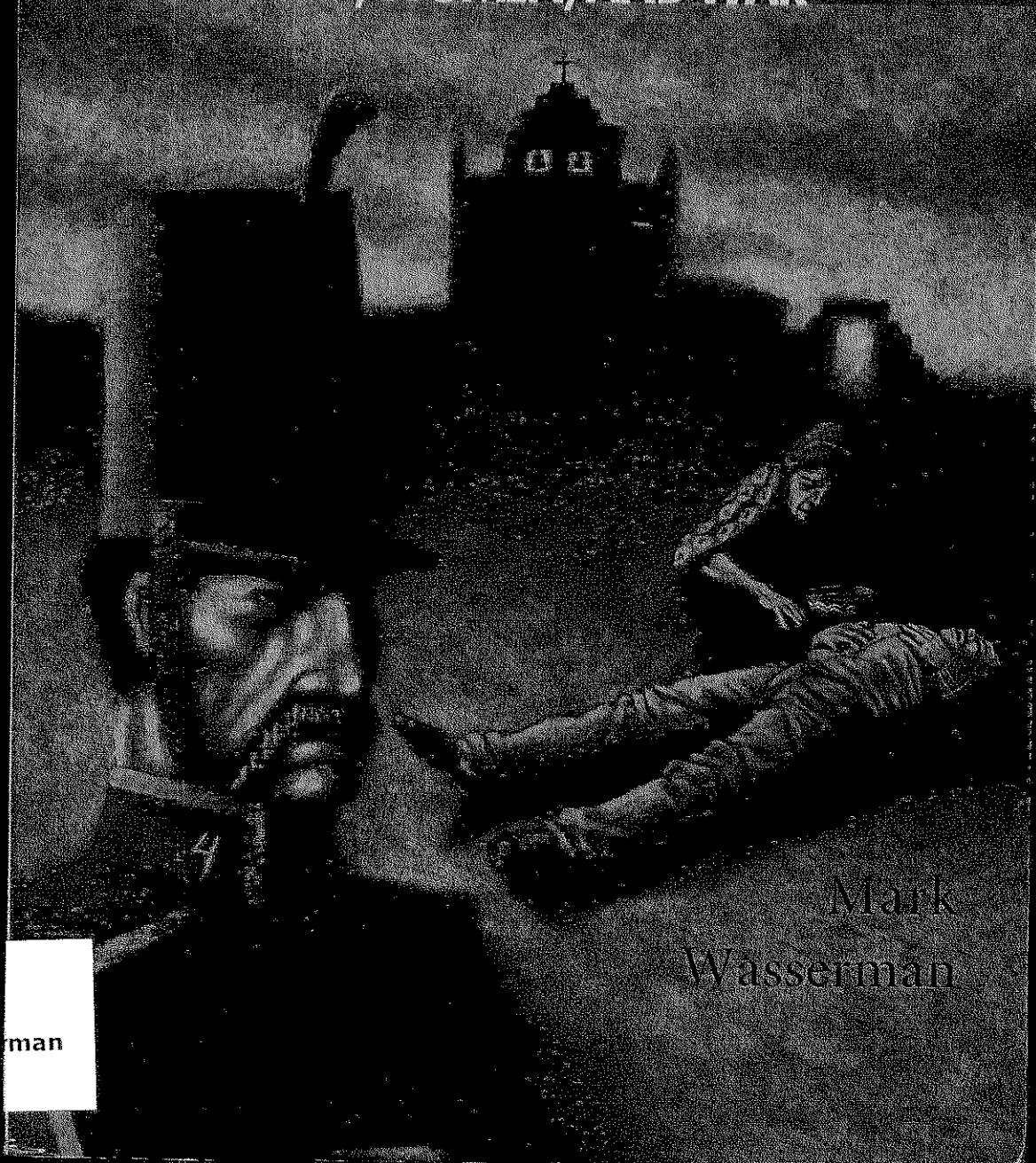


EVERYDAY LIFE AND POLITICS IN NINETEENTH CENTURY MEXICO

MEN, WOMEN, AND WAR



Mark
Wasserman

man

Soldiers

Although on paper Mexico had a large number of men under arms at the outbreak of war with the United States—almost 20,000 permanent troops, scattered in garrisons all over the country, and slightly more than 10,000 active militia reserves attached to regional commands—the dismal reality was quite different. There were far too many officers and far too few soldiers. When war came, the government had to raise a large number of troops quickly. Panicked officers could not pick and choose from the population. Conscripted men filled the ranks, but of necessity took unwilling men.

The soldier's life was not a comfortable or happy one. Most important, there was no time to train the new soldiers. Poorly trained troops were more likely to desert or to panic in battle. Conditions experienced by the common soldier were generally abominable. In 1835 a soldier's pay was approximately 20 pesos a month, with deductions for laundry, barber, shoes, and assorted other expenses, if the government paid him at all. Armies fight on their bellies, but for Mexican forces supplies were hard to come by. Mexican soldiers often had to live off the land. Most civilians were uncooperative when it came time to provision the army. Most country people had little to spare after providing for their own families and the government commonly paid them in worthless currency for their produce. Hungry troops deserted or mutinied. Arms and equipment were outdated; weapons were usually British army discards. Mexican artillery was no match for the North Americans'.

The lack of equipment was also a cause for dismay. For example, Mexico City's Matamoros battalion, a militia unit comprised of 500 men, in November 1846 had only 90 usable rifles and an estimated 300 others that were irreparable. By late December one commander complained that his troops still had not enough uniforms three months after they had organized. His men had "a frock coat and skintight pants, and they lacked a shirt, a short cape, and a blanket; in sum, the clothes were useless and infested with lice."

The soldiers were further disadvantaged by poor leadership. The general staff was not trained to undertake large-scale military operations. One report on the Mexican army criticized the "prodigality of ranks and decorations conferred on a multitude that does not know how to lead . . . [A]s a result of this disorder, well-trained and punctilious officers have retired. . . ." Officers commonly mistreated their subordinates.

An incident at the Battle of Churubusco in late August 1847 is telling. After a long bloody struggle, during which both sides suffered heavy losses (the United States experienced many more casualties than the Mexicans), a North American officer inquired of the Mexican commander: "General, where is your ammunition park?" The general replied, "If I had ammunition, you would not be here."

Discipline was lenient. Saluting individuals, for example, was not required until 1847. On the other hand, there were specific regulations for the spacing between soldiers and the pace of march during battles. Officers often ignored crucial regulations. In an especially egregious case, at San Jacinto in 1836 commanders failed to post the required sentries.

Despite all their disadvantages, Mexican soldiers fought well. There were notable examples of bravery and endurance. Though on average barely over five feet tall, the Mexican soldier had extraordinary stamina and resilience and was capable of exceptional bravery. Lieutenant William S. Henry described them:

The infantry were miserably clad, brawny, thick-set fellows, chiefly shod with sandals; one regiment of Lancers were as fine looking men as I ever saw. Their horses were inferior animals. . . .

In September 1846, U.S. forces attempted to capture Monterrey, Nuevo León. In an engagement at a fortress known as the Citadel, Mexican troops inflicted terrible casualties on the invaders, who lost ten percent of their force. Hand-to-hand street fighting in the city ensued, accompanied by vicious artillery barrages and heavy civilian casualties. Nonetheless, the Citadel held. Mexican troops were still attacking when their commander offered surrender. The armistice allowed evacuation of the fort on the most honorable terms. The Mexicans left with "their flags held high, giving the appearance of a victory parade." Before the battle of Angostura in February 1847, Mexicans marched forty-eight miles and plunged into battle without rest. They captured an important ridge the first day and kept it without camp fires through the night, protecting their powder from the pouring rain with their bodies. The next day they took additional hills and broke through North American positions all over the field. Despite their accomplishments, their commanders ordered them to withdraw ten miles, abandoning their wounded. The soldiers clamored to attack again, but their officers ordered retreat instead.

Armies on both sides marched with considerable numbers of women, who formed supply and medical auxiliaries. They also suffered casualties. More than 1,500 women and children went with Santa Anna on his Texas campaign. Only 300 survived. The rest died from starvation, thirst, and exposure. Generally, without the women soldiers would have either deserted or died of hunger. Women served foreign soldiers as well as Mexican. They traveled with the U.S. Army, and they often nursed both sides in battle. One U.S. soldier described these women as follows:

The woman of sixty or more years — the mother with her infant wrapped in her rebozo — the wife . . . the youthful señorita frisking along with her lover's sombrero upon her head; even to the prattling girl who had followed padre and madre to the wars. . . . In addition to their bedding and wearing apparel, they pack upon their backs the food and utensils to cook it in, and worn out as they are by the toils of the day, while their husband or lover sleeps, they prepare his repast.

It was not just the enlisted men who had an entourage. Lieutenant Henry noted that

The streets were filled with followers of the army, mounted on everything from a decent mustang to a humble, uncomplaining donkey. Some of the officers' wives, picturesquely wrapped in their gay-colored ponchos, were slowly riding after their chivalric husbands.

Although women's greatest impact was in providing medical care and supplies, there were some who fought as soldiers. Their heroism was widely admired.

For all soldiers, the horror of war was immense. A North American soldier described the aftermath of one battle:

[It was] such a sight as I had never seen before, and which I would have been satisfied never to see again. The ground was covered with gore from the wounds of the dying and dead. . . . The sight was horrible. . . . Some had a leg, a foot, an arm or hand mangled to pieces and were lying upon the cold, muddy ground, shivering with cold, begging . . . [a] drink of water.

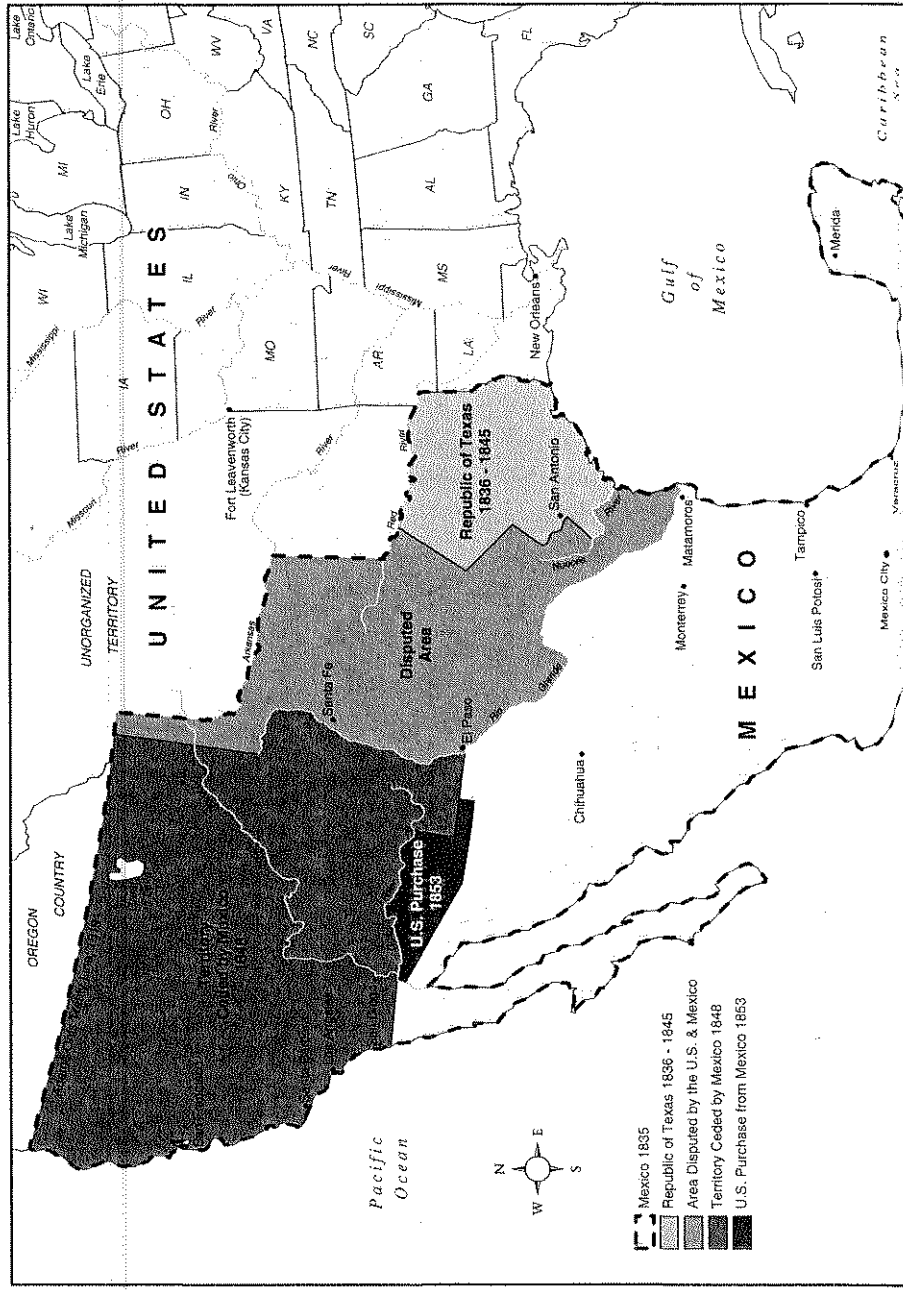
On both sides to be wounded meant death. The weapons used inflicted terrible wounds and there were no medicines to prevent or treat infection. Hospitals were unsanitary. Since there was no anesthesia, treatment brought brutal pain.

The Cost of War

The cost of the war was enormous. The United States lost more than 12,000 dead, eighty-seven percent of whom died from disease and exposure, the highest cumulative mortality rate of any war fought by the United States. Thousands more were badly wounded. The cost to the nation was US\$100 million. Mexico's casualties, though difficult to calculate accurately, were probably heavier in combat, but lower from disease. Perhaps 10,000 Mexicans died in the war, with 4,000 to 5,000 of the total killed in battle. Countless more civilians perished. The economic damage to Mexico was immense.

Civilians in many regions paid a high price for the war in several different ways. There were, of course, direct damages and disruptions, which extracted the heaviest toll. There were also forced loans and taxes levied by both the Mexican and U.S. armies. The worst damage occurred during the siege and bombardment of Veracruz in March 1847. Many buildings fell on their occupants and others were burned out. The bombardment was horrible. Shells flew in day and night. Only because the town was mostly masonry prevented it from being burned down in its entirety. One U.S. officer recounted: "I shall never forget the horrible fire of our mortars. . . ." There was no safe place for the wounded. Errant shells crashed into churches, where hospitals were es-

Map 2. Mexican Territorial Losses from 1836 to 1853



tablished. The yells and screams of the victims were heard above the din by the attackers.

Needless to say, Veracruzanos were not the only victims. Mariano Riva Palacio related in his memoirs that in Chalco “all the villages and haciendas have suffered great destruction at the hands of the malicious” northeamericanos. He claimed that in Chalco the northeamericanos had gone so far as to rob the little chapels of their sacred vessels and images. The invaders had left “fixed signs of the barbarity by burning the doors.” Near Saltillo, Coahuila, the main house of the Hacienda Aguanueva, owned by the wealthy Sánchez Navarro family, was burned by retreating North American troops just before the battle of Buena Vista and required extensive repairs.

As in all wars, civilians were tragically caught in the middle. The invading North Americans inflicted considerable damage during their occupation of Mexican territories. In the early days of the war the U.S. army reported that its “wild volunteers . . . committed . . . all sorts of atrocities on the persons and property of Mexicans.” The situation grew serious enough that in February 1847, General Winfield Scott had to establish military courts for crimes committed by North Americans against Mexican civilians. It took the examples of public whipping and a hanging to restore good behavior.

In the combat areas civilians were constantly in danger. Mexican guerrillas in the northeast, for example, burned down the haciendas of owners who refused to aid them. The North Americans, in turn, burned haciendas whose owners cooperated with the guerrillas. Many landowners, consequently, had to abandon their properties. As one traveler in the northeast observed, “[A]ll the haciendas are blackened shells, . . . abandoned by their residents.”

Sometimes the war required the government to take drastic steps. In October 1846, the governor of San Luis Potosí ordered all Church properties, schools, and government buildings turned into hospitals and barracks for Santa Anna’s army. Wealthy families had to furnish livestock, provisions, and shelter in addition to subscribing to forced loans. Everyone suffered as the city grew very crowded with refugees from other regions fleeing the North Americans.

On at least one occasion, civilians refused to endure unnecessary hardship. After the Mexican army retreated from its defeat at the siege of Monterrey, the inhabitants of Saltillo would not allow General Pedro de Ampudia to take a stand there, reasoning that if he had lost Monterrey, he had no hope of defending Saltillo. He concurred and retreated further.

The U.S. occupation also had its costs for the Mexican people. After the capture of Mexico City, North American commanders demanded war taxes of 3 million pesos from the states, of which 400,000 pesos were to come specifically from the capital and the Valley of Mexico. At the same time, in Mexico City Yankee troops occupied barracks, convents, hospitals, and schools; officers were accommodated in hotels, inns, and private homes. In some instances, they were guests and paid rent, in others they shared dwellings with Mexicans, and in some cases they lived in houses abandoned by owners who had fled the city.

Because spontaneous riots and stone throwing erupted and there were continuous rumors of uprisings in the barrios, the worried, undermanned North Americans staged public punishments, such as lashings, in the Zocalo. Far from curtailing popular civil disobedience, these measures aroused protests; the main plaza, where these spectacles occurred, was full of hundreds of lower-class Mexicans, who resisted when ordered to disperse and threw stones at the soldiers.

As in all wars, some civilians profited substantially. Business relations, however, did not mean Mexicans and North Americans lived harmoniously. The invaders, out of necessity, contracted locally for food and supplies. In 1846, for example, they purchased 1,000 mules at a cost of US\$15,000. The camps themselves were often open to peddlers and food vendors. Mexicans sold the U.S. troops alcohol and took their money in gambling. More than a few of the *norteamericanos* sought the company of Mexican women. Business dealings often gave rise to mistrust. The racism of North American soldiers also affected relations.

The price of Mexico's defeat was, perhaps, as great politically and psychologically as the impact of the wars of Independence. The traumatic loss of the northern half of the nation caused a wide reevaluation of Mexican politics. That reevaluation would in turn lead to a devastating decade-long civil war. It is to this second tragedy that we turn next in chapter 5.