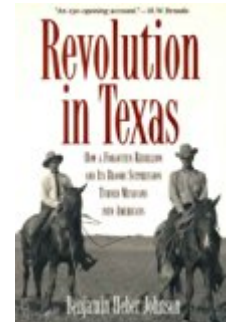


Benjamin Heber Johnson. *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and Its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. 272 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-09425-1.



Reviewed by Victoria Hennessey Cummins

Published on H-Texas (June, 2004)

The Plan de San Diego Revolt was an event in the history of south Texas that has long been known to historians of Mexico and of the Mexican Revolution. Named for the Texas town where it was promulgated, the Plan called for Tejanos to rise-up, take back Texas from the Anglos, and return it to Mexico. Although never a realistic scheme or taken seriously by significant policy makers, the Plan did play a part in the international reaction to the Mexican Revolution by partially motivating the famous Zimmerman Telegram on the eve of World War One. Although never meaningfully executed, the Plan was related during 1914 and 1915 to a series of gory raids against Anglo-American farms and ranches made by armed Spanish-speaking vigilante groups (variously styled by Anglo-Texans as Mexican "bandits" or "revolutionaries").

Although the relationship between the Plan de San Diego and border violence is not explicitly established by the historical records, these raids, at least in the minds of Anglo south Texans at the time, brought the violence and turmoil of the Mexican Revolution northward across the Rio

Grande River into U.S. territory. On several occasions, these bands of armed Spanish-speaking men fired on U.S. Army troops while, at other times, they committed rather bloody depredations against local Anglo-Texan residents of the lower Rio Grande valley, especially in isolated rural areas. These brutal incidents against U.S. Anglo citizens quickly prompted an aggressive counter response from the Texas Rangers, who answered these episodes with their own retaliatory depredations in kind against Spanish-speaking residents of the area, not always bothering to ascertain if the Tejano individuals they were targeting for nasty reprisals had been explicitly linked to the "Mexican bandit" raids against the English-speaking population. The result was over a year of turmoil and violence in the lower Rio Grande valley of south Texas perpetuated by both sides and marked by atrocities, depredations, cruelty, and bloodshed, with the net result that the Texas Rangers established fear and terror among the Tejano population in an effort to maintain Anglo-American social control.

No historian of Texas, interestingly enough, has heretofore studied the revolt from the standpoint of its being a state-based occurrence that had enduring impact on areas north of the Rio Grande in the United States. Several fine studies have examined the Plan de San Diego Revolt from the perspective of the Mexican Revolution. Most notably, James Sandos in *Rebellion in the Borderlands: Anarchism and the Plan of San Diego, 1904-1923* (1992) examines the various manifestations in south Texas that touched on the politics of the Mexican Revolution, especially the contributory ideas of the anarchistic Flores Magon brothers who motivated unrest from their headquarters in San Antonio at the outset of the 1910 Constitutionalist rebellion in Mexico. Sandos's study clearly links the Plan de San Diego to the larger events and occurrences of the revolution in Mexico, but without specifically considering its long-lasting impact on the Tejano population.

Benjamin Heber Johnson's study, *Revolution in Texas*, approaches the Plan de San Diego Revolt from a completely different perspective than Sandos's 1992 examination. Professor Johnson offers a solid reinterpretation of the revolt in Texas as a chapter in Tejano-Anglo rivalry and racism that had come to characterize border society in the Lone Star State. For Johnson, the actual Plan de San Diego was not so much a motivator of the violence as an excuse for igniting it. In advancing the proposition in a closely reasoned narrative, Johnson devotes little space to examining the Plan de San Diego itself and its larger relationship to the events of the Mexican Revolution. This is because, in his view, the violence of 1914 and 1915 along the lower Rio Grande was actually the manifestation of deeper, more profound demographic and economic changes in the region. These changes upset the prevailing racial, social, political, and economic norms that had defined the relationships between Tejanos and Anglos in the lower valley for decades during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. This was especially the case in terms of politics: the relationship between

the Anglo-American political machine of the region and the progressive leaders of the Spanish-speaking community were fractured in the years before World War One by these changes. What had been a balance and accord between them came to an end. These changes included the arrival of the railroad into the major cities and agricultural areas of the Valley, the influx of a demographically significant number of new Anglo farmers into the area brought by the railroad, and the collapse of the Jim Wells political machine. They created frustrations in the Tejano community that destabilized relations between the races of the region. The Plan de San Diego, linked to the Mexican Revolution as an impractical anarchist strategy, provided along the border an opportunity for action on the part of Spanish-speaking dissidents from both Mexico and Texas to move violently against the Anglo community north of the border. Hence, a series of vicious raids directed against English-speaking Texans cost dozens of Anglo lives, especially during 1915. These raids, undertaken by Spanish-speaking vigilantes and raiders, known locally in the valley as *sediciosos*, enraged the entire Anglo community of south Texas and created a heightened indignation in official circles that made the whole area a smoldering power-keg. This resulted in the Texas Rangers arriving on the scene to end the depredations in a full-scale campaign of harsh repression against the *sediciosos* that brought armed responses just as cruel and violent as the initial events which had begun the violence. Indeed, Johnson documents some cases in which the Rangers engaged in personal vendettas against Tejanos who had no role in the depredations against the Anglo residents. Other times, the Rangers lashed out at Tejanos who haplessly crossed their paths. No person of Latino heritage was fully assured of safety during this difficult time along the lower Rio Grande.

Johnson's characterization of the Rangers serves as a powerful historiographical counterweight to earlier, more laudatory accounts written about their activities during this time. Indeed,

the picture that the author paints of the Rangers can be seen as a very valuable corrective to the popular image of this organization. The Rangers, in point of fact, may well have been more vicious perpetrators of violence and mayhem than the *sediciosos* themselves in creating the local terror associated with the Plan de San Diego Revolt in far south Texas. In that regard, Johnson clearly substantiates his position with reasoned argument and graphic historical example. The summary executions of Tejanos by Rangers were most certainly not, by any means, isolated events, nor were they limited to the Rangers as the only perpetrators. Local sheriffs and other town officials, along with the general Anglo populace, also became involved. Thousands of Tejanos accordingly fled the United States for Mexico in the face of the Sedicioso raids and the Anglo retaliations.

This book, however, goes far beyond assessing the violence that was so much an integral part of the revolt. In addition, it provides a full-scale analysis of the events that served as a prelude to the violence, while giving an even fuller assessment of Tejano politics and identity in the wake of the Revolt. In so doing, the author gives particular attention to the career of T. J. Canales, a lawyer from Brownsville who emerged as a leader of the progressive Tejano community. His hopes of economic and social advancement for Tejanos were dashed by the excess of violence. In spite of Canales's best efforts, along with those who shared his views, Tejanos living in south Texas had lost much by 1916 in the aftermath of the difficulties as their status declined from what it had been before the revolt. Reaction to the *sedicioso* raids increased Anglo-centrism. Johnson thus argues that the Plan de San Diego Revolt marked the major turning point in race relations between Anglo Texans and Tejanos in south Texas, creating a situation which would last for decades to the detriment of the Hispanophone population.

This book is particularly at its best in describing the atrocities and depredations that occurred

on both sides of the struggle. The cruelty displayed by both the *sediciosos* and the Texas Rangers, as graphically described in this volume, would astound the sensibilities of any present day television watcher should such events be part a modern evening news broadcast. It is that focus which gives validity to the subtitle of this volume which cast these episodes as a "forgotten rebellion" that provoked a "bloody suppression." All of the relatively limited historical literature dealing with this event has heretofore ignored the mayhem, vigilantism, and uninhibited carnage that occurred in south Texas during the Plan de San Diego Revolt. For that reason alone, this book should be required reading for every Texas historian, every student of Texas history, and any aware Texan who wishes to understand the origins of the twentieth-century state.

In addition, unlike the other studies of this revolt written from the perspective of Mexican history, this volume is focused entirely on Texas and events there rather than the rebellion's role in the national history of Mexico. The author thus postulates that the lasting import of the rebellion can be seen in Anglo-Tejano race relations in south Texas instead of the Plan's influence on the course of the Mexican Revolution or diplomatic relations between the United States and Mexico. Hence, the book argues very persuasively that the Plan de San Diego Revolt was a major catalyst in the formation among Tejanos of a very distinct Mexican-American identity in the lower Rio Grande valley. The revolt and its carnage caused many Tejanos to flee permanently south of the river while many who remained had to live in reduced status and esteem in the eyes of the Anglo community. The revolt also marked the beginning of an uninhibited period of Anglo-Texas economic growth that reduced the Tejanos to the being the "others" of the region, thus creating several generations of identity politics in south Texas. The first manifestations of this came with the founding of the

League of United Latin American Citizens in the decade following the revolt.

This book is based on solid research in primary sources and represents the pleasing product of an historiographical viewpoint that allows each side to tell its own story. In particular, Johnson has mined numerous repositories including the Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin, the Center for American History at that same University, and the Texas State Archives. The narrative of the volume is well written and very engaging. This volume represents a major, important addition to the history of Texas and of its diverse peoples.

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

Citation: Victoria Hennessey Cummins. Review of Johnson, Benjamin Heber. *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and Its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans*. H-Texas, H-Net Reviews. June, 2004.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9506>



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