

México en guerra (1846-1848), Perspectivas regionales

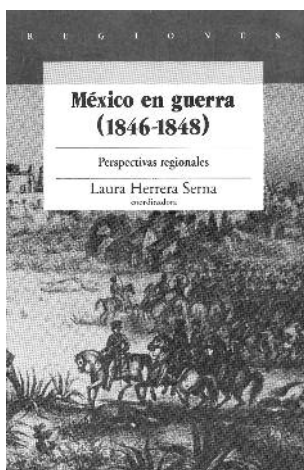
(Mexico at War [1846-1848], Regional Perspectives)

Laura Herrera Serna, comp.

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The war with the United States seems to be unresolved for Mexican historians. Perhaps this is because it needs delicate handling and even today can become just another subjective examination that turns the main protagonists into heroes or victims of the circumstances. On the other hand, the episode can be conceived

unwholesomely and reduced to a question of U.S. imperialist ambition and Mexican ineptitude. Undoubtedly, the passage of time has made it possible to look at the facts with greater serenity, although that does not imply a constant interest in the Mexican-U.S. War.¹ The 150th anniversary commemoration of the war was the perfect reason to examine it again. Laura Herrera Serna thought of calling on different students of the topic to participate in the First Congress of Interventions “Mexico at War (1846-1848). Regional Perspectives,” which gave rise to the book.

The book is the result of prolonged coordinating efforts: a first phase coupled with the organization of the congress and later, the gathering, correction and ordering of the papers presented there. *México en guerra (1846-1848). Perspectivas regionales* is a new way of looking at U.S. intervention into Mexico. In contrast with classic Mexican historiography, centered around the capital city and its perspective, and how that affected the rest of the country, this book takes a different tack. The war affected the different states that made up the republic at the time in very different ways. Not all were directly invaded, but none could really be divorced from the problems that national political life had to deal with. This is precisely the book’s merit.

It is interesting to look at the scope of a work like this since it gathers together in a single volume articles by 32 Mexican and foreign authors. Each article is a unit in and of itself, but, simultaneously, forms part of the puzzle that was Mexico of that time. Reading each of the essays clears up the events of the years of clashes with our northern neighbor. The research unveils different geographical spaces, different problems faced in each state and, therefore, the different responses offered to a single event. It presents the visions and interests that, for example, promoted the defense of Mexican territorial integrity or, to the contrary, shrugged off a problem that was considered “national” in scope. After reading the studies, a very serious question becomes clear: did a nation exist? Simultaneously, it is important to see that there is a “before” and an “after” of this war; there is no doubt whatsoever that this clash left behind it both feelings of failure and of hope, since the conflicts arising out of the attempts at concluding the peace reflect both a fear of conceding defeat and a sense of belonging and involvement with Mexico.

The pens of renowned researchers, together with those of new scholars, both show interest in trying to “dot the i’s” on this

episode in our past. The whole country is touched on, including, logically, what is now California, New Mexico and Texas, to give a fuller idea of the situation in the middle of the nineteenth century. All these articles are introduced by three keynote speeches that outline the overall significance of the war that left a mark yesterday which has lasted until today.

The articles examine many aspects: not everything can be reduced to politics. They also inaugurate a new way of dealing with events: the weight of the regions define the historical process; the capital city is only one more backdrop for the conflict. The way the states, cities and municipalities are dealt with is outstanding, and reveals the authors' interest in leaving behind that selective vision of history in which all events take place in capital cities and affect only those in power. This vision is more dynamic: new actors enter the stage of history and old themes are rethought.

México en guerra, an evocative title, invites the reader to find out about the positions adopted by different political, social, economic or diplomatic sectors involved in shaping the conflict's outcome. The book is enriched by watching as heretofore ignored representatives of the population file through its pages. For example, we discover how some government officials from the state of Jalisco contributed their wages to maintaining the troops, or how the general population in different parts of the country organized guerrilla bands. The way in which the "enemy" was imagined is also worth noting, since not all the states were actually invaded nor had the rhythm of their lives disrupted by enemy troops. Guanajuato is significant in this sense. Each state showed how it understood "national life" and used the terms "sovereignty" and "federation" differently: Oaxaca, Yucatán or the State of Mexico are good examples. The war was also the perfect pretext for power-seekers. The inclusion of the outlook of both residents and authorities of California, New Mexico and Texas is very fortunate since it supplements and enriches the panorama of the war.

Without a doubt, writing about Mexico-United States relations requires a critical, analytical review. A factor which has aided in bringing this intention to fruition was the way that a spectrum of first-hand sources were used, giving the different focuses originality. The inspection of official documents, memoirs, private correspondence, newspapers, pamphlets and much more, as well as secondary sources like regional histo-

ries, private testimonies or historical novels, brought other social actors into the picture. It also brought out the different reactions to the war, looked behind the scenes at the interests involved in the political and economic sphere, making it possible, in brief, to have very diverse visions by letting each author emphasize social, political, cultural or economic matters according to his/her preference.

México en guerra is not a single history. Quite to the contrary, it opens up new spaces for reflection and suggests multiple focuses, leaving to one side the classic interpretation of the war of '47. It managed to practically create the image of a whole, with its concern for diverse aims. The work recovers the many enthusiasms and daily life of most of the states in the Mexican republic. Colima, Nayarit and Querétaro are still pending, however; and Querétaro was key in the pacification process, making its omission significant.

This book is an important contribution to the new Mexican historiography; it is the first of its kind, which should be emphasized. The ample bibliography—from the U.S., and to a lesser degree, Mexico—would not have presented the overall panorama that the book offers. It also leaves us with many questions that will gradually contribute to understanding the process of the conflict itself.

Lastly, I should say that throughout the book, the complex relationship between Mexico and the United States is revealed. The border we share shows how difficult it was and is to be good neighbors. The power demonstrated 150 years ago has not disappeared; quite to the contrary, it has taken on new forms of appropriation, with more subtle but equally aggressive strategies that make us think that Mexico should keep its guard up.

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NOTES

¹ Despite this, some scholars have enriched the historiography about the war from many angles, particularly Josefina Zoraida Vázquez, Carlos Bosch, Angela Moyano, Jesús Velasco, Luis G. Zorrilla.