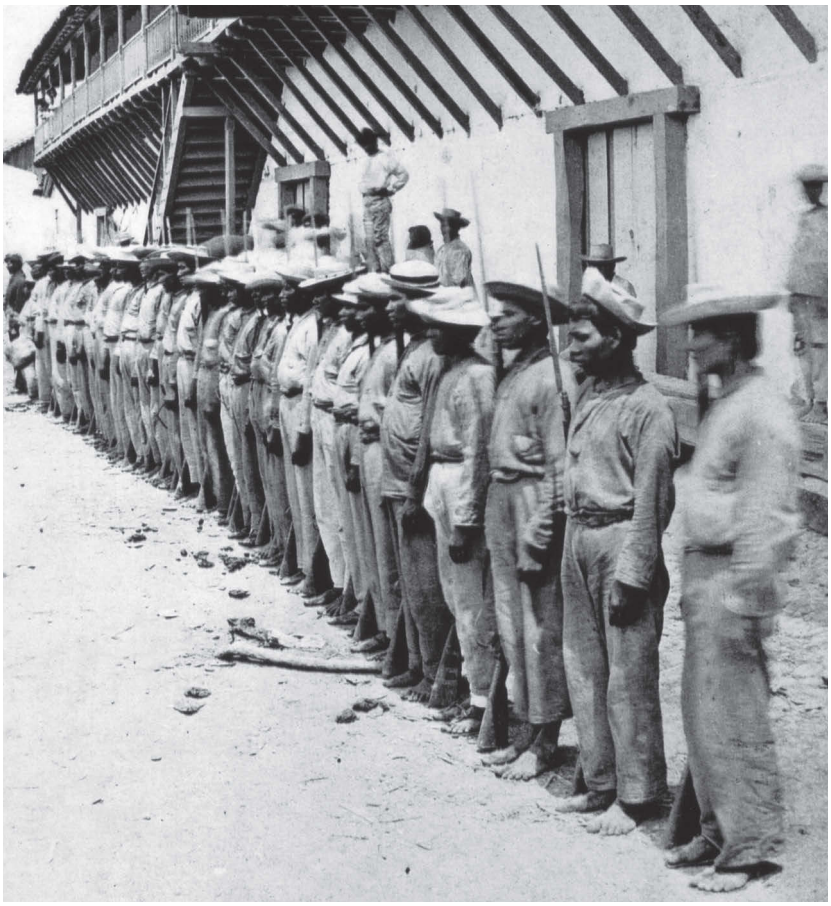
During the early years of the 20th century, Central American states El Salvador and Honduras had been interfering in the politics of their neighbor Guatemala. Their support for rivals to the president of Guatemala, Estrada Cabrera, led in 1906 to conflict between two of the states, Guatemala and El Salvador. President Cabrera had ruled Guatemala since 1892 and, to counter his many enemies, had built up the Guatemalan Army to 15,000 men. In Central American terms this was a huge force, when his neighbors had armies of only 2,000–3,000 men. In late May 1906, political exiles had launched an abortive invasion of Guatemala

OPPOSITE General Aparicio Saravia, the 48-year-old Uruguayan cavalry commander and co-leader of the Blanco Party, was a larger-than-life character. He always led his elite Gaucho "Saravista" cavalry into battle from the front, and sustained several wounds during his 30-year military career. During the decisive battle of Masoller in September 1904, he was shot in the abdomen by a Mauser bullet. Taken across the border into Brazil by some of his men, he lay in agony in a farmhouse for ten days before dying of peritonitis. (Author's Collection)

A cadet from the Guatemalan military academy goes through drill for the camera in 1904 wearing the smartest uniform available in this impoverished country. When he leaves the academy, he will be an officer in one of the largest armies in Central America. Most Central American armies were based around a small hard-core regular force reinforced in times of war by volunteers and militia. Two years later this cadet would probably be taking part in the war with El Salvador, which resulted in a Guatemalan victory. (Author's Collection)

from El Salvador, before the war proper began in July. This poorly organized invasion, led by Guatemalan General Manuel Barillas, was easily defeated in a battle at Ayutia on June 11. The rebels fled back across the border, leaving a large quantity of arms and ammunition behind them. Relations between the two nations now deteriorated, as President Cabrera accused the Salvadorians of supporting the rebel force.

Matters came to a head when the El Salvadorian minister of war took it upon himself to start a war. Tomas Regalado had served as Salvadorian President between 1898 and 1903 and had retained his position at minister of war when he resigned. Regalado was a man embittered by the run in his political fortunes, and a renowned drunkard, whose notorious drunken binges usually resulted in trouble in the capital. On this occasion, Regalado, in a drunken attempt to re-establish himself in Salvadorian politics, acquired an artillery piece and fired a few rounds into the presidential palace, as his colleagues kept their heads down. Realizing he had gone too far this time, Regaldo made yet another desperate attempt to establish himself as a national hero by leading some of the El Salvadorian Army to the Guatemalan border to punish President Cabrera. His army crossed the border on July 9, led by a reportedly drunken Regalado, who had brought some Chilean military advisors with him. On July 13, as Regalado's troops advanced towards the Guatemalan capital, Guatemala City, he decided to scout ahead of the column. He rode towards Guatemalan lines, taking his adjutant and a small escort with him, when disaster struck. Regalado rode with his men into the middle of a unit of troops dressed in the dark blue of the El Salvadorian Army. Unfortunately, these were not friendly troops but were Guatemalans wearing similar dark-blue uniforms. He had seen Guatemalan troops earlier in the campaign wearing khaki, but these troops were reinforcements from the capital wearing smarter uniforms. Regalado and his men were quickly surrounded and set upon by the enraged Guatemalans. Although they fought bravely, all of the Salvadorians were killed and the invading army was now leaderless. The death of Regalado was followed by a short truce out of respect for his position of commander-in-chief. Surprisingly,



Soldiers of the El Salvadorian Army stand outside their barracks at the time of their farcical war with Guatemala in 1906. The simple cotton uniforms, old muskets, and lack of equipment all indicate the poverty of Central American armies of the early 20th century. The officers in this unit wear the dark-blue dress uniform that often served as a field uniform as well. (Library of Congress)

the El Salvadorians did not retreat to the border but instead continued their advance. A decisive battle now took place at the town of El Jicaro, where two armies of several thousand men each clashed. The battle, of which little is known, ended in an El Salvadorian defeat and this setback persuaded their commanders to fall back to their border. As the Salvadorian troops withdrew, they were pursued by a strong Guatemalan army of 6,000–7,000 seeking revenge. The Guatamalans advanced into northern El Salvador, heading for the main Salvadorian force, which was recuperating after their campaign.

While this invasion was taking place, a truce was being arranged by the presidents of Guatemala and El Salvador. The El Salvadorian president, Pedro Jose Escalon, complained to the main peace broker, Mexican President Porfirio Diaz, accusing Guatemalan President Cabrera of using the peace talks to make a final attack on his forces. On July 17, a strong

force of Guatemalans had indeed begun an attack on 2,000 Salvadorians camped at Metapan and Platanar. On the first day of the offensive, the Guatemalans, with several artillery pieces, struck the Salvadorian camp at Metapan and on the 18th attacked Platanar. Although outnumbered by the Guatemalans, the Salvadorians had a number of Chileans officers with them. One of these officers led a charge of Salvadorian cavalry that threw the Guatemalans back. The Guatemalan breach of the truce now incurred the wrath of the United States. President Theodore Roosevelt, enraged by the Guatemalan attacks, demanded that President Cabrera order his troops back across the border. He said that the "40,000-strong" Guatemalan Army was now a "menace to the peace" of Central America. By grossly exaggerating the size of the Guatemalan Army, Roosevelt was deliberately trying to create a Central American "bogeyman" to excuse the USA's interference in the region. What President Roosevelt didn't know, or chose to ignore, was that a small El Salvadorian army had crossed the border into southern Guatemala. It faced little opposition from the Guatemalans, whose main army was fighting in the north. Although peace negotiations had begun in the meantime, the Salvadorians hoped that this invasion would force the Guatemalans to withdraw some of their troops from El Salvador. Roosevelt was worried that the crisis could spill over into Mexico, which shared a border with Guatemala and had demanded that the two countries sign a truce.

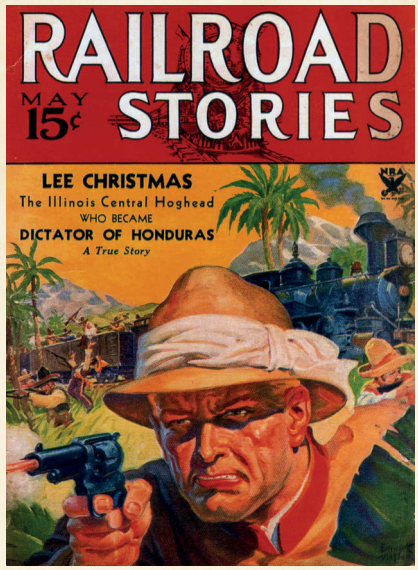
The two parties met aboard the USS *Marblehead* and signed a peace treaty in the last days of July. The price paid for this "little" war was heavy, with El Salvador losing 700 killed and 1,400 wounded. Guatemala's losses were reported to be much heavier, with 2,800 killed and 3,000 wounded. These were, proportionally, extremely heavy losses for such small nations and armies. Primitive medical facilities and the humidity of the region meant that significant numbers of the wounded also died as a result of complications like gangrene.

The Campaign for Nicaragua 1907

Jose Santos Zelaya, the president of Nicaragua, had come to power in 1900 and held on to it with a combination of guile and brute force. He was supported by a 4,000-strong "active army," but boasted that he could expand this to 40,000 if it became necessary. During 1906, Zelaya had begun to support a number of Honduran Liberals hoping to topple his regional rival, President Manuel Bonilla. The USA was growing

SOLDIERS OF FORTUNE IN CENTRAL AMERICA, 1900–30

Wars in Central America in the first decade of the 20th century saw various presidents, dictators, and rebellious generals employ foreign military experts. Most of these experts were US veterans of the Spanish–American War of 1898 and the USA's campaign in the Philippines between 1899 and 1903. These often larger-than-life characters had little to lose, and in many cases much to gain, from seeking employment with the armies of Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. The most famous of these military adventurers was Lee Christmas, a Louisiana-born engineer and train driver, who through chance found military service with a number of Central American armies between the late 1890s and 1913. His train was captured by rebels in Honduras in 1897 and he decided to join them, fighting with them for two years. Switching sides several times, by 1902 he had gained the rank of colonel in the Honduran Army. In 1903 he became an ally of General Bonilla. Christmas stuck loyally to Bonilla's side during a series of military campaigns between 1903 and 1913. During those years Bonilla lost power and fought several campaigns before regaining the presidency of Honduras. When Bonilla died in 1913, Christmas retired after spending almost 20 years fighting in the jungles of Central America, dying of tuberculosis in 1924. During his long military career in Central America, Christmas had fought alongside a number of American machine gunners. In the early days of machine guns, the acquisition of a few of them handled by expert gunners could decide the outcome of a battle or skirmish. Men like Tracy Richardson, Guy "Machine Gun" Molony, Sam Dreben, and Emil Holmdahl were employed by Central American armies purely for their skill with this type of weapon. Often, the fact that they could simply keep a machine gun operational in the humid conditions of the jungle was enough to earn them good pay. Although these "soldiers of fortune" often fought alone or in small units, there were sometimes several hundred, mostly American mercenaries in a Central American army of a few thousand. There were of course some Europeans who fought in the Central American wars between 1900 and 1913. Some of these adventurers volunteered to fight for the British or, in the case of Tracy Richardson, the Canadian Army during World War I. By the time the USA entered the war in 1917, many of these men were too worn out by years of service in the jungles of Central America to serve their country. Others were lying in shallow jungle graves, having failed to persuade their captors that they should be allowed to change sides and serve a new master. Perhaps the most lucrative employment for foreigners in Central America during the 1920s and early 1930s was as military pilots. The shortage of trained indigenous pilots meant that Central American generals were forced to employ foreigners to fly their handful of combat aircraft. By the early 1930s, however, even this source of work had dried up. Most Central American air forces had, by this time, enough trained pilots of their own. They could then refuse to pay the exorbitant wages often demanded by these "flying soldiers of fortune."



This cover from the 1930s boys' own adventure magazine *Railroad Stories* shows an idealized vision of Lee Christmas, the American military adventurer. Beginning his career as a train driver in the early 1900s, Christmas was to fight for several Central American armies between the late 1800s and the 1920s. Christmas was the epitome of the larger-than-life characters who fought for various Central American armies during the Banana Wars of the early 20th century. (Cody Images)

increasingly unhappy with Zelaya and the way he was throwing his weight around with other Central American states. In readiness for the expected war with Honduras and his Liberal Nicaraguan enemies, Zelaya had recruited heavily to strengthen his army. By the end of January 1907, he had 12,000 men stationed on the northern border with Honduras and another 3,000 on the Costa Rican border. Fearing Zelaya's next step, President Bonilla put together a regional anti-Zelaya military coalition. This was made up of the Honduran Army and the regular El Salvadorian Army, along with Nicaraguan Liberal rebels. In February Zelaya decided to launch a two-front campaign against Honduras, with a main army crossing their mutual frontier on the 21st. Heavy fighting took place in the border region, with Zelaya's troops winning the main encounters and capturing the Honduran city of San Marcos from its 2,000 defenders. The defeated Honduran Army left behind 200 rifles, 10,000 rounds of ammunition, and a precious 75mm Krupp gun. At the same time, Zelaya sent a 600-strong invasion force in a few ships to make landings at various points along the Honduran coastline. These ports were an important source of revenue for Bonilla, and Zelaya was happy to bring his enemy to his knees by military or economic means. In response, Bonilla sent an army of 1,500 men southwards to link up with the 3,000-strong El Salvadorian Army under the command of General Jose Dolores Preza. Bonilla was determined to bring the Nicaraguan Army to battle, especially when he received news that several of his northern ports had fallen to their troops. The combined Honduran–El Salvadorian Army reached the town of Namasigue in the south-west of Honduras in early March. Zelaya had sent any troops he could spare to the region with the intention of destroying as many of the Allied force as possible, to prevent an invasion of northern Nicaragua.

The Battle of Namasigue, March 1907

On March 17, 1907, the two armies fought the decisive battle of the war at Namasigue. The battle saw a large Allied force of 5,000 defeated by a Nicaraguan Government force of only 1,500. Although the Nicaraguans were heavily outnumbered, President Zelaya had made sure that they were not outgunned. They had a number of 42mm Hotchkiss M1875 light guns and several Hotchkiss 1-pdr. revolving cannon, which was like an enlarged Gatling gun. This gun could fire 68 rounds per minute from its five barrels and proved devastating against the tightly packed Allied infantry columns. In addition, many of Zelaya's men were armed with modern