BOOK REVIEW


Peter Guardino, a leading scholar of nineteenth-century Mexican social history, has written an ambitious and remarkably successful social history of the 1846 U.S.-Mexico War which sets a new standard for the scholarship of this tragic conflict. Most studies of the war are one-sided military histories that give agency to generals and describe battles in great detail, but devote little space to the experiences of common soldiers, and even less to civilians. Despite the fact that over the past two decades academic scholars have produced excellent topically-organized monographs on various aspects of the social and cultural history of the conflict, these works have not, by and large, been widely read or integrated into the reigning narrative of the war. Very few histories of the U.S.-Mexico War have attempted to give equal time to both sides of the conflict, even fewer have been successful in the attempt, and none has focused on the lived experience of the war for both ordinary Mexicans and Americans.

Peter Guardino’s history, published by the trade division of Harvard University Press, breaks new ground in all these areas. The Dead March is above all else a very fine piece of comparative scholarship, firmly grounded in extensive archival research in both countries. With an enviable command of the historiography of both the war and nineteenth-century society on both sides of the border, the author provides a compelling comparative history of Mexico and the United States in the 1840s including a sophisticated analysis of the origins, progress, and outcome of the conflict, original analysis about the social composition and values of both armies grounded in analysis of race, class, and gender, new evidence about the extent of female involvement in the Mexican war effort, and a reasoned argument about why the United States prevailed.

Even more remarkably, Guardino presents this history in a largely chronological format. While this isn’t exactly narrative history, readers unfamiliar with the chronology of the war will be able to follow the armies through the course of the conflict in a comprehensible and satisfying manner. Scholars will be thrilled by Guardino’s provocative comparisons, (including Andrew Jackson as a typical caudillo), and even more so by many of his conclusions, including the role of rape by U.S. soldiers in mobilizing Mexican support for the war, how an American vigilante tradition shaped guerilla warfare, and the fact that anti-war
agitation in the U.S. did exactly what President James K. Polk claimed, which was give succor to the enemy.

But students and popular readers should be just as pleased. The clear chronological format will help those new to the war make sense of a confusing conflict, and although Guardino’s chief interest is with the lived experience of average men (and some women) in each country, he is also a skilled narrator of battles. The San Patricios, a Mexican battalion made up of U.S. deserters, is one of the few aspects of the U.S.-Mexico War that has made its way into American popular culture, including a 1999 big budget film starring Tom Berenger (“One Man’s Hero.”) Guardino not only skillfully narrates the story of these deserter-heroes, he offers new evidence about their activities and reception in Mexico. Maps and a number of wonderful drawings by Illinois volunteer Samuel Chamberlain of the war and Mexican society provide visual evidence for Guardino’s observations.

There is little to critique in this meticulous study. Guardino twice states that in the United States “modest taxes generated enough revenue to support an expensive foreign war” (6). But as James W. Cummings reveals, the United States financed the war by marketing securities to European investors. (James W. Cummings, Towards Modern Public Finance: The American War with Mexico, 1846-1848. London, 2009). Polk chose to run up debt rather than pass a tax for an increasingly unpopular war. The author might be a bit too credulous about self-described “rogue” Samuel Chamberlain’s account of the war. And occasionally it seems as though the author is speaking to historians of Mexico more than historians of the United States. Guardino convincingly argues that Mexico did not lose the war because of a failure of nationalism. Mexican citizens and soldiers proved just as patriotic as individuals north of the border. But few U.S. historians would argue otherwise. Studies of the war written from a U.S. perspective are far more likely to point to the economic superiority of the United States as the key reason for U.S. victory (as does Guardino), and to accept the nearly universal claims by U.S. soldiers and officers that their Mexican foes fought valiantly, than to point to the failure of Mexican nationalism as a reason for Mexico’s loss, let alone the prime reason.

But these are minor quibbles. The Dead March is an important book that deserves a wide audience, and with which future historians will be forced to contend.