

Review Articles



War Politics and War Games in Puerto Rico

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Puerto Rico en la Segunda Guerra Mundial: Baluarte del Caribe. Jorge Rodríguez Beruff & José L. Bolívar Fresneda (eds.). San Juan: Ediciones Callejón, 2012. 533 pp. (Paper US\$ 29.00)

Battleship Vieques: Puerto Rico from World War II to the Korean War. César J. Ayala & José L. Bolívar. Princeton NJ: Markus Wiener, 2011. v + 220 pp. (Paper US\$ 26.95)

These books on Puerto Rico in the World War II era address geopolitics in close interaction with the social and political history of the island during a crucial conjuncture of the twentieth century. The collection of twenty articles in *Puerto Rico en la Segunda Guerra Mundial* represents the best of contemporary research on U.S. militarism in Puerto Rico. *Battleship Vieques* documents the expropriation of two-thirds of Puerto Rico's offshore island of Vieques in the 1940s and the creation of the largest navy bombing range in the Atlantic.

Two opening essays by Jorge Rodríguez-Beruff challenge interpretations of the period. Developments during World War II, he argues, are key to understanding how the United States accomplished a restrained transformation “from a traditional colonial model to a more modern arrangement” (p. 31). He focuses on the 1939–40 period and takes issue with widely-shared explanations that hold World War II in the background and focus on the governorship of

Rexford G. Tugwell in 1941–45 and his collaboration and divergences with Luis Muñoz Marín and the Popular Democratic Party (PPD).

Puerto Rican politics in the 1930s was dominated by a conservative, pro-sugar industry alliance (the *Coalición*) that included a prostatehood party and a trade unionist party, in control of a corrupt island legislature. The *Coalición* was strongly supported by governor Blanton Winship and by the almighty Division of Territories and Insular Possessions in Washington. The Roosevelt administration as a whole remained stubbornly colonialist. Muñoz Marín fell out of favor when he refused to denounce the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, whose violent acts were in retaliation against persecution by the colonial government.

Muñoz Marín found an audience again in Washington only after 1939, when the war in Europe “urgently raised the question of political stability” in Puerto Rico and in the Caribbean as a whole (p. 38). The appointment of Admiral William D. Leahy (a former chief of naval operations and Roosevelt military adviser) as governor was a major turning-point. Rodríguez-Beruff argues that the alignment of forces was set then, and not later during Tugwell’s governorship. Large military investments in Puerto Rico during the war were also an important, if subsidiary, factor. Rodríguez-Beruff calls attention, with good reason, to the importance of World War II—in particular, early U.S. defense planning and policies. Yet his emphasis on the issue of “political stability” tends to blur Puerto Rico’s nationalist and labor upheavals of the 1930s.

In his second article, Rodríguez-Beruff explores another 1939–41 turnaround, this one by Muñoz Marín himself. For just as Washington suddenly tolerated Muñoz Marín, and on the eve of the PPD’s razor-thin victory in 1940, Muñoz Marín “postponed” the struggle for independence in favor of ardent support for democracy against fascism, in conjunction with wide-ranging social reform. Less clear is how and when Muñoz shifted from genuine wartime postponement of the status issue to elevating colonial autonomy as a permanent “Commonwealth” status, or how much Muñoz Marín’s “antifascist” message actually swayed proindependence forces. Nor can we discount Muñoz Marín’s personal ambition and his drive toward consolidating power.

Michael Janeway considerably broadens our perspective on Tugwell. Contrary to widely-held belief, Janeway demonstrates that Tugwell was not cut off from Washington in the Second New Deal and was a vital intermediary between the Roosevelt administration and Muñoz, who certainly *was* cut off in 1937, Janeway argues. Muñoz remained on the fringes of Washington power, regardless of Roosevelt’s strategic expressions of praise for Muñoz. Roosevelt and Muñoz “distrusted each other completely” (p. 112).

Tugwell was a key intermediary between Muñoz and Washington during

the wartime years, when political conflict in Puerto Rico between the PPD and the *Coalición* only intensified. Janeway argues that the Tugwell-Muñoz relationship was cordial and complex, and was actually part of a quartet that included FDR and Harold L. Ickes. Hence Tugwell's relationship with the FDR administration was highly relevant to his accomplishments, for the consolidation of Muñoz's political power and for the PPD's historic landslide electoral victory in 1944. Another player was one of the most nebulous and interesting Brain Trusters, Charles William Taussig, heir to and president of the American Molasses Company. Taussig, who was well acquainted with the Caribbean, was Roosevelt's choice for the governorship of Puerto Rico after Admiral Leahy. Taussig cochaired the Caribbean Commission (see below) and remained FDR's chief adviser on Puerto Rican and Caribbean affairs until 1943 or 1944. Tugwell, with Muñoz, may have finessed Taussig's departure at a key juncture ... a topic for further research. Unlike Rodríguez-Beruff, Janeway sees open political outcomes at least until 1944. Without Tugwell's political and personal skills, Janeway contends, Muñoz's opposition could have prevailed in Washington. At times, Janeway's emphasis on Tugwell's role seems disproportionate, but he is right to emphasize the political struggles of 1940–44.

Norberto Barreto-Velázquez registers Tugwell's assessments of the war and Roosevelt's policies which sometimes were critical despite his devotion to FDR. Tugwell admitted to doubts about U.S. entry into the war and was concerned about its effects on domestic programs. Barreto-Velázquez's account underscores the importance of contextualizing Tugwell's years in Puerto Rico within his full political and intellectual trajectory.

José Bolívar-Fresneda's article on U.S. military expenditures in Puerto Rico during World War II makes the case that these were the "central factor" in economic development in the 1940s and 1950s. He argues, with good reason, that prevailing explanations of Puerto Rico's social transformation focus narrowly on agrarian reform, land distribution, state-owned factories, and Operation Bootstrap. Bolívar-Fresneda's extensive research offers an important corrective to earlier interpretations, which generally failed to recognize massive military expenditures and the full impact of World War II on Puerto Rico. (See also Bolívar-Fresneda 2011.)

However, differences between wartime expenditures and the earlier New Deal programs need not be overdrawn. These initiatives were federal in part but also involved Puerto Ricans in policymaking roles. More importantly, the social and economic transformations that Puerto Rican society experienced in the early 1940s and their political consequences—while not as momentous as the peaceful revolution that PPD apologists claim—cannot be underestimated. The way forward in the historiography of the late 1930s–1940s in Puerto Rico

may be to explore the interactions and contradictions between these dimensions, rather than attempt new interpretations that are, or at least seem to be, largely monocausal. The discussion of Puerto Rico's "military economy" of the 1940s also needs to be placed in the wider framework of the U.S. political economy, where World War II expenditures ushered in a vastly expanded civilian federal state and military-industrial complex.

The more general chapters in the first part of *Puerto Rico en la Segunda Guerra Mundial* are followed by fourteen articles on strategy and military aspects, bases and local communities, war and society, and communications and press. Ligia Domenech-Abreu narrates the fascinating and enormously effective, though short-lived German submarine offensive in the Atlantic in 1941–42 and explains in detail the objectives of that campaign as well as its successes and failures.

Mayra Rosario-Urrutia's comprehensive account of the background and activities of the U.S.–Great Britain Caribbean Commission portrays the delicate situation created by the transfer to the United States under the Lend-Lease Agreement of British bases in Caribbean islands recently shaken by social conflict. The crucial, and most intriguing, objective of the Commission was a Caribbean federation under U.S. hegemony. Rosario-Urrutia traces the development of the so-called "Taussig Plan" or "Caribbean Plan," which was almost unanimously rejected by Puerto Rican public opinion, though the plan was supposedly well received by political leaders in the British West Indies, who believed that the United States would grant independence more readily than Britain (!). Gerardo Piñero-Cádiz chronicles the construction of coastal defenses and captures the climate of impending danger (particularly in 1942) amid regular blackouts when "an air attack, an amphibious invasion, or the landing of saboteurs" was considered a serious possibility (p. 249).

In the book's section on military installations and local communities, Carlos González-Morales and Piñero-Cádiz document the establishment of the two major bases in Puerto Rico, Borinquen (later Ramey) Field and Roosevelt Roads. Both articles offer valuable information on the impact of these bases on rural communities. A common theme is the eviction of hundreds of families, most of whom were *agregados* without formal legal title but who had, in most cases, longstanding de facto rights. The virtual mirage of booming employment during base construction facilitated the expropriations. Other common themes are the rapid, profound transformation of rural areas, including the growth of prostitution.

Josefa Santiago-Caraballo presents a further consequence of World War II in Puerto Rico: the connection between the first agrarian reform projects and the construction of military bases, including Roosevelt Roads. Hundreds of parcels

were distributed in usufruct to the expropriated *agregados* (though not in Borinquen Field). While in one sense Santiago-Caraballo's findings confirm the ubiquitous role of the U.S. military, one may also ask if these initial expropriations were facilitated by their direct connection to military needs, and helped legitimate later agrarian reform projects unrelated to the military. The article on Vieques by Bolívar-Fresneda and César Ayala summarizes the argument in *Battleship Vieques* (reviewed below).

Several articles in *Puerto Rico en la Segunda Guerra Mundial* address the social consequences of World War II in Puerto Rico. Cruz Ortiz-Cuadra's article on food supplies and diet analyzes the struggles over food distribution in Washington and San Juan, as government officials attempted control of the distribution chains in order to avoid speculation (p. 375). Various enactments are explained, but actual outcomes are less clear. Government food officials ultimately may not have pressed the issue because the food shortages did not truly reach crisis proportions.

Other articles address narrower topics such as Ponce in wartime, the family memoir of a Puerto Rican recruit, and "patriotic" wartime propaganda in the public school system and in the local press. The closing article in the collection, by Luis Rosario Albert, is on the acquisition of the Puerto Rico Telephone Company (then owned by ITT) by the island government—a transaction that Muñoz himself derailed, over Tugwell's opposition. The article interestingly locates that controversy in the context of the relationship between ITT (which had strong roots in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands), the European Fascist powers, and U.S. armed forces.

The articles in *Puerto Rico en la Segunda Guerra Mundial* are on the whole outstanding, and the book usefully underscores the many-sided importance of World War II for modern Puerto Rico. However, the authors at times overemphasize both the war's significance for Puerto Rico, and the island's importance in the war. The three Caribbean zones where the German submarine presence was strongest were the Windward Passage, Trinidad, and Curaçao-Aruba—not Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico was also not the main U.S. military outpost in the Caribbean. The Panama Canal Zone—virtually a U.S. domestic waterway—was far more strategic than any Caribbean island. And Guantánamo was the assembly point for merchant shipping convoys between the East Coast and the Caribbean. A broader understanding of the multiple periods and theaters of World War II will give us a better sense of the locus of Puerto Rico and the Caribbean in that vast process. Puerto Rico's relative importance early in the war did not carry over to the later phases of the conflict, when the fighting moved from the Atlantic to the Soviet Union and the insular Pacific. Moreover, the crucial 1944 elections in Puerto Rico occurred at a juncture that was

drastically different from 1941–42. Cross-referencing between the articles and discussion on points of agreement and disagreement would have helped to frame those broader questions and further stimulate research.

Battleship Vieques is a well-documented overview of the history of Vieques (six miles southeast of Puerto Rico) from the Spanish colonial epoch. The book focuses on the expropriation of two-thirds of the island in the 1940s and the creation of a major navy/marine corps bombing range and maneuver area. The end of naval maneuvers in Vieques in 2003, after a massive campaign of civil disobedience, hardly implies that historical research on that island has lost importance—quite the contrary. (See, for example, Rivera-Martínez 1965, Meléndez 1982, Ayala 2001, McCaffrey 2002; Fabián 2003, Ayala & Bolívar-Fresneda 2006, Ayala & Carro-Figueroa 2006; and Santiago 2007.)

Research on Vieques is evolving as new sources become available and its experience is reassessed in broader contexts. Ayala and Bolívar-Fresneda connect social, political, and military dimensions in ways that give students of Vieques much to ponder, sometimes going to the heart of debates on Caribbean history and (quite literally) the nature of colonialism. They argue that the presence of the U.S. Navy drove Vieques in a direction opposite to that of the rest of Puerto Rico, which underwent an economic and social transformation. In fact, their argument captures the two inseparable faces of colonialism: on the one hand, precarious material progress, and on the other raw military power, outright dispossession, and ecological devastation.

The opening chapter of *Battleship Vieques* argues that Germany's Caribbean submarine offensive in 1941–42 provoked a food crisis that triggered the PPD agrarian reforms as well as the expropriations in Vieques. Ayala and Bolívar-Fresneda reinterpret the economic transformations of Puerto Rico in the 1940s as being largely a result of the inflow of federal (mostly military) expenditures. Another general chapter addresses the overtly racist policies followed by the U.S. military in Puerto Rico at the time, an issue that deserves far more extensive treatment

The most riveting chapters in *Battleship Vieques* document the U.S. Navy's draconian expropriation of over a thousand *agregado* families, mostly from western Vieques. The expropriations/evictions were, in many cases, carried out literally overnight, with no compensation other than minute house plots elsewhere in Vieques. The authors' research is impressive, but their argument on the land rights of the *Viequesenses* remains ambiguous. On the one hand, they recognize that the Vieques *agregados* had "traditional usufruct rights" that were "part of the landscape, almost legally ascribed to the land" (pp. 51, 55), in many cases on plots as large as two acres, plus access to prolific seashore and mangrove ecologies. Ayala and Bolívar-Fresneda fully recognize the multiple

impacts of the expropriations, including a “widespread feeling of dispossession” (p. 56) and blast navy rule.

On the other hand, they argue that Vieques had become the most extreme instance of land concentration and plantation society in Puerto Rico long before the U.S. Navy, and that as a result, its *agregados* were no more than resident wage laborers on sugar estate land. This assessment, ironically, converges with the navy’s stated position that the *agregados* were but squatters. The *agregado* issue is evidently a complex topic (not just in Vieques) that needs further investigation and comparative study. Given the state of research, it might be preferable to acknowledge large grey zones and set forth key problems. We also need to open up questions on Vieques history and its agrarian relations; for example, was Vieques uninhabited and lacking a peasant substratum before plantation development, as Ayala and Bolívar-Fresneda contend? “Plantation Vieques” could be as much an oversimplification as the navy’s view of a “Battleship Vieques.”

The sweeping expropriations in Vieques may not have been a result of wartime military necessity, but rather part of a navy plan to depopulate Vieques and turn the entire island into a bombing range and maneuver area. The key navy projects of the 1941–43 “boom” were the construction of two breakwaters, a quarry where the stone for the breakwaters was excavated, and the construction of munitions depots—all in western Vieques, where the evictions hit hardest. The breakwaters were to form a harbor between Vieques and the main island of Puerto Rico that would shelter 60 percent of the U.S. Atlantic fleet and the entire British fleet in the event of a German invasion of Britain—a possibility that was believed imminent in the summer of 1940. Construction of the breakwaters was to receive two-thirds of the funds assigned to the entire project: \$23.3 million of the \$35 million total, while only \$1 million was to be used for land acquisitions in Vieques. Only a portion of this was actually spent, as the project was abruptly suspended in the summer of 1943, but clearly the “Roosevelt Roads/Vieques” base construction project was essentially the breakwaters.

Military historians may have the last word on this, but it would appear that a German takeover of the British fleet was out of the question as early as the summer of 1941, when Germany invaded the Soviet Union, effectively ending its offensive on the western/Atlantic fronts. In the meantime the evicted *agregados* of western Vieques continued working in a massive, well-paying, and seemingly long-term construction project. That the breakwater project may have been continued artificially until 1943—when the first round of expropriations ended—suggests that the navy’s plan for a permanent presence in Vieques and for turning all of Vieques into a depopulated maneuver area predated the 1947

announcement of its training objectives and the relocation of the island's entire population. On the whole, the expropriations relocated the island's entire population into one-third of its territory. The expropriated land in the most densely populated and fertile west part of the island remained largely unused except for munitions depots, which raises still more questions.

On the economic impact of the Vieques expropriations, Ayala and Bolívar-Fresneda argue that "contrary to the commonplace assumption of an invariably disastrous situation in Vieques" (p. 73), a more complex interpretation should include the navy-generated construction surge, "the greatest economic boom in [Vieques] history," during and immediately after the expropriations (pp. 69, 73–74). In a questionable periodization of the 1942–48 period, they render the time of the expropriations as coterminous with "prosperity," followed by "a disastrous period," after the construction projects ended, and then "a period of partial recovery" after the Puerto Rican government took some employment initiatives (p. 73).

"Partial recovery" may be a euphemism, since Ayala and Bolívar-Fresneda recognize that the government initiatives were largely unsuccessful. In any case, any degree of "recovery" fell apart with another round of navy expropriations, the beginning of joint maneuvers in 1947–48, and further expropriations in 1950. Hence, characterizing a fourth period of Vieques-Navy relations—far longer than the first three—would be in order: a period when every year brought a two-month "high season" of bombings by day and drunken sailors by night; few alternatives beyond liquor sales, laundry work, and prostitution; and navy restrictions on other employment alternatives, marine and air transport, and sea fishing, newly taken up by a number of *Viequenses*. Though one may disagree with some aspects of *Battleship Vieques*, and the absence of any discussion on the full Culebra-Vieques range complex is significant (see Feliciano-Encarnación 2009), the book is well researched and offers ample information on Vieques during and immediately after World War II.

When Mao Zedong said—to paraphrase—that the only difference between war and politics is bloodshed, he could have added that wartime politics is neither and both, and that bloodshed takes many forms (cases in point: the PPD's crushing victory over the Coalición in 1944, or the Vieques expropriations). At the intersection of military, political, and social history, *Puerto Rico en la Segunda Guerra Mundial* and *Battleship Vieques* will greatly interest students of the U.S. military presence in the Caribbean, and will be quite an eye-opener for those who are not.

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