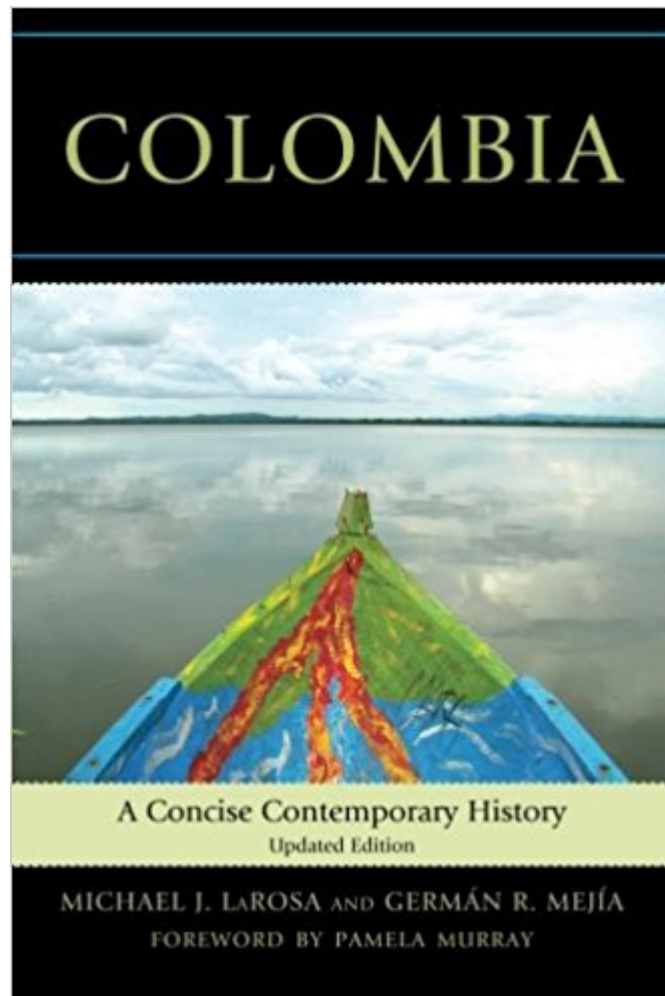




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Colombia: A Concise Contemporary History



Synopsis

Written by two leading historians, this deeply informed and accessible book traces the history of Colombia thematically, covering the past two centuries. In ten interlinked chapters, Michael J. LaRosa and Germán R. Mejía depart from more standard approaches by presenting a history of political, social, and cultural accomplishments within the context of Colombia's specific geographic and economic realities. This updated paperback edition addresses the current peace negotiations in an epilogue titled "Chronicle of a Peace Forestalled."

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Customer Reviews

Without engaging in whitewashing or leaving behind academic rigor and meticulous historical detail, the authors . . . have maintained an engaging balance between the more tragic aspects of Colombian history and its successes. . . . Their narrative is present-focused and organized thematically, rather than following a standard chronology. It explores in small, easily digestible sections subjects like demography, political culture, infrastructure development and, of course, conflict. . . . The book, written in English as a collaboration between two historians from the United States and Colombia, is intended for a foreign audience of non-experts. However, it manages to engage, and even surprise, readers that might be more familiar with Colombia. Those that have spent significant time in the country will recognize in the book's pages the quirky details of Colombian life that tell as much about the country as the goriest details of its civil war. . . . I applaud Mejía and LaRosa for abandoning the seductive lure of gore in Colombian history and making an

honest and serious effort to tell a more complete and complex story. (ReVista: Harvard Review of Latin America) LaRosa and Mejía- a iconoclastically focus on the factors that produced cohesion in Colombia between 1800 and 2011, rather than on the violence that has torn the country apart. Their topical chapters highlight the existence of long-lasting constitutions, two national political parties, a diverse but predominantly mestizo and urban population, recent improvements in transportation, a common language and religion, a healthy economy, and an appreciation for culture that has produced internationally prominent artists. They correctly note that Colombia was not uniquely violent in 19th-century Latin America. . . . Although keeping the focus on the resiliency of the people who have suffered through decades of tragedy, the authors do discuss enduring social problems like the highly unequal distribution of income. Their approach provides a good corrective to much current scholarship on Colombia. . . . Recommended. (CHOICE) Perhaps due to the cooperation of its government with the U.S.'s war on drugs, Colombia is probably America's closest ally in South America. This concise and easily digestible survey is a useful and timely introduction to a country little understood by most people north of the Rio Grande. LaRosa is professor of history at Rhodes College, and Mejía- a is professor of history at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá. They combine thematic and chronological approaches to offer a broad-based portrait of Colombia in an admirable effort to counteract many of the oversimplified impressions outsiders may have concerning the country. They don't avoid the seamier aspects of historical and contemporary Colombia, including political violence and the curse of the traffic in narcotics. But they also note the nation's considerable cultural achievements and its laudable efforts to build a stable democracy and play a positive role in hemispheric relations. (Booklist) The book by Michael J. LaRosa and Germán R. Mejía- a is well written and covers effectively most of the important events of 'modern' Colombian history, defined by the authors as the years since 1800. . . . The authors aimed to have a new work of history that would be bold, energetic, and innovative, not focusing on the catastrophic vision of the country or theoretical constructs from the developed world. Rather, despite all the mayhem the country has experienced, they wanted to explore a central question: 'How is it that the nation stays together?' (The Americas: A Quarterly Review of Latin American History) This sensitive and engagingly written historical introduction to Colombia moves beyond the nation's conflicts and failures to uncover what also holds its people together. Readers will be especially drawn to the rich portrayal of Colombia's deep cultural traditions, expressed in art and literature and in people's daily lives. (Herbert Tico Braun, University of Virginia) This imaginative, go-to analysis makes the intriguing and multi-faceted world of Colombia accessible to all readers. LaRosa and Mejía- a artfully break away from the classic approach to the

writing of Colombian history and provide an insightful window into the country's political, social, and cultural past. Their thematic approach enhances a story born of a common love for sport and the arts, for drama and for political ideals. LaRosa and Mejía-a make ever present the rich heritage of this country and of a people who have fought passionately for liberty over the past two centuries. (Douglass Sullivan-González, dean of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College, University of Mississippi) A unique and refreshing assessment of the contemporary history of Colombia. Highlighting the lesser-known aspects of Colombia's history, LaRosa and Mejía-a have succeeded in producing a well-balanced narrative. Unlike most treatments of modern Colombia, which linger on its tragedies and failures, the authors focus on the creativity, resourcefulness, and resilience of its people and the myriad ways in which they have contributed to building their country. LaRosa and Mejía-a's reinterpretation of the contemporary history of Colombia is an important contribution to our understanding of a little-known and understood country. (Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas, University of Memphis)

Michael J. LaRosa is associate professor of history at Rhodes College. Germán R. Mejía-a is professor of history at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá.

Across ten chapters organized thematically rather than chronologically, Michael J. LaRosa and German R. Mejía-a present this fine English-language history of Colombia in accessible prose that only occasionally belies that they were writing or thinking initially in Spanish before making this considerable gift to the English reading public. The line-up of chapter titles arguably serves as LaRosa's and Mejía-a's first promise that their history will not weep over a fragmented and violent nation, but rather will sketch the contours of a nation seeking unity, nourished by a certain dynamism, and eager—or perhaps more often merely destined—to find its place in the world: Origins The Colombian Nations The Dynamics of a Political Community The Cadence of Unity Conflict Economic Unity A Common Space Cultural Dynamism Daily Life Colombia and the World The book's first chapter (Origins) establishes the case for autonomy and then independence from Spain on the awkward fact that Spanish plans for that European nation's American colonies would always leave the creoles at a disadvantage over peninsular interests. The detail that this history

begins with post-Columbian political reorganization rather than the pre-Columbian

“given” that the Spanish conquerers encountered is perhaps symptomatic of the concise nature of the work. It is also programmatic of history and of this particular narrative that Colombia was born in blood and contest, a genesis that wants to extend its hegemony “but in LaRosa’s and Mejía’s telling, does not finally succeed” from the beginning through to the end of the nation’s story. In this North American reader’s opinion, the authors make the eventual Colombian state’s post-Encounter pre-history understandable in broad brush and via analogies with a North American historical experience that is more familiar to the book’s English readership. The Colombian Nations “the work’s second chapter” clarifies that political wrestling between fair-skinned peninsulares and criollos does not by itself exhaust the Colombian story, neither in its earliest decades nor in the present time. On the contrary, the country’s staggering diversity is enriched by vast contributions by its indigenous and Afro-Caribbean populations, even when “official” histories and mainstream politics have conspired to push such nations to the barely visible margins. Colombia is a “nation of mestizos” in which a majority self-identifies as white. Yet history, as ever, is more complex than any demographic snapshot of self-identification suggests. In addition, the chasms, evolutions, and migrations between and among rural and urban experience are those of a profoundly regional country, where the sentiments and realia of national unity have been condemned to swing against the strong and persistent currents of regional identity. In “The Dynamics of a Political Community,” (chapter 3), the authors introduce us to the 1830 death of “Gran Colombia” (comprised of today’s Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela) and the de facto birth of the Republic of Colombia, with its political center of gravity never shifting entirely from Bogotá despite the pretensions of elites from the country’s other regions. The hard work of “transforming subjects into citizens” was now to raise myriad questions about what citizenship should mean in this country of comparatively modest dimensions after the collapse of the Bolivarian dream. Here the influence of the French and North American revolutions is felt, with their values duly registered in a sequence of national constitutions that register the enduring conflict between federalist and centralist views of what the nation should become. LaRosa and Mejía observe that “(t)he lesson of Colombia’s nineteenth century was clear: presidentialism/centralism created fertile ground whereby party-led management of the state became the factor that contributed most directly to chronic violence. A monopoly of state offices by one or the other political party was viewed as the most efficacious manner of operating government,

and such a monopoly was typically enforced through violence. Triumphs at the ballot box granted political party to one party to the exclusion of the other. The party out of power often determined that violence was the only way to overturn such a situation of exclusion. Although formal civil wars disappeared in the twentieth century, political party violence remained one of the basic characteristics of the Colombian political model: violence was the manner through which control over the Colombian state was ensured.' In the authors' persuasive telling, this hard-wired impulse towards the exclusive use of power of political party by one party and the reactive deployment of violence to 'rectify' the situation by the other led to the political exhaustion that produced the concordist National Front model in the middle decades of the twentieth century. This political agreement established alternating 'turns' at national government by, respectively, the Conservative and Liberal parties. It managed to reduce political violence but at great cost: 'Politics as an exercise of citizenship was stripped of its virtue, instead favoring the technocrat and punishing the career politician. At the same time, new, dangerous actors, exploded onto the national political scene: the guerrilla fighter, the drug trafficker, the paramilitary, and the corrupt public official. A society that was becoming ever more urbanized increasingly grew politically apathetic, a phenomenon that was made evident by the significant abstention that characterized all elections during the last two decades of the twentieth century.' LaRosa and Mejía seem to place significant hope in the consequences of the 1991 constitution, though faulting the manner in which it nourished the continuance of 'a weak Congress. This has allowed the executive power to carry out legislative initiatives in the country, either because many of the law projects discussed in Congress have been developed in the offices of the different ministries or because the constitution of 1886 allowed the president to govern by decree'. Also, unfortunately, the parties continue to approach politics in a manner that places a high value on coercive customs associated with political caudillos. Still, somehow, the Colombian political reality has with one brief exception, managed to avoid the cold grip of dictatorship, no doubt a core plank in any case that can be made for Colombian exceptionalism. The book's well-titled fourth chapter ('The Cadence of Unity') broaches the remarkable fact that a Colombian state "in multiple forms and with more than one name" existed long before a Colombian nation had come to be: 'As the multiple name and territorial changes suggest, the nation (a unifying culture) did not exist when the state first formed. Even today a "Colombian nation" is difficult to identify. What emerges out of the depths of Colombia's republican history is a state that constructed the "nation". By actively producing both governmental and cultural institutions over its

territory, Colombia would gain stability and, over time, would consolidate into a unified nation.' The primary creative forces were the two traditional political parties, the Catholic religion, and the Spanish language, not necessarily in that order. Of these, the first (the Liberal and Conservative parties in their undying quests for national hegemony) were the agents of conflict and disunity as well as undeniable unifiers of Colombians who shared similar political sentiment across the regional divides. This fourth chapter is arguable LaRosa's and Mejía's most illuminating and orienting assessment in a book that excels at both. It leads organically into the next, with its awful and too accurate title (Ch. 5, 'Conflict'). The chapter begins pungently: 'Colombia's history has been defined by epic conflicts.' Organized around four key categories (politics, international relations, social structure, illegal narcotics), the discussion shows that 'even here Colombian history is paradoxical, for 'despite endemic conflict, Colombia has held together as a territorial entity, with the exception of the separation of the Province of Panama, which resulted from a myriad of colliding national and international factors. Colombians have been able to resolve conflicts through creative methods and intermediaries. Alas, these creative methods involved the (arguably ill-fated) National Front in the late 1950s, of which the unintended consequence was that it pushed people who belonged to neither party toward the sociopolitical margins and eventually into armed guerrilla forces.' Though their tracing of internecine violence from the Spanish evacuation through to Plan Colombia has no shortage of episodes upon which to alight, the authors insist 'again, the paradox is rife and at times the protestation a bit much' that Colombian levels of violence are not unique within Latin America. Indeed they do not approach the 'lurid madness' of the Mexican experience. Sadly, the 2013 date of the book's most recent edition allows the inclusion of Álvaro Uribe's *mano dura*, *corazón grande* but not the efforts of Uribe's erstwhile secretary of defense (now president) to achieve a peace deal with the FARC and eventually the ELN. The authors' efforts to move beyond bare description and on to the lived experience of Colombians is again evident in the chapter's conclusion: 'Colombians have learned to live with great ambiguity and uncertainty. Conflict is part of everyday life, but so too is warmth, generosity, and a spirit of collaboration. Most Colombians try to transcend the daily political and social conflict by spending as much time as possible with family, friends, and visitors' 'a style of endurance influenced by Colombia's unique historical and cultural development.' In chapter five ('Economic Unity'), we learn that Colombia's 'modern, diverse, market-driven economy maintains itself in the context of one of the most unequal societies in Latin America and the world', yet another of Colombia's

pluriform paradoxes. The economy of what we today call Colombia would not have been foreseen from the time of the Spanish conquerors, for its land area was modestly endowed when compared to the rich metal deposits to the north and the south. Moreover, it would be impossible to speak of a Colombian economy until modern transportation networks allowed production and consumption to escape the country's marked regionalization. The authors explore coffee's role as an economic motor, with due attention to how this and other economic developments in Colombia took place in the shadow of the economic behemoth in the North. LaRosa and Mejía's analysis manifests a center-left suspicion of large corporations, external investment, and industrial agricultural that is more common among Latin American economic historians than among English-language readership. Yet if ideology discernibly contextualizes the authors' efforts to make sense of their topic, it does not in this reader's estimation come close to distorting the narrative. The chapter includes a valuable discussion of the drugs cartels from an economic perspective. The post-independence forging of a shared national community (Chapter six, *A Common Space*) has been a long journey on a mountainous road. From 1830 until the profound social crises that lasted from about 1960 to 1980, the fundamental objective of governance was to force all populations to cooperate with an ideal that was to be nourished by democratic-liberal institutions and principles, the ideals of capitalist bourgeois thinkers, and the norms and practices of Catholicism. The authors argue, however, that in the light of today's multicultural Colombia national unity can only be a political reality. In working out how this common (political) space has been formed to date, LaRosa and Mejía survey improvements in transportation systems, the establishment and expansion of mail and communications systems, the growth of regional print media (few of which have commanded a national audience) as means that have served the pursuit of this end (Chapter seven, *A Common Space*). A useful chart (Table 7.1. Railroad National Network) nicely illustrates several flurries of railroad construction as well as the quite limited lengths of each line, owing no doubt to the ever-influential limitations that topography imposes upon any transportation ambition in Colombia. Sadly, this chapter was written too early to allow consideration of Medellín's recent inventiveness with urban rail (metro) and the city's transformative metro cable system. The latter has linked previously isolated comunas on the sides of the valley the city occupies, to great social and economic effect. The names Botero and García Márquez loom large over any discussion of Colombian visual and literary art, yet the authors introduce their readers to the lesser lights of a dynamic culture that, as far as the rest of the world is concerned,

has often been veiled by the centrifugal force of the enormous vogue of things Mexican (Chapter eight, Cultural Dynamism). In this reader's opinion, Colombian music has enjoyed less light than the chapter might have thrown upon it, particularly as popular superstars such as Shakira and Juanes have refracted its rhythms and tones to an international public. LaRosa and Mejía have a knack for nuanced and illuminating final statements in their chapters, of which Chapter Eight gives us this: 'Colombians have been successful at creating literary works of astonishing originality, such as García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; at the same time, they have been able to incorporate, adapt, and innovate as only a mestizo nation can. Colombians are comfortable with the hybrid; their culture is not obsessed with pursuits that are purely intellectual, avant-garde, or otherwise divorced from the concerns of daily reality. Colombian culture, shaped by regional realities and restraints and the burdens of history, and conditioned by the serene wisdom of living day to day, is vibrant, often nostalgic, and sometimes uncertain. It is a metaphor for Colombian society.' The authors once again explicit their option of avoiding the catastrophic history that characterizes much writing about Colombia (Chapter Nine, Daily Life): 'Few textbooks published in English deal with Colombian daily life, preferring to focus on violence, drug trafficking, and other lurid topics that frequently find their way into the Colombian evening news. This chapter seeks to explore the cultural forces that move Colombia and Colombians: for example, religious festivals and Catholic feast days are part of the rhythm of the Colombian calendar. The shared celebrations of a decidedly more secular Colombia are still apportioned with reference to Catholic saints, though only the most devout can these days link the holiday to the religious figure whose life is memorialized by it. Colombians have also made their mark internationally in auto racing, golf, tennis, cycling, baseball, and *colegio*—the latter a sort of Colombian-Venezuelan rodeo. LaRosa and Mejía also touch on Colombia's remarkable presence in international beauty pageants, the retaking of the nation's urban centers, radio and TV (including the famed soap operas), gastronomy, and university life. Yet, even here, national unity is an uphill climb: A nation as divided as Colombia, by geography, race, social and economic class, political power, education, and *apellido* (family name) can never come together completely and earnestly, but innovative and intelligent Colombians have worked hard to create infrastructure, parks, programs, transportation systems, and university curricula that help Colombians focus on what unites them as a people and a nation rather than what has historically divided society. In their tenth chapter (*Colombia and the World*), LaRosa and Mejía engage Colombia's place in the wider world to which it belongs. As independence from

Spain became a reality, the new Colombian nation looked generally to Great Britain for economic advice, to France for cultural and philosophical principles, and to the United States, begrudgingly, for technical support. The word begrudging(ly) is a serviceable descriptor in fact for much of nearly two centuries of Colombian interaction with the colossus to the north. Yet paradox continues to play a central role, for the authors note that, Panama and other grievances notwithstanding, compared with the United States historical relationships with other Latin American nations during the twentieth century, the U.S.-Colombian relationship is actually a model of pragmatism and stability. Notice of Eric Hobsbawm's description of Colombia as long known for an altogether exceptional proclivity to homicide evokes a push-back from the authors in terms of the remarkable set of policies developed by Colombians to stem the violence. This push-pull of the authors' recognition of the harshest realia of Colombian history accompanied by an insistence that there is an additional side to the story that is seldom told is a signature facet of LaRosa's and Mejía's historiography. The desire to set the record straight by broadening and completing its conclusions is perhaps to be expected in a substantial history like this that is directed to an English-language readership that will almost by definition have missed all but catastrophic history-writing on Colombia. In this reader's objective, it is important that this impulse be called out, but it does not lessen the value of the concise contemporary history that our authors have given us. The book's publication date allows only for a consideration of Presidents Bush and Uribe as brothers in arms, followed by the briefest recognition of President Santos' entrance as president, though hardly as a national leader of influence since he had served as Uribe's Secretary of Defense. The authors' Conclusion is something of a *cri de coeur*, a plaintive and to this reader compelling argument that the non-catastrophic history they are given us ought to persuade Colombia watchers that 'Colombia endures as a nation despite difficulties, challenges, and a history that is tragic and dynamic. Colombians do not hide from their past. Indeed, they have learned to confront and incorporate parts of their history that would be more convenient to forget. Our book has attempted to show that Colombia, despite its complex historical record, endures, and that the focus on political violence, illegal narcotics, and corruption hides a less dramatic but more important story of constitutional procedure, governments that regularly transfer power after elections, and a concern with social rights of the people. While interpretations will vary, we have little doubt that Colombia the nation will endure and that Colombians will continue to face the challenges ahead of them with a

sound spirit of skepticism grounded in hope, fortitude, and the dignity that seems to define them as a people. The quest for a better future is the goal of all civilized peoples, and Colombians have been moving toward that goal—not always evenly, but in a systematic, remarkably creative Colombian fashion. This reviewer has read LaRosa's and Mejía's perhaps misnamed brief history alongside Marco Palacios's BETWEEN LEGITIMACY AND VIOLENCE. A HISTORY OF COLOMBIA, 1875-2002. Both books open doors and windows through which Colombia becomes accessible to an appreciative viewer who peers in from outside. Both require a patient reader, for the complexities of this nation's story are dense and persistent. LaRosa and Mejía move more satisfyingly beyond Colombia's economic and political history, which is more a description of their focus than of any deficiency in Palacios's arguably magisterial work. I cannot think of a better place for the highly interested reader on Colombia to move beyond or bypass the tendentious tourist guides and dig into Colombian realia. The journey on which these authors take their readers is a sober one, yet the path on which one is led takes in the dramatic, the painful, the violent, and the enchanting aspects of Colombia and Colombians in a measure that corresponds to the lived experience of this nation's hopeful citizens.

A great resource for learning about Colombia and provides a solid historical background for the ongoing conflicts that the country faces. This book was a required text for the contextual theology in Colombia course offered at Earlham School of Religion.

Excellent book. Well-written and comprehensive.

I've been dating a Colombian girl for the last 6 years and I decided I wanted to learn more about her heritage and ethnicity. This was a difficult book to read in terms of staying interested (hate to admit it) but I'm glad I read it, I have a whole new understanding of the country and a better perspective of my girlfriend's upbringing.

Excellent narrative easy to read and very well documented!

A fairly well-written account of the history that led to the Colombia of today, but read a bit too much like a series of academic papers cobbled together by the authors to prove their thesis of a country united despite itself. Still worth the read for anyone interested in Latin American history or wanting

an introduction to Colombia beyond what Hollywood and the nightly news can offer.

Thanks for this history of a country I am coming to love after three extended visits so far. The writing style is a bit lugubrious, but the history itself is fascinating once I puzzle out the wordy sentences.

Hate it

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