

Stephen Neufeld. *The Blood Contingent: The Military and the Making of Modern Mexico, 1876-1911.*

Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017. x + 383 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8263-5805-9.

Reviewed by Zachary Brittsan

Published on H-LatAm (February, 2018)

Commissioned by Casey M. Lurtz (Johns Hopkins University)

The *Blood Contingent* revisits military power and the making of the nation in late nineteenth-century Mexico. Beyond merely assessing the success or failure of this endeavor—much less why influential leaders pursued modernity as they did—Stephen Neufeld explores how this halting and incomplete process was manifest in the discursive and practical experiences of military men. Although the author leans on the writings of military officers to tell the story of *la vida militar* between 1880 and 1905, he reads these sources against personnel records, newspaper accounts, popular songs, poems, and images to place subaltern officers, everyday soldiers, and *soldaderas* on center stage. Neufeld's wide-ranging findings strike the necessarily delicate balance of explaining how the military failed to consolidate a sense of nationhood during the nineteenth century while simultaneously undercutting regionalism and quelling indigenous rebellion.

Despite the long-standing existence of legal prohibitions against conscription and corporal punishment, new soldiers often entered the military against their will in a process Neufeld compares with the practice of *rapto y estupro* visited upon young, unmarried women. Once safely ensconced in urban army barracks far from home, officers subjected soldiers to regular physical and verbal abuse while assigning them to emasculat-

ing cleaning duties that would theoretically prepare them to be reeducated as fighting patriots. While daily pay, opportunities to obtain literacy, and the chance to build a new community or pursue adventure did keep some soldiers at arms, Neufeld finds that coercive practices perpetuated resentment between officers and soldiers and fueled public distrust of the military. High rates of desertion and legal petitions for freedom from impressment attest to this fact, even as upwards of two hundred thousand men shared the experience of having served in the Porfirian army.

The Blood Contingent is at its most compelling when it explores life in the barracks, detailing the daily negotiations of power within and just beyond the confines of military spaces. Whereas European armies had largely redefined the barracks as homosocial spaces, Neufeld reveals how women shaped Mexican military life as informal but integral members of a heterosocial “second family.” They sold food, traveled on troop trains, and rendered themselves publicly visible during military parades by running alongside their parading soldiers. Though subject to physical and sexual violence within the barracks (they were also disproportionately targeted for containment as carriers of STDs by the emerging medical science community), they also leveraged sexuality into stability and long-term relationships. Neufeld identifies an

intriguing pattern of marriage ceremonies and baptisms occurring within the barracks that conveyed legitimacy and the potential for financial security to military families. The *soldaderas* bolstered a sense of community among soldiers at the same time that they challenged elites' modernizing agenda.

If Neufeld is most interested in generating a vivid image of this alternative community, he does not ignore the junior officers upon whose shoulders implementation of the Porfirian modernizing project rested. Officer programs at Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City produced well-trained graduates who displayed Mexican modernity during European excursions but struggled to implement lofty goals once assigned to the barracks or sent into the field. Ultimately, they regularly engaged in unsanctioned activities like small-scale embezzlement and taking their soldiers on drinking excursions outside the barracks to maintain status and cultivate rapport. If junior officers were integral to the campaigns to diminish banditry across the country, this achievement came at the cost of extrajudicial and decidedly unmodern killings of the sort that Porfirio Díaz publicly disavowed after 1880.

Neufeld casts an ambitiously wide thematic net. For the most part, the author's forays into the diverse facets of the Porfirian military experience pay off. Only occasionally, as is the case with the discussion of the prestige of military engineers involved in construction and cartography projects, do the analytical strands feel underdeveloped. The culminating chapter on discursive and actual violence visited upon indigenous rebels, moreover, serves as an effective crescendo that lays bare the tragic foundation of the nation-building process. Thanks to Neufeld's skillful rendering, the proposition that the Porfirian military after 1900 could be susceptible to internal fragmentation and public distrust while cultivating a grudging loyalty within a significant portion of its fighting men turns out to be eminently plausible. Even

the unique and novelistic flourish of weaving three fictive characters into each chapter binds together the narrative threads on the whole.

The Blood Contingent thus constitutes a notable achievement in the new military history, regularly delving into the social and cultural fabric of civil-military relations. Although one does emerge with a sense of the class, market, and geo-spatial power dynamics that informed military life in Mexico City and Porfirian priorities nationally, Neufeld has more to say about sexuality, families, religion, and the language of medicine, hygiene, and vice. The Porfirian military may have quelled the regional rebellions that long had thwarted national consolidation in Mexico, but officers failed to manufacture a national consensus. Remnants of the *patria chica*, it seems, followed the army back into the barracks.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Zachary Brittsan. Review of Neufeld, Stephen. *The Blood Contingent: The Military and the Making of Modern Mexico, 1876-1911*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. February, 2018.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=51004>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.