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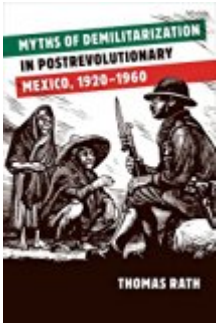
Thomas Rath. *Myths of Demilitarization in Postrevolutionary Mexico, 1920-1960.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. 272 pp. $29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8078-3929-4.



Reviewed by Irving Levinson

Published on H-War (August, 2013)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

On the second page of this book, Thomas Rath sets forth three clear objectives: “to explain what the Mexican Army did, why, and what people thought about” the demilitarization of Mexico commonly held to have taken place between 1920 and 1960. In 172 well-written pages of very thoroughly researched text, the author argues that the removal of the Mexican army from the country’s political, social, and economic life proved far less complete than generally assumed. His work deserves careful consideration because he presents a tightly argued and well-documented case (892 endnotes) based on work in numerous archives. But before considering his arguments in detail, I prefer to address a closely related issue: the ties that an army and a revolutionary government bear to their peoples’ past.

Traditionally, both the political and military leaders of revolutionary regimes enjoy thinking that their triumph marks the end of an age. That belief is a vanity and a dangerous one at that. Only painters possess the luxury of starting with a blank canvas. The people of a nation merge their practices and experiences to form the attitudes that serve as a framework for future conduct. When the premier of the People’s Republic of China recently and publicly lit ceremonial incense at a temple in tribute to his ancestors, he did not do so because of the revolutionary party’s doctrine; he did so because he is of China and he is of a China that has existed for millennia.

When the Mexican Revolution drew to a close, the national army possessed multiple traditions. The first and politically preferred one consisted of resistance to tyranny as exemplified by those who fought for the patria at Chapultepec in 1847 and at Puebla on the Cinco de Mayo. But other traditions persisted. The elitist one that began with Agustin d’Iturbide framing his Plan of the Three Guarantees and that continued with Porfirio Diaz systematically betraying the Liberal traditions in which Benito Juarez schooled him also remained. The third and perhaps most damaging tradition consisted of the *caciquismo* "bossism," by which power brokers typified by Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna’s seamlessly fused military

command, political power, and economic resources into a weapon that allowed them to dominate the nation, repressing political and economic dissent.

As Rath notes, these conflicting traditions became evident even in military classrooms as early as 1915. Some officers favored a continuation of a few of the old traditions of the Porfirian army while others wanted to destroy the military academy at Chapultepec. The governments of Venustiano Carranza and Alvaro Obregon faced an additional and more immediate sort of contradiction. While they on the one hand sought to create an image of the new army as a professional and apolitical force serving a united nation, on the other hand those two presidents also wanted the army to serve as an instrument of organized state violence that could be directed against recalcitrant and armed Mexicans ranging from embittered *agraristas* (agrarian reformers) to defenders of the ancien regime. This contradiction continued throughout the Sonoran era. The army was expected to exemplify admirable traditional characteristics, such as discipline, cleanliness, and masculinity, while at the same time performing blatantly ideological duties, such as suppressing Roman Catholicism during the early phase of the Maximato and crushing those *agrarista* revolts that the regime did not choose to co-opt or ignore.

Concurrently, Rath notes, the Sonoran leadership failed to prevent generals from accumulating wealth and political power in the process of performing their duties. That particular tradition of the nineteenth century was not eliminated by the revolution or the constitution that followed. Here we have one of many cases of a continuity extending beyond a change of regimes and constitutions.

Rath follows a chronological format, moving smoothly from a consideration of the Sonorans' actions in the first chapter of the book to the conduct of Lazaro Cardenas in the second. He devotes considerable attention to the Cardenistas' decision to "create a new type of class-conscious officers, keen to defend the Mexican Revolution from capitalist elites and their military stooges" (p. 31). Here, we have a different contradiction. While trying to create a new paradigm for the army, he freely used the same traditional tactics employed by the Sonorans for controlling factionalism within the army and for pacifying truculent generals. In this regard, the author's citation of a 1937 radio address by Colonel Ignacio Beteta contending that the founding of a corporatist party seemed to "eclipse the notion of a politically neutral army altogether" seems quite accurate (p. 37). The notion of a politically neutral army serving an ideological revolution always may have been a notion and nothing more.

Having addressed both the Sonoran and Cardenista eras, Rath's third chapter addresses the critical issue of resistance to conscription during the 1940s. At one time, a military draft attracted the support of many, particularly the middle class, as a means of inculcating values in an entire generation. This school of thought held that the sergeants would teach Mexicans to be clean, disciplined, literate, and ready to receive orders from their superiors. However, only a small percentage of the eligible males actually faced induction and widespread resistance across the political spectrum undid the hopes of those who saw the army as a school for the nation. Conscription ended in the 1950s.

With these first three chapters concluded, Rath moves into the part of the book I found most interesting. He first considers the relationship of the army and the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in a general and national context and then focuses on this dynamic as seen in one of Mexico's most important states: Puebla. These two chapters constitute an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the army's role in modern Mexican society. Once again, Rath presents the reader with the contradictions of the situation. The PRI, the Secretaria de la Defensa Nacional, and the army sought to portray the armed forces

as an apolitical institution. In reality, the army "provided a good measure of the organized force that allowed the avilacamchista machine to function" (p. 115). Connoisseurs of detail will enjoy Rath's description of the familial, political, and geographic linkages that together formed a complex web of control within Puebla and between Puebla and the national government. These two chapters are fascinating.

In the sixth and final chapter, Rath offers his conclusions. Correctly, he points out that continuities and discontinuities with the Porfirian army remain. For me, the most important continuity is the army's role as a regulator and suppressor. Rath believes: "when it came to the army's most important role as an agent of social and political control, the evidence of the military's impunity and insulation from popular pressure is far more imposing that [*sic*] its responsiveness" (p. 168). Here, he draws a clear line between the small-scale counterguerrilla efforts that took place in the countryside of Guerrero and Oaxaca in the 1940s and 1950s and the more recent and highly public actions of the 1960s and 1970s in urban Mexico. To summarize, this book is a fine example of intensive scholarship and clear judgment about a subject, Mexican military history, that does not receive an adequate level of attention from the scholarly community.

However, no work of history is perfect and in this regard, two comments seem appropriate. First, I very much regret that Rath decided not to address developments during more recent decades. First among these is the 1968 massacre at the Plaza of the Three Cultures. This army execution of hundreds of unarmed citizens, the subsequent burning of their corpses at nearby military bases, the arrest of thousands of other Mexicans in the days that followed, and the absence of substantive and public official investigations left many unanswered questions. If the army opened fire at the order of President Gustavo Diaz Ordaz, then the image of an apolitical military can be discarded. Conversely, during that decade and the two that followed, much of Latin America fell under military rule as armies removed the civilian leaders of the ***nacion*** in the name of the patria. If the Mexican army undertook these killings without civilian orders, then we are addressing issues going back to the 1820s. In making this criticism, I fully realize that much information about the events of 1968 remains unavailable. However, some effort on Rath's part to address these matters would have been welcome.

A future volume also might extend into the history of the current century. Depending on which figures one chooses, fifty thousand to sixty thousand Mexicans have died during the past twelve years in a drug war including both intra-cartel warfare as well as extensive conflict between the armed forces and the cartels. In this war, the army has supplanted state and local police forces in many places and occasions. A number of Mexican commentators, most notably, the editors of ***Proceso***, repeatedly have voiced concern over the extent to which the armed forces have entered the daily existence of hundreds of Mexico's municipalities and millions of its citizens. Ideally, the civil state and the army exist in a symbiotic relationship with each institution respecting the legitimacy of the other. Yet the question that inevitably arises is the degree to which the extension of military force into the lives of so many Mexicans reflects not a symbiosis of authority as much as a transfer of power from the civilians to the military. Here again, a historian would encounter significant barriers in terms of information not accessible. However, at some point I hope that a scholar of Rath's caliber will make the effort.

With that point acknowledged, I close by noting perhaps the most important lesson of this book: that centuries-old institutions such as ***caciquismo*** and the rule of force in place of the rule of law do not yield, graciously or otherwise, to revolutionaries or pseudo-revolutionaries who

flatter themselves with the idea that a new world
begins with them.

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Citation: Irving Levinson. Review of Rath, Thomas. *Myths of Demilitarization in Postrevolutionary Mexico, 1920-1960.* H-War, H-Net Reviews. August, 2013.

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