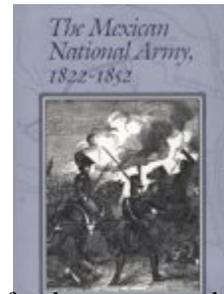


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William A. Jr. DePalo. *The Mexican National Army, 1822-1852*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997. 280 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89096-744-7.

Reviewed by Hans Vogel (Leiden University)  
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Thorough, scholarly studies of Latin American national armies are few and far between—whether in English, Spanish, Portuguese, or any other language. From his double expertise as a scholar and a soldier, William DePalo has set out on a courageous task to help fill this gap with a study on the Mexican “national” army during the first three decades of Mexico as a sovereign state. Profusely and solidly annotated, *The Mexican National Army* deals with all aspects touching on the topic: recruitment, training, command, control and communications, logistics and political activity in both war and peace.

To do this in a mere 160 pages of main text is quite an accomplishment. As a matter of fact, the title is slightly misleading, since the contents are as much about the army itself as about its political and social roles. While dealing with “true” military history, DePalo could not avoid spending quite a lot of attention on the key role the army has played in Mexican politics. As the conclusion states, this role was only terminated in 1940, thanks to decisive action by Manuel Avila Camacho. A title carrying the keywords “war and society,” or the “soldier and the state” would therefore have been appropriate. The book is divided into seven chapters: “Colonial Antecedents and the Independence War, 1764-1821,” “The Army in the Early Republican Era, 1822-33,” “The Texas Revolution, 1835-36,” “The Army in the Decade of Centralism, 1834-45,” two chapters on the seminal conflict with the United States (one on the Northern Campaign in 1846 and one on the Eastern Campaign in 1847), and a final chapter on “Postwar Reorganization and Reform, 1848-52.”

DePalo’s book is interesting because it is a moral tale as well as a sincere effort to tell a complex story dispassionately. The first serious English-language contribution on the Mexican army, this monograph has been

written with a profound sympathy for the common soldier. Contrary to widespread belief, Mexican soldiers were not the undisciplined, cowardly lot they are often made out to be in jubilant United States accounts of the Mexican War. Man for man, they were just as brave, motivated, and competent as their U.S. enemies, but it was especially Mexican leadership that was woefully incompetent. General officers had become more accustomed to political intrigue and to fighting small insurgencies than to leading their men in a serious, modern military conflict with a determined, well-equipped and well-trained opponent. Unit commanders and officers on all intermediate levels lacked the kind of hands-on military experience their U.S. counterparts had been able to accumulate in fighting against the Indians. As a consequence, Mexican officers did not know how to develop independent action within the framework of a broader operation that may often make the difference between winning and losing a war. Mexican officers tended to be passive, awaiting orders from their superiors. Such orders were often too late and when they arrived, often contradictory and meaningless as well.

On an organizational level, it was this that caused defeat in the war against the United States. Interestingly, during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, the French army was plagued by the same defects: competent and cooperative soldiers being led by indecisive, passive officers. Like the French army that was its example and main frame of reference, the mere fact that the Mexican army was able to defeat a Spanish invasion in 1829 and a French one in 1838 is ample evidence that it was equal to its task of defending the country against the kind of foreign encroachment not uncommon in Latin America. Only when faced with a determined opponent operating from a nearby base of operations, did the inherent weak-

nesses of the Mexican army become apparent. Nor did it fail as an instrument to preserve domestic peace and order: seriously discredited by the defeat at the hands of the U.S. invaders, the army successfully stamped out rebellions and insurgencies in the Sierra Gorda region and Yucatan.

What I found most refreshing about *The Mexican National Army*, is that without insisting on it overly much, DePalo actually makes a major contribution to the debate on nation building and “national identity.” As a matter of fact, here is proof once again that it is much more fruitful to deal with broad themes by focusing on “tangible” topics rather than the big themes themselves. Here is a valuable contribution to a debate long sustained by scholars such as Hamnett, LaFaye, Brading and Florescano.

We are still in a stage where practically any study on

the early nineteenth-century Latin American military is to be welcomed, whatever its merits. William DePalo’s book is a work of solid scholarship that tells its story competently. At the same time, however, it holds rather few surprises, adding little to what we already know. What it does is give more details and confirm a number of judgments made before by others. Apart from being an important contribution on Latin American military history, this book certainly is required reading for anyone working on Latin American nation building or nineteenth-century Mexican history.

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