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Review by Kyle Burke, New York University, Center for the United States and the Cold War

At the height of the Salvadoran civil war, leading right-wing politicians and military officers harnessed a transnational network of anticommunists to fight the revolutionary guerrillas of the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) and other enemies at home. They procured funds, weapons, and tactical advice from a kindred movement in Guatemala. They traveled to conferences in Argentina and Paraguay to discuss counterinsurgency strategy with high-ranking members of the military juntas from several Southern Cone nations. And they lobbied hardline conservative politicians in the United States, hoping to shape the Carter and Reagan administrations’ policies towards El Salvador and the broader Caribbean region. In so doing, the Salvadoran right further undermined the country’s already struggling military government while murdering thousands of citizens whom they saw as threats not only to El Salvador but also, as Aaron Bell tells us, to ‘western civilisation’ itself. This campaign ultimately helped the Salvadoran right establish a formal political party, the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA), which soon became one of the most important forces in the country’s politics.

Bell’s analysis of ARENA and its transnational connections joins a growing body of scholarship that transforms how we see the Cold-War anticommunist right.1 While many historians have tended to portray rightists as reactionary, insular, and parochial, Bell shows that the Salvadoran right and its allies in the United States, Central America, and Latin America’s Southern Cone thought and acted across national borders, and that they did so in service of a hemispheric campaign against their shared enemies. Moreover, he marshals an impressive if scattered body of evidence to trace those connections and explain what they all amounted to.

The Salvadoran right’s transnational collaboration did not leave much of a paper trail in the archives, which is not surprising since much of it was about killing civilians. And so Bell has assembled an array of other sources—especially declassified reports from the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency and an extensive selection of newspaper articles from El Salvador, the United States, and beyond—to tell this story.

That approach helps us to better understand how the Salvadoran right saw itself in the inter-American Cold War. The leaders of ARENA and its predecessors, especially death-squad commander Major Roberto D’Aubuisson, were dismayed by the election of Jimmy Carter and his administration’s human rights-oriented policies. They concluded that the U.S. government could no longer be counted upon as a reliable anticommunist ally and therefore they had to find help elsewhere. Searching for allies abroad, they found a world of militant anticommunist organizations spread across the Americas and even Asia. The strongest bonds that Salvadorans made were with like-minded political and military leaders in Central and South America who shared a set of beliefs about the threats facing societies in El Salvador, Guatemala, Argentina, and elsewhere. At meetings of the Confederación Anticomunista Latinoamericana, right-wingers from across the hemisphere railed about President Carter, about the weakness of the United States, and about the growing challenges to oligarchy and inequality in their own countries. All were inclined to see those challenges as foreign-inspired Communist plots that demanded violent responses, whether from the state or, more often, right-wing paramilitary groups. Those ideological affinities laid the groundwork for exchanges about counterinsurgency. D’Aubuisson and others received funds, weapons, and training in Guatemala and Argentina, the latter of which sent about fifty officers to El Salvador to teach D’Aubuisson’s men the methods they had used in the Dirty War. This collaboration, in addition to the years of training that D’Aubuisson’s men had received from U.S. and Taiwanese instructors, contributed to the high levels of violence directed at civilians as the civil war exploded after 1979.

As Salvadoran rightists found new ways to kill their fellow citizens, transnational ties also offered ways for them to influence—or more often protest—U.S. policy towards El Salvador. While Carter was in office, those efforts had little impact, though Salvadorans did find a firm ally in North Carolina’s Republican Senator Jesse Helms, a staunch anticommunist and close friend of the military regimes in Argentina and Chile. When Ronald Reagan entered the White House in 1981, right-wing Salvadorans were delighted to see that many of their closest allies in the United States now had positions of power in the administration—folks like National Security Council member Roger Fontaine, who shared the Salvadoran right’s commitment to anticommunism, free markets, and property rights, and who helped them “procure economic and military assistance needed to preserve the military government against the revolutionary left” (531).

While Bell’s treatment of right-wing Salvadorans’ activism in the United States is sound, it does not go far enough. He presents their work in the United States as mostly political in nature—networking, lobbying, and the like. That was true, but it also had a paramilitary character that Bell does not fully address. For instance, many of the death squads controlled by Roberto D’Aubuisson were funded by wealthy exiles living in Miami who raised money alongside anticommunist Cubans and Nicaraguans who also hoped to launch counterrevolutions in their homelands. Meanwhile, starting in 1981, a few dozen private U.S. citizens traveled to El Salvador to help train the security forces in counterinsurgency methods. A mix of mercenary freelancers, Vietnam veterans, and paramilitary enthusiasts, these men worked outside of the formal channels of the State Department. Yet most U.S. diplomats and military leaders knew of their work—it made headlines in the New York Times—and many were happy about it, especially after the U.S. Congress capped the number of official military advisers at fifty-five. When U.S. mercenaries returned home, they pressed the
cause of the Salvadoran right in Soldier of Fortune magazine and many other right-leaning forums, thereby generating new grassroots support for ARENA. Without examining that paramilitarism, Bell’s article presents a somewhat skewed portrait of the collaboration between right-wingers in the American hemisphere. When Salvadorans went to other Latin American countries, he suggests, they sought violence. When they went to the United States, they sought politics. But the violence also flowed from the United States, and not just through the well-trodden paths of official military aid but also the kinds of shadowy paramilitary networks that Bell finds at work in Guatemala and Argentina.

That critique, however, should not undermine Bell’s contributions to the scholarship on the Cold War in the Americas. By forcing us to consider how and why the Salvadoran right collaborated with like-minded movements abroad—and what the consequences of that collaboration were—he offers more than a new perspective on El Salvador’s civil war. Much more, he helps us see how the ruling classes of Latin America sought common cause with one another to defend their shared interests at a time when they faced assaults from many quarters. His work is therefore a welcome addition to the growing body of scholarship that moves beyond bilateral studies of the United States and one Latin American country or another to provide a more nuanced view of the inter-American Cold War in which anticommunists from many places worked together, often with little or no involvement from U.S. officials.

Kyle Burke received his Ph.D. from Northwestern University in 2015, and is currently the Agnese N. Haury Post-Doctoral Fellow at the New York University’s Tamiment Library and the Center for the United States and the Cold War. He is at work on a book entitled Revolutionaries for the Right: American Conservatives, Anticommunist Internationalism, and Covert Warfare in the Cold War, which traces the rise and fall of an international network of right-wing paramilitaries from the 1950s through the 1980s. His article, “Radio Free Enterprise: The Manion Forum and the Making of the Transnational Right in the 1960s,” appeared in Diplomatic History 40:1 (January 2016): 111-139. Starting in the fall of 2016, he will be a research assistant professor with the Center for the Study for Force and Diplomacy and the Department of History at Temple University.

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