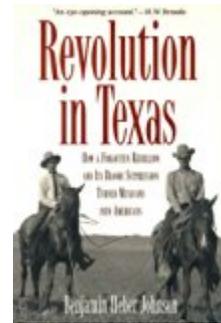


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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.

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## Extralegal Violence and the Making of “Mexican Americans”

In 1915, persons of Mexican origin living in Texas orchestrated an uprising remembered today as the Plan de San Diego. Comparable in scale to Nat Turner’s slave rebellion nearly a century earlier, the revolt was responsible for the killings of dozens of white farmers and ranchers in south Texas and stimulated a bloody reaction that claimed the lives of untold Mexicans. According to the Plan, the ultimate goal of the insurrectionists was to return the American Southwest to Mexico by force. The failed revolt was the last armed conflict in the struggle over the U.S.-Mexican border, a struggle that dated back to 1846 and the U.S.-Mexican War.

Benjamin Heber Johnson, an assistant professor of history at Southern Methodist University, has written the first book-length treatment of the Plan de San Diego in over a decade. *Revolution in Texas* began as Johnson’s Yale Ph.D. dissertation, but it has been deeply revised.

Johnson’s book is first and foremost a brilliant narrative of the Plan de San Diego. But it is much more than that. He hooks readers with the story of the uprising but weaves in historical context and analysis in a way that should satisfy scholars while not alienating general readers. His argument about what the Plan de San Diego meant—both to Mexicans living in South Texas and to the course of American history in general—is fascinating, compelling, and sure to provoke debate and discussion for years to come.

*Revolution in Texas* will be of interest to legal historians primarily for Johnson’s attention to the wave of

lynching and vigilantism that swept through South Texas after 1915. Johnson convincingly demonstrates that this extralegal violence hastened the declining status of Tejanos (Texas Mexicans) in south Texas. The number of Mexicans killed in what Walter Prescott Webb called an “orgy of bloodshed” is hard to comprehend. Johnson himself estimates the number in the “low thousands” (p. 120). Thousands more left Texas for Mexico, some never to return. The explicit goal of some of the vigilantes, and the sure result of their campaign of terrorism, was the transferal of lands from Mexican to Anglo hands. Moreover, Anglos in the wake of the Plan de San Diego imposed voting restrictions and systematic segregation in south Texas for the first time. Texas Mexicans, Johnson leaves no doubt, paid a steep price for their failed revolt. This story—how extralegal violence and other forms of intimidation helped strip Mexicans of their lands—has never been told so well or so convincingly.

Mob violence against Mexicans gets too little attention from historians, and scholars of the American South and African American history would be well-served by reading Johnson’s book. The bloody lynchings and racial terrorism described in the book will help one see extralegal violence in the American South from a different perspective. In this regard, I wish that *Revolution in Texas* had made more comparisons to lynching and vigilantism in other parts of the United States. For example, I would have liked to read more about how the vigilantism of South Texas differed from contemporary violence against blacks. The role of the legally sanctioned Texas Rangers

in so much of the extralegal violence after the Plan de San Diego has no real parallel in Georgia or Mississippi. The Texas Rangers did more than wink at, or tolerate, lynchings orchestrated by private citizens. They took an active, persistent leadership role, and at times hanged and shot Mexicans against the wishes of the local Anglo citizenry. Studying mob violence against Mexicans is sure to complicate our understanding of extralegal violence and continue the debate initiated by Christopher Waldrep over how one defines lynching.

There are other fascinating issues in this book beyond the vigilantism that followed the Plan de San Diego. The most original and controversial component of Johnson's argument is his claim that the Plan de San Diego "turned Mexicans into Americans." This argument will be of interest to those legal scholars interested in issues of immigration and citizenship. Johnson posits that Tejanos emerged in the 1920s identifying themselves as United States citizens and distancing themselves from the nation, if not the culture of, Mexico. Johnson says that this change can be traced to an influential group of progressive Tejanos who reevaluated their commitment to Mexico and the United States after the Plan de San Diego. The bloody suppression of the uprising by Texas Rangers and vigilantes combined with the failures of the Mexican government led these leaders to conclude, ironically, that resistance to white racism and prejudice would best be accomplished by pursuing citizenship and equal rights in the United States. These leaders eventually formed the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), a group Johnson compares to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). After restricting its membership to U.S. citizens, LULAC urged Mexicans to embrace their American roots and identity while simultaneously demanding that the United States live up to the racial and ethnic egalitarianism implicit in the Declaration of Independence.

I expect that readers will question the central irony of Johnson's book. Why didn't the brutal killing spree of 1915 and after lead Mexicans to more closely identify with Mexico rather than the United States? On this point, Johnson is good at showing how the experience of the early twentieth century left Tejanos frustrated and disappointed with both Mexico and the United States. Johnson believes it is important that Mexicans distinguished between the soldiers of the United States army, with whom they sometimes sought protection, and the Texas Rangers, who they saw as murderers and derisively called "rinches." Distinctions between American ideals and practices, combined with a lack of faith in the

Mexican government, helped tilt many Tejanos toward LULAC.

Critics will question Johnson's argument that the decision of LULAC leaders and others to embrace U.S. citizenship was inspired by the belief that the United States could be pressured to live up to its egalitarian ideals. Neil Foley has argued just the opposite, that many Tejano leaders embraced the racism in American society. They sought to focus upon their United States citizenship and their "whiteness" in order to distance themselves from African Americans and thereby protect themselves from the worst ravages of Jim Crow. In a nation composed of "whites" and "blacks," Foley argues that these Tejanos were more committed to being seen as "white" than to a wide-ranging attack on racism in American society. The historical record offers some support to both Foley and Johnson, and the historical profession should expect a rich debate on this topic in the future.

*Revolution in Texas* will be compared to the first book-length study of the Plan de San Diego, James Sandos's *Rebellion in the Borderlands*. Sandos's research was broad, but his monograph focused on the anarchist influence of Ricardo and Enrique Flores Magon on the uprising. Johnson believes these two admittedly important figures had less influence on the course of events than does Sandos. Johnson finds the "fuse" of the Plan de San Diego not in Mexico or California but in south Texas. He notes that the revolt of 1915 was far from the first major act of resistance by Tejanos. Indeed, Johnson says that "there was something about south Texas that seemed to foster mass insurgencies" (p. 26). Johnson identified three key factors: the fact that Mexicans were the majority population; the existence of a large number of Tejano landowners, and the ease of escape provided by the nearby Mexican border.

Legal historians intrigued by the profession's growing interest in transnational history will be drawn to Johnson's work because it both embraces and challenges some of the core concepts of transnational scholarship. He understands and studies people who move over and across national borders, but he does not dismiss the importance of the nation. Indeed, his argument is that Mexicans living on the border were essentially a people without a nation and that the failure of the Plan de San Diego made it clear to them that they had to become a part of one nation or the other. Their interest in US citizenship arose out of their realization that a national identity was critical.

Johnson's research is exhaustive. He has surveyed

all of the key depositories in South Texas and has traveled to Mexico as well. His work benefits from a wide array of both Spanish-language and English-language sources. Archival materials, institutional records, newspapers, diplomatic correspondence, government investigations, and oral interviews are all brought to bear with great effectiveness.

I will conclude by returning to Johnson's style. Johnson has written his book as a narrative. Indeed, the graceful writing and brevity of the text (211 pages not including notes) is one of its most important features. It is that rare academic book that both simultaneously con-

tributes original knowledge to the field and is accessible to the general public. To emphasize this point, Yale University Press's promotional literature includes advance praise from both esteemed academics such as David Montejano and public intellectuals such as Larry McMurtry.

In my mind, this is a near perfect monograph: well-written, insightful, and full of controversial arguments that, while well-supported with evidence, open up points of discussion and avenues for future research. It should be required reading for graduate students in American history. I can and will assign this book to my undergraduates in the future.

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