

Book Review

– *Soldiers of the nation: military service and modern Puerto Rico, 1868-1952*,
by Harry Franqui-Rivera. University of Nebraska Press, 2018

War is a gendered affair, and as American historian Kristin Hoganson has shown in her *Fighting for Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars*, it has played a significant role in the expression of “American manhood.” Harry Franqui-Rivera’s *Soldiers of the Nation* explores how the United States tried to use the military in their nation-building efforts in Puerto Rico to sculpt manlier and “modern” men out of Puerto Ricans (especially the peasantry). In doing so, he shows the rarely narrated or explored complex and paradoxical history of the American military presence on the island. He argues that the opening of the military to Puerto Ricans and the role it played in improving life on the island – through creation of jobs, and health and construction campaigns – contributed to the creation of modern Puerto Rico and to the growing attachment of islanders to the United States. However, metropolitan control over its colonial subjects’ identities was never total and it was challenged by colonial elite and popular sectors. The need of the metropolis for the colonial elite’s aid opened a space for power struggles that ended in the *criollization* of institutions and modernity projects.

Chapter 1 examines Spain’s military policies on the island and how the monarchy sought to exercise total control through the exclusion of the *criollos* (born in Puerto Rico) from the military. Such exclusion emasculated elite men and contributed to make the differences between *peninsulares* (born in Spain) and *criollos* more evident. Franqui, arguing against one of the founding myths of the pro-independence movement on the island, convincingly demonstrates that the Lares revolt of 1868 was not the expression of a Puerto Rican national identity, but that such identity emerged as the result of the measures and policies Spain established in its aftermath.

In chapter 2, the author focuses on the U.S. military’s role in nation-building efforts in Puerto Rico, showing that the health, humanitarian, and construction campaigns helped to foster the peasantry’s loyalty to the United States. He also examines the paradoxical stance of the military regarding the mobilization of Puerto Ricans: on one hand, the military considered Puerto

Ricans as non-martial and docile; while, on the other, it had to mobilize them during World War I.

The next chapter analyses the different modernity projects diverse actors had for Puerto Rico: the United States hoped to Americanize Puerto Ricans; pro-statehood Puerto Ricans desired to prove the island could become a federal state; and, *autonomistas* wanted to show Puerto Ricans' capacity for self-government. Each sector understood Puerto Rico's strategic geopolitical position, especially traditional and emerging elites who enhanced their political power thanks to the structural reforms installed by the United States, and wrestled control of the military from the metropolis, a process started during WWI and completed during the Korean War. Here, again arguing against pro-independence movement's mythology, Franqui clearly shows that U.S. citizenship was not granted to Puerto Ricans to be cannon fodder during WWI because racism against Puerto Rican battalions – mostly composed of peasants – hindered their participation in the battle fronts. Nonetheless, such experience was important for those groups because it allowed them to come into close contact with U.S. culture.

Chapter 4 examines the Nationalist Party's challenge to U.S. colonial rule in Puerto Rico. Franqui argues that Pedro Albizu Campos – the charismatic leader of the Party – understood the importance of the military as a tool for “regaining,” and proving, Puerto Rican manhood; that is the meaning Franqui discerns in the *Cadetes de la República* – the paramilitary branch of the Party. However, the *nacionalistas* violent ways and nostalgic proposal of a rosy Hispanic past were incongruent with the progress and hints of modernization that the U.S. already symbolized for Puerto Ricans by the 1930s.

In chapter 5, Franqui analyzes how two modernization projects for Puerto Rico coincided during WWII: the United States wanted to promote the loyalty of the islanders and its image as leader of the free world; Puerto Rico's political leadership – especially Luis Muñoz Marín – sought to advance the island decolonization and the use of soldiers' economic benefits to improve the socio-economic situation on the island. The author reveals the immense importance of military investments for the economy of the island. Franqui proposes that it was in that context, and with the understanding that most Puerto Ricans would reject independence, that Muñoz Marín moved towards autonomism, a process that ended in the creation of the *Estado Libre Asociado* (Commonwealth).

In the last chapter, the focus is on Puerto Rican participation in the Korean War, especially the 65th infantry, known as the Borincaneers. Again, Franqui shows how different actors understood Puerto Rican military participation in diverse ways. For Puerto Rican soldiers, participation in the war helped proving to others and to themselves that they were not inferiors to Americans. Mobilization provided an arena for regaining their manhood. For the *autonomistas*, the participation in the war was an opportunity to show Puerto Rico's commitment to democracy and its readiness for self-government; for pro-statehood it showed readiness to become a federal state; and for *independen-*

tas it was a way to show the island's readiness to become an independent state, one that would not be anti-American or Communist. Finally, the Korean War was the arena for Muñoz Marín where the new Puerto Rican would be born, the new *jíbaro* in whose body the two cultures – American and Hispanic – would coexist. The “Conclusion” summarizes the text’s main arguments.

Franqui has produced a superb text, solidly researched, and painstakingly argued. Sometimes the repetition of certain propositions or the use of the same quote repeatedly could weaken the effect of the argument. Also, a more detailed discussion of the processes of racialization he identifies would have enriched the text. Notwithstanding, he has shown that it is possible to write a history of the paradoxical effects of the military and modernity projects without negating, or being apologetic of, the imperial rule of the United States over Puerto Rico. Scholars in Latin American and Caribbean history/studies, geographies with difficult and tense entanglements with the United States and its military apparatuses, would benefit greatly from his book.

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