

Race and Resistance on the Creation of Mexican American Citizenship and the Chicano Identity

LUIZ FRANCISCO GUIZZO GUTIERREZ OSORIO

University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Many times disregarded by the Anglo-Saxon historical memory, the Mexican- American War of 1846 is one of the most important events on recent Mexican history, together with the Independence struggle (1810-1821), the wars against the French, and the Mexican Revolution (1910-1924). From all the cited conflicts, it was the only one where the Mexican people did not come out on top. After two years of war, the ex- Spanish colony had lost more than 50% of its original territory to its neighbors' aggression. That land was not unoccupied, and brought into the United States the newest addition to the American racial hierarchy; Mexican Americans, as they would be known from there on, became the first "non-white" people to be officially recognized as full American citizens, on the terms specified by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo between the two nations. After peace was achieved, however, the American justice would more often than not ignore the Treaty's provisions and guarantees, and the thousands of persons crossed by the new border would effectively be regarded as a sub- class of citizens for another 120 years. Despite what the Anglo-centered educational system and historiography of the early 20th century has painted, these men and women did not simply accept the *gringo's* conquest, and various forms of resistance flourished

throughout the American Southwest. In this paper, I aim at reassessing the persistence of Mexican culture against the “melting pot” narrative of assimilation, and its role on the creation of the Chicano identity.

War and Peace

To understand post-War relations between these two peoples, we have first to understand the origins of the conflict. While, in the 1810s, Mexicans fought to achieve their Independence from colonial rule, the American economy was struck by the 1819 economic crisis. Throughout the 1820s, many Americans saw the Mexican territory of *Coahuila y Tejas* as a cheaper alternative to the more expensive land prices in the U.S. During those years, more than 20,000 American citizens officially migrated to the territory, together with their more than 2,000 slaves. By 1835, on the eve of the Texan Revolution, the 30,000 Americans living in Texas, most of which had acquired Mexican citizenship, far outnumbered the 5,000 native-born Mexicans in the territory¹. On a letter sent to Guadalupe Victoria, the President of the Mexican Republic in 1828, independence hero General Manuel Mier y Terán reported that Americans not only outnumbered Mexicans in the Texas territory, but also comprised the upper-class. As he put it, the Mexicans living in the region were “the very poor and ignorant” and, because those foreigners knew Mexico only by the frontier land, that was the image they had of its entire people. The General advised his President to take immediate action to revert this scenario before Texas “throws the whole nation into revolution”, as colonists complained about the lack of efficiency of the public institutions and natives complained about the far better education of the foreigners². Texas was, by 1836, a time-bomb ready to explode.

1. Acuña, Rodolfo F, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, (New Jersey: Pearson, 2007) pp. 41-43

2. Manuel Mier y Terán to Guadalupe Victoria, June 30, 1828, in “Causes and Origins of the Decree of April 6, 1830”, by Alleine Howren, *Southwestern*

Forget the Alamo

Myth and history, as we will later see with the 1960s Mexican American movement, do not play opposite roles on the creation of a culture. Rather, they combine to create a narrative upon which the community can grow and identity can be achieved. Just as the memory of the Civil War would later be altered on the Southern mind to fit the “Lost Cause” struggle for “State’s rights”, the Texan memory of the 1836 Revolution was tremendously altered to create the Republic of Texas’ national narrative. Because this narrative is so embedded in American mainstream culture, it is easy to forget that what defeated Santa Anna’s army was a fragile Anglo-Mexican alliance defending the right to own slaves, and not a strong coalition of democracy-loving European-Americans.

Even (or rather, specially) the Alamo, the symbol of the Texan struggle, had its memory re-shaped to maintain the “bad-Mexicans” portrait that would later justify aggression and prejudice. The brave men who died in the battle were not the martyred “peaceful colonists defending their homes” that they are many times painted as, but ranged from professional soldiers to criminals and adventurers. They were not voluntary martyrs either, and in fact expected to be rescued by their Texan comrades. Santa Anna indeed had the numbers (1,500 against 170-200 men), but the Alamo Mission had 21 cannons and several rifles provided by the U.S. Army. The attacking forces, composed of Maya-Native soldiers without proper training and armed with muskets, counted only with its eight mobile cannons. Eight of the defenders survived the carnage, seven of which surrendered and were executed (including the famous David Crocket) while one escaped to spread the myth³. The Alamo is not cited here just as a historical anecdote, but because it would later become a central piece on

Historical Quarterly 16, No. 4, (April 1913), pp. 395-398

3. Acuña, *Occupied America*, p. 44

the racial relations of Texas. The “white martyrs who were slaughtered by the cruel brown Mexicans” would, in the eyes of Texans, later justify the murdering, lynching, and sadism against this people, from 1836 to 1848, and beyond.

After the revolution was over and Texas had achieved its independency, reprisals for the Alamo took the “lands, stock, and lives of Mexicans, friend and foe alike”, and not only the poor and ethnic Mexicans but also those who considered themselves to be the white descendants of the Spanish colonizers. In its ten years of existence, the Republic of Texas’ most prominent “American buyers” bought 1,368,574 acres of land from Mexicans, disposing thousands of families. At a certain point, they went as far as declaring the livestock of Mexicans as public property⁴.

Invasion from the North

When, ten years after the Lone Star Republic achieved its independency, the U.S. defied Mexican authority by sending military garrisons to the border and then recognizing and annexing Texas, the outcome of a War was not exactly clear. The Mexicans had previously defended their territory successfully against both Spain and France, and much had changed since Santa Anna’s defeat at San Jacinto. But the American voluntary army, fed by the ambitions of President James Polk and the faith on America’s Manifest Destiny of “civilizing the wildlings”, was confident of victory from the beginning. Before the War even started, plans and dreams of conquest and subjugation were commonly expressed on both Congress and the Military. Many soldiers left registered their views on the conflict, and something noted by author David Weber on a 1973 book is that, for the Yankees fighting in Mexico, expansion “seemed to be sufficient reason for

4. Montejano, David, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987) pp. 26-31

war”. They saw a higher obligation of the U.S. as a “civilized nation” to redeem the “backward Mexicans”⁵. Thus, an idealistic White Man’s Burden type of moral imperative accompanied notions of Manifest Destiny. A good example of this is in the diary of Texas Republic Colonel Thomas Jefferson Green, who was captured on a Texan campaign to Tamaulipas. While been held captive near the Rio Grande, he wrote “The Rio Grande [...] is capable of maintaining millions of a population. [...] This river, once settled with the enterprise and intelligence of the English race, will yearly send forth an export which will require hundreds of steamers to transport to its delta while its hides, wool, and metals may be increased to an estimate which would now seem chimerical”⁶. On the political arena, Green’s compatriot and Texas Republic former Secretary of State, Ashbel Smith, justified the war by saying that it was the “Anglo-Saxon race’s destiny to civilize and to Americanize this continent”⁷.

Not all Americans, though, were convinced by tales of Manifest Destiny, and even some who fought in Mexico were skeptical about their deeds. Years after the war, U.S. President General Ulysses Grant wrote that he was bitterly opposed to the measure, and “to this day regard the war [as] one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation”. “It was”, he continues, “an instance of a Republic following the bad example of European Monarchies”, pursuing an expansionist agenda⁸. Others had different reasons to be opposed; as the cruelty of the American army went on, many of its Irish soldiers, migrants and sons of migrants who identified with the catholic Mexicans, deserted. Some joined the other side of the fight, forming the San Patricio Battalion⁹. Worst reasons for opposition could be

5. Weber, David J, *Foreigners in Their Native Land: Historical Roots of the Mexican Americans*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1973), p. 132

6. Green, Thomas Jefferson, quoted in Montejano, David. “Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987) p.18

7. Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*, p. 24

8. Montejano, *Anglos and Americans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*, p. 40

9. Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, p.49

found, as demonstrated by South Carolina Senator John C. Calhoun. He had widely supported expansion, but when given the floor in 1848, justified not absorbing the Mexican population because “[we] could not incorporate into our Union any but the Caucasian race- the free white race”. In his argument, he also adds that these peoples could not be treated as equal because accepting Indians and Blacks “incapable of self-governing” was the exact mistake of the Spaniards in Mexico¹⁰. And so, to end this bloody war in a way that satisfied Polk, expansionists, and white supremacists, came the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Written by both U.S. and Mexican diplomats in a crucial moment when the Republic of Mexico was being held hostage by American forces, the Treaty is regarded as the first and most important accord between the United States and its neighbor south of the Rio Grande (among other things, it establishes the river as the official border between the two nations). Our focus here, however, is on articles XIII, IX, and XI (Article X, which explicitly stated the protection of Mexican land grants, was excluded by Congress on recommendation of President Polk¹¹). These articles were, and still are, the guarantors of Mexican rights in the United States. Together, they entitled the estimated 75,000 Mexicans in the conquered territories with the same rights and legal protections of the white American citizens. This included the choice of becoming a citizen of the United States or remaining as citizens of Mexico, to be communicated to the new government within the period of one year after ratification. It also delegated to the U.S. government the obligation to deal with the indigenous peoples living in the land anyway they wished, as long as they did not harm Mexico or its citizens¹². As we will see, the rights promised by the treaty would not be fulfilled, and Mexicans would become second-class citizens, at best. “At worst”, wrote Weber 120

10. Senator Calhoun, speaking on January 4, 1848, 30th Cong., 1st sess., Congressional Globe 7, pp. 98-99

11. Castillo, Richard Griswold, *Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo: A Legacy of Conflict*, (University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), p. 44

12. "Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (peace, friendship, boundaries and claims)," *Treaties and Other International Acts of the United States of America* (Miller) 5 (1848): 207-406

years later, “they became victims of racial and ethnic prejudice without the political power” to do anything about it. Only in New Mexico the native population was a majority, and thus had the necessary numbers to, at least, be heard¹³.

A New Society

And so, for the last half of the 19th century, the economic, political, and social powers of Mexicans living in what was now the American Southwest gradually eroded. Most Mexicans could not assimilate into Anglo-American culture because of the whites’ prejudice against their traditions, religion, and skin color. Only the light-skinned Spaniard elite could try to do so with different degrees of success. They had been “preserving” their whiteness by inter-marrying, as to racially justify their social superiority within Mexico.

It is not a stretch to hypothesize that the constant flow of Mexicans coming through the border on the following decades was the main responsible for the continuation of Mexican culture in the area¹⁴. These migrants were not only bearers of their culture within the U.S., but active agents of American history, as exemplified by the many Mexican-born individuals who served on both sides of the Civil War.

Nevertheless, they would not have their citizenship recognized for years and even decades to come. In some States, it would take until the 20th century. Losing the conflict only deepened racism in the bitter South, where Mexicans now had to compete with freed blacks for work. In more than one occasion, Blacks would blame Mexicans for low wages, and not the great growers who drove down both group’s payments. To encourage tensions between these two ethnicities, the Federal Government would station black regiments in Southern areas

13. Weber, David J, *Foreigners in Their Native Land*, pp. 140-143

14. Weber, David J, *Foreigners in Their Native Land*, pp. 204-205

of Mexican majority during Reconstruction¹⁵. Of course, different States and territories had different social constructions, and Texas and California in special were completely different from the other conquests.

The Texas Land Rush

There was no “gold rush” in Texas as in California, but instead a land rush that, enhanced by the chaos of war, quickly overwhelmed the Mexican settlements. Even though the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo clearly specified protections to Mexican persons and property, Texans still had to deal with the matter of hate and prejudice created by two bloody conflicts in a ten year period.¹⁶ The first issue that arose just after peace was achieved was whether to let Mexicans vote. In Texas, the fear of being overwhelmed by the Mexicans made so that every county had the option to decide by itself, and in the ones where Mexicans indeed had their political rights enforced, a patronage system developed. *Patrons* (bosses) dictated how the Mexicans working under them would vote, thus “legitimizing” their ballots¹⁷. What followed, then, was dispossession: using of intimidation, fraud, and many times the very legal system that was supposed to be guaranteeing Mexican property rights, Texans and other Anglo settlers quickly took over the *Rancheros*’ (farmers) lands. Now regarded as “heroes” on Texas Anglo mythology, the Texas Rangers played a crucial role on dispossession, and were seen as bandits and villains by Texas’ Mexican population. After the Civil War, some Mexicans started to refer to them as their region’s Ku Klux Klan¹⁸. Available court records and the many accounts from white “pioneers” make it clear that illegal dispossession was taking place on a daily basis. By the

15. Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, p. 69

16. Montejano, *Anglos and Americans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*, pp. 24-25

17. Montejano, *Anglos and Americans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*, pp. 39-40

18. Weber, David J, *Foreigners in Their Native Land*, p. 187

1880s, after the “barbered-wire” enclosure movement displaced the landless cattlemen by privatizing public lands, the Mexican cheaper labor started to gradually substitute the now mythical figure of the Anglo cowboy. Many of these *vaqueros* and *pastores* hired by the new large landowners were the Mexican *Rancharos* and their descendants that had been displaced by the White American farmers¹⁹. Entries on the diary of the English Lady Mary Jaques, who spent two years at a Central-Texas ranch during the 1880s, show just how crucial race was for the Texan society. “[the Mexican] seems to be the Texans’ natural enemy; he is treated like a dog, or, perhaps not so well”. She writes that it was difficult for her to convince Texans that the Mexicans were people, and the fact that even the “educated Englishmen who had settled in Texas” assimilated so well into this racist hierarchy specially upset her²⁰.

As stated before, with the Civil War (and later the 13th and 14th amendments) also came competition between Mexicans and freed blacks for work on the changing economy of Texas. Most great farmers elsewhere preferred “Negro labor” than Mexican, for, they said, the Hispanics were “not found of work”. But the abundance of Mexican hands and the (illegal) *Peónage* system made it attractive for these farmers to hire *Chicanos*, a pejorative name for working-class Mexicans. In fact, farmers insisted that the reason for their need of Mexican labor was exactly what made them inferior: they were easily handled, ate less, and were more submissive²¹. An interesting case of Mexican resistance defying this image of submission and passivity during this period was the Cortina Wars of 1859 and 1861, named after *Ranchero* Juan Nepomuceno Cortina and his band of rioters. While trying to protect one of his employees, Cortina shot a Sheriff

19. Montejano, *Anglos and Americans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*, pp. 51-52; 90-91; 80-81

20. Jaques, Mary J., *Texan Ranch Life*, (reprinted by Texas A&M University Press, 1989), pp.361-362

21. Montejano, *Anglos and Americans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*, pp. 77-79; 199

of the city of Brownsville, and thereafter, unwantedly became a revolutionary. He gathered around him a group of disposed *rancheros* and other Mexicans angered by American rule, and together they captured and held Brownsville for six months before been put down by the American Army and the Texas Rangers²².

Miners and Politicians

In California, a very different scenario developed. Acting as mediators between the conquerors and the conquered, the Mexican white elite of *Californios* helped controlling the masses, and were important in giving the illusion of democracy. On the California Constitutional Convention of 1849, eight out of forty-eight delegates were *Californios*. Voting together as a bloc, they could have secured more rights and protections to Native Mexicans and Indians, but thinking that their high status would be maintained on this new society, they preferred to vote only in self-interest. A couple of years later, the U.S. Congress would pass laws incentivizing squatters to challenge Spanish and Mexican land grants, and in clear violation of Guadalupe Hidalgo, approved the 1851 California Land Act²³. The Convention also sought to disrespect Article IX of the Treaty by extending voting rights to “every white, male citizen of Mexico who shall have elected to become a citizen of the United States”, thus reducing the rights of those who had “black or Indian blood”. The Indian populations, having enjoyed full citizenship in Mexico, were not granted the rights specified in the Treaty. In only twenty years of American rule, their population declined by more than 100,000. Indians had become fair game for slavery, murder, theft, and starvation²⁴.

During the Californian Gold Rush, xenophobia and Nativism (consequences of both racism and war time resentments) resulted in

22. Montejano, *Anglos and Americans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*, pp. 32-33

23. Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, p.68; 136-138

24. Castillo, *Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo: A Legacy of Conflict*, pp. 66-69

violence between Anglos and all foreigners, but specially Mexicans. Vigilantism, lynching, and other harassments of “aliens” caused diplomatic protests from several countries against the U.S., including Mexico. In 1849 the military Governor of California announced the “trespass” orders, prohibiting non-citizens of mining activity in public property. Many reports of stabbings, extortions, and lynching (evident in memoirs of the time) obliged the government to issue passes for Spanish-speaking citizens, asserting their right to mine, but these were normally disregarded by whites. Only after the 1870 case of *People vs. de la Guerra* the status of non-white Mexican citizens was (legally) resolved. Pablo de la Guerra, a *Californio* landholder and signer of the California Constitution, ran for district judge in 1869. Elected, his office was challenged by political opponents, arguing that he and other *Californios* did not have the right to hold office. Besides, Congress had not yet conceded official citizenship to them (note that this case happened 21 years after the signature of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo). The California Supreme Court ruled in favor of de la Guerra, finally settling the issue and making citizenship official²⁵. De la Guerra was whiter than most Mexicans, and many others would be, for example, prohibited from testifying against whites under Section 394 of the Civil Practice Act of 1850, which among other things prohibited Indians from testifying. Whenever they pleased, courts would invoke this article to justify preventing Mexicans “of Indian blood lineage” to speak in court²⁶.

The Supreme Court decision was in practice ineffective to most part of California’s Mexicans, who still had to cope with racism and challenges to their rights daily. Antonio Franco Coronel narrated what is a rare account of a victim of the racist lack of justice in the mines on his memoirs, published in 1877. In one of the passages, he narrates how, on a Sunday morning, signs appeared throughout the

25. Castillo, *Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo: A Legacy of Conflict*, pp. 67-68

26. Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, p. 139

Los Pinos mining region and several other places. They warned all who were not Americans to leave within 24 hours, and were supported by what Coronel described as “a gathering of armed men”. After some days of tension, two men who worked with him, a Spaniard and a Frenchman, were seized and accused by white miners of robbery. Coronel and his group of migrants gathered 5 pounds of gold (one more than what the men had accused them of stealing) and, vouching for their friend’s honesty, offered to bail them out. The Anglos took the money and then proceeded to hang the men in front of him. The next day, they all gathered their belongings and moved north²⁷.

From Occupation to Segregation

The other territories would only become fully recognized states much later, as it was the case when Arizona was carved out of the New Mexico territory in 1863. New Mexico itself, the only conquest of the Mexican-American War where Mexicans were the majority of the population, would only become a State in 1912. Because of that, its inhabitants had even less rights and no official citizenship. Following the precedent of the Northwest Ordinances of 1787 and the Wisconsin Organic Act of 1836, Congress conceived them as a “dependent people” not entitled to political participation²⁸.

Mexican American resistance in the site has been greatly undermined, but was present from the beginning. Because of movements like the Taos Rebellion, composed of disaffected Mexicans and Pueblo Indians, or the many guerrilla actions taken by the New Mexico population just after the end of the War, military occupation of the Taos was indispensable until 1851, when these were finally suppressed²⁹. In Nevada, groups like the *Gorras Blancas* (not to be confused with

27. Coronel, Antonio Franco, *Cosas de California*, dictated to Thomas Savage for the Bancroft Library, 1877, pp. 176-184, as translated in Weber, “Foreigners in Their Native Land”

28. Castillo, *Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo: A Legacy of Conflict*, pp. 70-71

29. Weber, David J, *Foreigners in Their Native Land*, pp. 97-98

the Texan racist anti-Mexican group “White Caps”, as their name was translated on the original source) organized resistance to Anglo domination as late as 1890, when their program was nailed onto various buildings of the city of Las Vegas. The *Las Vegas Daily* edition of March 12, 1890, transcribed such program, named “*Nuestra Plataforma*”. It read: “Our purpose is to protect the rights and interests of the people in general and especially those of the helpless class”. They also vouched to watch the city for Anglo “land-grabbers” and unfair lawyers who abused their people, to fight the unjust and racist decisions of the judiciary, to fight for a democracy where they were truly represented, and claimed to be “1,500 strong and growing daily”³⁰.

The turn of the century would see the triumph of commercial Agriculture over cattle ranching in the entire Southwest, and thus the striking development of towns.

With urban centers also came the physical segregation of Whites, Blacks, and Mexicans. Anglo settlers who arrived as “pioneers” to these places organized in their own separate neighborhoods, and because of decades of prejudice and economic loss of the Mexican population, a new order was established. Anglos became bosses; American-born Mexicans became the intermediaries, the translators; and “foreign-born Mexicans” composed, together with Blacks, the bottom of the social hierarchy. An interesting development of the Mexican unofficial segregation happened in Arizona in 1904, when families from a mining Mexican community adopted 40 children from a catholic foster home in New York. When the Anglos in the region discovered that the children were blond, blue-eyed, white, and American-born, they revolted. According to *The Tucson Citizen* newspaper, a mob of 350 people organized by a group of Protestant women gathered to seize the younglings and beat up the priest, nuns, and nurses accompanying them. Lynching and feathering were demanded, but after police intervention, they were saved. The whites held the children for

30. “The White Caps”, *Las Vegas Daily Optic*, March 12, 1890

days, demanding that they were placed with families of “their own race” or sent back to whence they came.

As far as we know of the children’s destiny, some were hidden by their adoptive Mexican families, some returned to New York, and 19 remained to be placed in “American homes” by the revolting population³¹.

The physical segregation of Mexicans and Blacks was planned by whites and maintained through sales policies. Hospitals, schools, and even public events were built as to separate the “three races”, but it was the segregated residencies that made clear the social and economic gap between them. Even so, 23,991 Mexicans officially migrated to the U.S. between 1900 and 1909. On the following decade, 173,663 immigrants were registered, and during the 1920s more than 487,700 Mexicans are known to have crossed the border³². In Texas, to keep schools separated after white parents protested against integration, the Anglo authorities created Mexican-only schools. Their education had to be worse, for they had to be kept ignorant to continue providing cheap labor.

These schools were substandard, with inadequate supplies and poor facilities. The teachers were all Anglos, and many shared the belief in race superiority, turning a blind eye to the illegal money diversion to “American schools”. As of 1900, the U.S. controlled over 70% of Mexico’s export trade³³. Any labor shortages were met with recruitment programs of workers on the other side of the border, and labor surplus with breaches of contract, nonpayment, and shotgun settlements³⁴.

31. “Orphans and Foundlings at Clifton-Morenci: Forty Children Brought From New York and Divided Among Mexican Laborers Almost Cause a Riot”, *The Tucson Citizen*, October 5, 1904

32. Montejano, *Anglos and Americans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*, pp. 163-168

33. Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, pp. 77-78

34. Montejano, *Anglos and Americans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*, pp. 191-194; 214

At the same time, more and more Anglos were recruited by the U.S. government to settle in the southern border. They were amazed by the “retrograde” institutions and surviving Mexican culture, and saw themselves as modernizers. Throughout the 1900s they would end the patronage system, displace more Mexicans, and reinforce the social hierarchy, thus giving Chicanos more reasons to organize. As a result, during the First World War, many anti-Anglo movements arise, typically portrayed as bandit movements, and were responsible for the loss of millions of dollars in Anglo property. They stemmed from the so-called “*Plan de San Diego*”, which called for independence from “Yankee tyranny”, uprisings, the creation of a “Liberating Army for Races and People” (to be composed of Mexicans, Blacks, Japanese, and Indians), and the creation of an independent Republic consisting of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, and California. Inspired by the ongoing Mexican Revolution, various groups of 25-100 men engaged in guerrilla warfare (they were supposedly assisted by the Germans, U.S. enemies during WWI). Initially not given much attention by the white elite, the movement grew, provoking later reprisals and violence. Executions and lynching of Chicanos boomed, which in turn led to an “exodus” of Mexicans coming from the Southwest in fear to be killed by Rangers or mobs. When the American Government intervened on the Mexican Revolution by bombing Veracruz, incentivizing vigilantism in the border, and recognizing Venustiano Carranza’s government in Mexico, revolutionary Pancho Villa started to actively give support to the movement. After a \$100,000 manhunt for Villa in 1916-1917, the uprising was finally suppressed^{35,36}.

35. Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, p. 170

36. Montejano, *Anglos and Americans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*, pp. 117-125

Whose Freedom?

These revolts, at the time, overshadowed Mexican American participation on the Great War, a crucial point of assimilation for the Mexican community. Hundreds were drafted into the Army, and those who stayed behind actively participated in the war effort. Many died, and the Army's institutions would unjustly neglect those who were recognized by their peers for their acts of bravery and courage. That was the case of Marcelino Serna, who received awards for bravery from France, Italy, and Britain, but although named for the Congressional Medal of Honor, did not receive it. He couldn't either read or write in English, a pre-requisite for the award. Many other Chicano veterans would later complain that, after the war, they would not receive any disability benefits despite their injuries³⁷. These veterans would later play a major role on the revival of Mexican American pride in the movements organized in the 1920s and 1930s, despite Anglo attempts to defame them. In 1920, for instance, historian Justin H. Smith was awarded the Pulitzer prize for his book "The War with Mexico", where he blames the conflict entirely on Mexicans' inability to "fathom our good will, sincerity, patriotism, resoluteness, and courage". In his eyes, Mexicans crossed by the border should be grateful for the opportunity to join "American democracy". It is clear today that real reason why he got the prize was Smith's ability to ease the American consciousness about the war.

The Greatest Depression

After the 1921 economic crisis, more than 150,000 Mexicans were repatriated.

As jobs lacked, Mexicans were the first to be fired, and nativist action against them increased dramatically. "Starving Mexicans" were

37. Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, p. 175

portrayed by the media as a danger to cities, and authorities were literally dumping them across the border. Southwest farmers and American industry had recruited many of these expelled men and women to work for them on the pre-crisis years³⁸. Things would only get worse for the Chicano population on the following decade, when the Great Depression hit them harder than any other class. Mexican Americans had the most vulnerable jobs, were excluded from most white labor unions, and were rapidly replaced by Anglo workers who now accepted any jobs they could get. Employers used the pretext of “taking care of their own people” to displace Mexicans from the labor market. As always, Texas’ repatriation program was harsher than any other State. Authorities often didn’t even let the deportees sell their property or collect wages before taking them out of the country. 60% of Austin’s Mexicans were out of the United States by January of 1931. As a response, Mexican Unions appeared, together with an outgrowth of the YMCA’s Older Boys Conference of 1934 named the “Mexican American Movement”. The MAM started to sponsor annual “Mexican Youth Congresses”, and by 1938 it had its own newspaper, *The Mexican Voice*. Its mission was to promote Chicano leadership in education, social work, business, and other areas. Later, during the 60s, the MAM would be widely criticized by its “Americanizing” message. Segregation of schools and public spaces was a major issue for this early political movement, and boycotts were the most widespread means of fight³⁹.

Fighting in Three Fronts

The main development brought by the 40s was the Second World War, and Chicano teenagers and young adults (most between 17 and 21) were again called forth to fight. This was a generation looking for

38. Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, p. 44; 202

39. Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, pp. 202-235

belonging, and enlisting to fight for the U.S. seemed like the best way to be recognized as Americans. Mexican Americans in both the Atlantic and the Pacific were treated the same way as their fathers a generation earlier in the trenches. Seen as inferior by their peers, they had to endure racism daily and within their own units. Even though they were proportionally the largest minority fighting in the war, Mexican Americans were mostly erased from the war memory on the following decades.

As war waged in Europe and the Pacific, anti-alien sentiments deepened, just like during every conflict the U.S. had been involved before. With the Japanese- descendent population removed to concentration camps in the West Coast, Mexicans became the perfect scapegoat at the Homefront. In 1943, for example, “sailor riots” took place in L.A., where marines and sailors invaded Mexican *barrios* and Black ghettos.

They assaulted people, especially zoot-suitors, and gathered in mobs to gang up on the neighborhood’s youth. At one point, a mob of military and civilians came down Broadway committing several acts of violence against Mexicans, Filipinos, and Blacks. The L.A. Police took the aggressors’ side by arresting more than 600 Mexican youths in a “preventive” action, and the riot was only controlled after the Military Command intervened. On the following decades, Mexican youth was always portrayed as criminals, and violence, especially police violence against individual Mexican teenagers, skyrocketed. The 50s Red Scare made it difficult for any type of protests coming from unionists, for they were always in danger to be detained as communists or persecuted under McCarthyism; Mexican men and women earned an average 69.5% and 34%, respectively, of the salaries of their Anglo counterparts. After the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, Mexicans were the largest group in favor of integration (77%)⁴⁰.

40. Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, pp. 246-259; 283-284

Reclaiming Their Civil Rights

It was during the 60s that the Mexican American political and Civil Rights movement really flourished. One of the founding figures of the movement was Reies Lopez Tijerina, a Texan preacher who, in the early 60s, organized rural Hispanos of New Mexico to claim for reversals in violations of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. He formed the *Alianza Federal de Mercedes Libres* to organize and acquaint the heirs to the land grants covered by the Treaty. It became the catalyst to a number of Chicano actions⁴¹.

Young Blood, Old Grievances

The real strength of the 60s counter-culture movements, however, was the youth; together with other baby boomers, the Latino population grew 51% between 1950 and 1960. Their education level and average income was still much lower than either whites or blacks, but that did not prevent them from joining in when the black Civil Rights movement began. Chicanos had already organized politically on the *Viva Kennedy* committees to elect the Democratic candidate on the 1960 elections, and did it once again to help Johnson in 64. They worked closely with the newly created Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to put forward Johnson's War on Poverty plan. Of course, with the Cold War and the Vietnam War ongoing, the United States had difficulties fighting in three fronts at once, and the program was soon emptied, but its lasting effects included the development of political consciousness among Chicanos.

And then came César Chávez and Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales. First, Chávez and his farmers "gave Chicanos a cause, a symbol, and a national space" to voice their claims in the Civil Rights movement.

41. Castillo, *Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo: A Legacy of Conflict*, p. 132

Following the examples of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, he organized farm workers for civil disobedience acts and strikes in the Delano area of San Joaquín Valley. Then, they formed the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA). Soon, they grew out of California and gathered affiliated organizations, such as the Texan Independent Workers Association (IWA)⁴². The NFWA used culturally recognizable symbols, like the Aztec Eagle, which were simple enough to be widely reproduced by workers while also bearing a cultural weight and symbolic identification⁴³. Gonzales, or Corky, as he was known during his fighting days as a professional boxer, was the author of “I Am Joaquín”, where he synthesized the many aspects of Chicano history into one, linear narrative. The poem is about a young Chicano tracing his lineage through the long history of revolutionaries and bandits, emphasizing the endurance and resistance under American rule, and bringing together the stories of the many Chicano communities nationwide⁴⁴.

When the many different groups started to come together in the late 60s as one single movement, this new generation of Mexican Americans sought to redefine their position in American society. They started to call themselves “Chicanos”, a previously derogatory term used to describe working class Mexican immigrants, and resurrected the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in protest against its fails, to show the world how their ancestor had been neglected⁴⁵. Their banners became the American and Mexican flags, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and messages like “*Viva la Causa*”. The Southwest coalition was soon joined by the Midwest and the Pacific Northwest, so that by 1968 Spanish newspapers and radio programs were airing nationwide. At the time, only 2% of college students were Latinos, and it was only by the second half of that year that Chicanos began to enroll in signifi-

42. Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, pp. 296-307

43. Bebout, Lee, *Mythohistorical Interventions: The Chicano Movement and Its Legacies*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011) pp. 49-50

44. Bebout, *Mythohistorical Interventions: The Chicano Movement and Its Legacies*, p. 59

45. Castillo, *Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo: A Legacy of Conflict*, p. 131-132

cant numbers. These were the adolescents who challenged the tactics of the old-guard Mexican American Organizations.

Angel Gutiérrez's MAYO (Mexican American Youth Organization) appeared to join students and unionists, and in California MASA's (Mexican American Students Organization) and UMAS' (United Mexican American Students) branches spread out into campuses, joining the Black movements. Education, access to universities, Mexican American studies programs, and end of the Vietnam War were all major issues for these groups. Other organizations, such as David Sánchez's Brown Berets, led demonstrations in L.A. against police violence that ended up in Sánchez's arrest. In March of 1969, walkouts were organized by high school students as well, spearheaded by secondary teacher Sal Castro. 10,000 Chicano students walked out of five L.A. high schools in support of Castro, who was being unjustly treated as an agitator in the school system. Their demands included the removal of racist teachers and changes on the implemented curriculum that obscured Chicano culture and programmed minority students for low-skilled jobs. The Berets were called upon to participate as security for the teenagers, and were used by the L.A. police as pretext to beat and brutally suppress the students. The Los Angeles walkouts inspired others around the country: in Denver 25 demonstrators were arrested, and in Texas more than 50 separated walkouts occurred, mainly instigated by MAYO. Castro would later be indicted by the Los Angeles Grand Jury on charges that included conspiracy to commit misdemeanor, and was only declared innocent 2 years later⁴⁶.

Myth and History

On the same month of the walkouts, college students from all over the Southwest and Midwest met in Denver for the First National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference, where *El Plan Espiritual de*

46. Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, pp. 308-314

Aztlán was adopted as the movement's official platform. They settled the goals of nationalism and self-determination of the Chicano youth and agreed to meet again later that year in Santa Barbara. There, the many groups were brought under the umbrella of what was called MeChA- *El Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán*⁴⁷. *El Plan* was at the same time a document of solidarity and a declaration of Independency. By tracing a direct line between Mexican Americans and pre-Columbian peoples, and placing the Azteca homeland of *Aztlán* in the conquered territories of the American Southwest, it essentially legitimized the Chicano call for independency, and helped to create a common identity of "us" vs. "the invaders". It honors their Indigenous heritage and condemns the efforts of the Mexican elite to pass for Europeans, while also conciliating the heterogeneous movement of students, politicians, unionist, and farmers. It created a spiritual ground for their struggle, a proud cultural heritage to be used as a weapon against the Anglo "melting-pot" narrative, inverting the role of perpetual foreigners by asserting that they were the original people of that land. The revival of *Aztlán* was also a protest against the European dismissal of indigenous systems of record-keeping, used to ascribe to the conquered populations the label of "peoples without history"⁴⁸. An interesting contradiction of the movement was the external usage of Guadalupe Hidalgo as a legal basis for land claims and civil rights, while, within MeChA, completely dismissing it as an illegal U.S. appropriation of the territory of the imagined nation of *Aztlán*

When Racism Ceases to be Polite

Unfortunately, the 70s and 80s would see the decline of the Chi-

47. Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, pp. 320

48. Bebout, *Mythohistorical Interventions: The Chicano Movement and Its Legacies*, pp. 11-15; 18

cano movement and organizations, reverting many of the 60s victories of the community. The 1970s crisis once again devastated the economy, and unemployment exploded, while the media worked against the legitimation of the Chicano youth⁴⁹. White supremacy, however, did not just disappear when the Civil Rights Act was enacted, but now being an outspoken racist had seized to be socially acceptable. This was true both within the government and society at large.

The 1960s War on Poverty program was completely dismantled and replaced by the War on Drugs, a program designed to incarcerate minorities and use heavy felony charges on Mexican and Black teenagers to obtain lesser felony convictions through plea. Soon, they were again deprived of their recently acquired political rights. An example of this was the 1969 trial of a 17-year-old Mexican boy in San Jose, California. He was accused of incest and then condemned by San Jose Supreme Court Judge Gerald S. Chargin. The Judge finished his verdict by proclaiming from the bench: “you are lower than animals and haven’t the right to live in organized society- just miserable, lousy, rotten people... Maybe Hitler was right. The animals in our society probably ought to be destroyed because they have no right to live among human beings”⁵⁰.

Conclusion

From post 1848 resistance to the World Wars, from the MAM to MeCha, the history of Mexican Americans is a history of struggle, fighting as they could, and trying to assert their forfeited right to citizenship and equality. Guadalupe Hidalgo was a failure, and the end of the 1960s revolutionary era seemed like it would also be. In 1970,

49. Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, p. 337

50. Salazar, Ruben, “State Calls for Probe of Judge in Latin Slurs”, *The Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 1969

Corky Gonzalez formed the RUP (*La Raza Unida* Party) and ran many candidates without much success. The movement had lost its momentum. It all worsened when, after the oil crisis, nativist and nationalist politicians used immigration as scapegoat once again. Together with the long-term developments of the War on Drugs, the country finally came full-circle from the 19th century: whites were again stereotyping Mexicans as criminals to justify violent police and military action against them. Several laws against undocumented workers were passed in the period, sold by the media as a solution to poverty, criminality, and the lack of jobs⁵¹. But, as bad as the situation was looking, it wasn't all in vain. Thanks to the bravery of those 60s students who defied long-standing stereotypes and joined other historically oppressed groups on the push for rights, respect, and a better education, an educated Mexican American middle-class was allowed to develop. It had different interests from the working-class, and ended up adopting much of the criticized Americanizing ideology of the MAM in the 1930s, but it was nonetheless the result of generations of armed resistance and peaceful revindications. Thanks to them, the history of the earlier generations was not forgotten, allowing for the Chicano movement to be revived in the future. By picking up from where their parents and grandparents left off, a new generation of Mexican American scholars, politicians, unionists, and civil leaders in the 1990s and 2000s was able to renew old institutions and, looking to the 21st century, build upon two hundred years of Chicano history.

51. Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, pp. 338-350

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