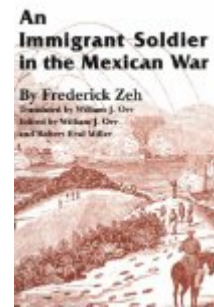


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Frederick Zeh. *An Immigrant Soldier in the Mexican War*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1995. xx + 117 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89096-667-9.

Reviewed by Hans Vogel (University of Leiden)
Published on H-LatAm (June, 1996)



A German Bernal Diaz?

First-hand accounts of wars written by common soldiers are rare. For obvious reasons (lack of time, inability to write, unavailability of paper and ink), most soldiers of past conflicts left precious few written testimonies. This circumstance alone would have justified the publication of the memoirs of a German immigrant volunteer artillery soldier in the U.S. Army fighting in Mexico in 1847. Soon after his arrival in the promised land, Frederick Zeh was out of money and in need of a job. He enlisted in a unit made up largely of immigrants, ending up in the army commanded by General Winfield Scott that conquered Mexico in the footsteps of Hernando Cortés.

From a military historical point of view, Zeh's memoirs are noteworthy, but in many details they are hardly surprising, confirming what we already know about nineteenth-century warfare. The account is replete with tales of bloody fights, extreme fatigue, thirst, hunger, disease, sleepless nights, and filth: yet another proof that war is hell. In passing, the reader is made aware of the fact that the U.S. Army of the 1840s was quite different from what it is today. After Winfield Scott's men had penetrated deep into Mexico, going without pay and decent food for a number of weeks, one German volunteer refused further service, alleging that the deal he had made with the army had been consistently and unilaterally violated. Response was swift and violent. As the soldier persisted in his insubordination, the captain of the unit ordered him to be put in the "buck" for the night, a "common U.S. military punishment of [the] 1840s." The soldier was "placed in a sitting position, with his hands tied forward of his knees, and a stick was run under his

knees and over his arms, then a gag was placed in his mouth..." (note 2, p. 97). After this treatment, the soldier still did not want to obey, upon which his "thumbs were now tied together. Then he was hauled up over a tall post in the middle of the courtyard until his toes barely touched the ground. In a few minutes, Kessler's hands were black and blue. But he would sooner have died under this torture than take back what he had said" (p. 41). Apparently the U.S. Army practiced a brutality that hardly contrasted with Spanish American armies, where the harsh corporal punishments prescribed by the *ordenanzas* of Charles III remained in force till the 1880s.

One is tempted to wonder if in the first half of the nineteenth century in other areas, the differences between the U.S. and the Spanish American republics were as minor. If armies are indeed reflections of the societies that produce them, it would seem that the United States was definitely not yet far advanced on the path of nationhood. The U.S. Army was multinational and "multicultural," with many units composed of men who could hardly speak the national language, or who did not share the then dominant religion. Compared to the Mexican army, made up of Spanish-speaking, Roman Catholic Mexicans, the U.S. Army was a motley array of men from all corners of the world. Yet despite its heterogeneity, the alien invaders outfought their enemies and scored victory after victory.

However, from Zeh's account, it is perfectly clear that the Mexican War was not the casual walkover many Latin Americans still believe it to have been, or that many U.S.

patriots are wont to believe. Such lingering unhistoric views were probably first caused by the awareness of the Cuban-Spanish-U.S. war of 1898, and by the subsequent successes of the U.S. armed forces in their overseas ventures.

Regard for the Mexicans among Zeh and his comrades was not very high, with the upper classes, especially, being depicted in a most unfavorable way: "The better class of Mexicans is noteworthy for exceptionally polite manners, consisting of graceful bowing, deferential doffing of hats, and an endless torrent of pretty phrases. But behind this constantly charming presence often lurks the dagger of the treacherous assassin" (p. 54). Similar utterances can be found ad libitem in nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century travel literature on Latin America, and Zeh therefore seems to reproduce "typical" opinions of his day and age: a mixture of black legend and old-fashioned racism.

However, after Zeh's six-month stay in Mexico City, one detects a change of mind. Almost every day, Zeh visited the Alameda, "a splendid public park," and frequently called at the museum (p. 83). After initial disappointments, Zeh in the end also began to appreciate the local cuisine, remarking that "the Mexicans prepare exceptionally tasty delicacies" (p. 83). Even his harsh judgment of Roman Catholic religion and its practitioners, with which the account is filled, became softened after Zeh came into close contact with monastic life: "without exception, the monks were amiable fellows. I enjoyed listening to their

choral music, and it was interesting to watch these dignified men. The choice cuisine and exquisite wine left me with no little enthusiasm for this Augustinian order" (p. 84). Apparently, Zeh and a number of his comrades had become friendly with the local ladies as well, because when the moment to leave the capital had arrived: "only promises of a prompt return could dry the tears of our lovely girlfriends" (p. 84). But for all his eventual appreciation of Mexico, the Mexicans and things Mexican, Zeh dutifully returned to his new fatherland with his artillery unit. In view of his later career, this might have been a mistake. Zeh did not have a successful life, and certainly had little personal gain from the dazzling economic development of his adopted country.

This volume seems quite adequately translated: the archaic feel of the text gives it a ring of authenticity. The introduction is thorough and pertinent, as are the footnotes that give just the kind of information one needs. A lot of care and effort has gone into the production of this volume, and the small number of specialists will be grateful for it. However, Zeh's memoirs are not merely valuable for the military historian specialized in the "Mexican War," but also for Mexicanists working on the nineteenth century, and for those interested in travel literature.

Copyright (c) 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Hans Vogel. Review of Zeh, Frederick, *An Immigrant Soldier in the Mexican War*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. June, 1996.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=491>

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.