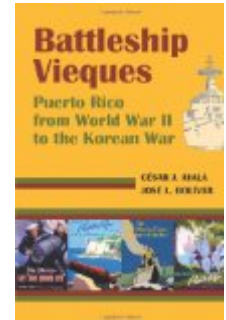


César J. Ayala, José L. Bolívar. *Battleship Vieques: Puerto Rico from World War II to the Korean War*. Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2011. vii + 220 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-55876-538-2.



Reviewed by Annette Palmer

Published on H-War (January, 2016)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

For most of the twentieth century, American military strategy perceived that bases in the Caribbean were necessary to defend the entire hemisphere, and nowhere is that idea better illustrated than in a book by César J. Ayala and José L. Bolívar, *Battleship Vieques: Puerto Rico from World War II to the Korean War*. According to these authors, during the early decades of the century, the United States maintained bases in Puerto Rico which they had taken from the Spanish at the end of the Spanish-American War. However, it was not until the beginning of the Second World War when German activity raised fear in the hemisphere that the United States made efforts to acquire additional bases in Puerto Rico and on several other islands in the Caribbean. The one that inspired this book was planned for Vieques, an island that is politically part of Puerto Rico, but whose social, cultural, and economic background was very different.

What Ayala and Bolívar describe, using a vast array of Spanish- and English-language statistics and documents, is the chronic flaw of colonial

powers. Not only did American military strategists violate several social and cultural taboos in Vieques, but they also enraged the islanders by introducing policies that denied them equal treatment based on their race and ethnicity. In addition, the authors maintain that whereas the American on-again/off-again occupation of most of the island was in response to a perception of threat to the hemisphere, US policy crippled the economy of Vieques. The establishment of the base transformed the local society and economy, reducing the island to a dependency of the United States Navy, and its population to an angry, hostile community.

Ayala and Bolívar are historians of the Puerto Rican experience, and the strength of this book lies in their willingness to place their investigations in historical context and to craft their narrative using their familiarity with evidence in English and Spanish. The authors emphasize the uniqueness of the history of Vieques and show how different it was from the history of Puerto Rico. Vieques, for most of its colonial period, had

been an unoccupied, frontier community on the edge of Spanish settlement in the Caribbean—an island that was closer geographically to the British-, French-, and Danish-owned islands than it was to Puerto Rico. It was not until the nineteenth-century plantation boom that the island was settled as a slave-based society. By the twentieth century, it developed into a classic plantation economy dominated by American and Puerto Rican landowners, and characterized by landless workers—black descendants of slaves or black migrants from the eastern Caribbean islands, which exported sugar and imported food. Like typical laborers in plantation societies, the people of Vieques had traditional rights to occupy land on the island. They were given house plots on the plantations where they worked and each family was also given a subsistence plot to plant food crops or to raise animals. These traditional rights of the workers were not recognized when the US Navy began expropriating land to build the base in 1941. By 1943, the navy had taken over about two-thirds of the island. Initially, islanders were mollified for a time because base construction provided an economic boost to local workers.

These good feelings, however, did not last. Islanders lost their jobs, their houses, their subsistence plots, and their animals. The locals experienced “the overwhelming political power of the navy as a total and arbitrary outside force over which they had absolutely no influence” (p. 53). In compelling chapters in which they use testimony from newspapers, navy reports, and oral sources, Ayala and Bolívar explain that while former sugar industry laborers found jobs in base construction, the introduction of racial elements altered the relationship between US Navy personnel and the people of Puerto Rico. On Vieques, workers realized that the US Navy drew distinctions between different types of American citizens based on race and ethnicity. Continentals, Puerto Ricans, and Virgin Islanders, all American citizens, were treated very differently in terms of their housing options and pay scales. As a result of overt discrimi-

nation on the base, there were a number of strikes and other violent incidents, which created “a residue of hostility” among the islanders (p. 110). Another source of hostility was created by the initial reluctance of the military branches to recruit Puerto Ricans. According to Ayala and Bolívar, even when the military began accepting Puerto Ricans, they separated recruits into white and black ratios, and “used about four whites to one black,” and the rejection rate was higher in Puerto Rico than anywhere else (p. 117). By late 1942 as the United States Army attempted to acquire recruits to replace continental soldiers on other Caribbean bases, some Americans referred to the program as “a glorified WPA (Works Project Administration)” or “WPA in Uniform” (pp. 111, 121).

A compelling part of the story of Vieques, according to Ayala and Bolívar, is how the shifting demands of the war affected the people on the island. By 1943, construction on the Caribbean bases was reduced as war planners shifted their interests to the Pacific. The economy of Vieques plummeted and workers soon found themselves without jobs and without land on which to either rebuild their homes or to plant food crops. The US Navy used the island for target practice for short periods and, between 1943 and 1946, actually closed the naval base and returned the land to the government of Puerto Rico, which attempted to establish an agricultural enterprise. But in 1947, the rumblings of the Cold War dictated that Vieques would again become a naval base. The navy occupied the island, the agricultural enterprises were stopped, and once again the islanders were conflicted. In this new/old Vieques, there were few opportunities for work, and those that existed demanded a continuing subservience to US Navy personnel. The island’s economy had become dependent on the money introduced by the soldiers and marines who came to the island. But this money was accompanied by “drunkenness, the emergence of prostitution, and periodic outbursts of violence,” which violated the sensibili-

ties of the islanders (p. 147). Resentment continued to build and eventually erupted in massive protests both on the island and elsewhere. By 2003, new military technology made bases obsolete and the US Navy gave up the base in Vieques.

What Ayala and Bolívar have done is to demonstrate that the US Navy takeover of the island of Vieques disconnected the island from political and other changes that were taking place in Puerto Rico. They use the language of colonialism to describe the advent of a nationalist movement in Puerto Rico, which coincided with the naval occupation of Vieques. The nationalist movement sought political, economic, and social improvements on the island, and by the Cold War era, on the one hand, Puerto Ricans had begun to notice some progress. In Vieques, on the other hand, there was a “historical regression,” and old colonial structures seemed to be reinforced (p. 7). At a time when so many were throwing off the trappings of colonialism, on Vieques, these trappings seemed to bind the people more firmly. It was only a matter of time before the islanders challenged the colonial structure of the US Navy. *Battleship Vieques: Puerto Rico from World War II to the Korean War* is an instructive, useful book that deepens our understanding of the social and cultural ramifications and consequences of interaction between military and civilian populations.

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

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

Citation: Annette Palmer. Review of Ayala, César J.; Bolívar, José L. *Battleship Vieques: Puerto Rico from World War II to the Korean War*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. January, 2016.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35755>



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