
RESEÑAS DE LIBROS / BOOK REVIEWS

CAROLYNE R. LARSON (ED.), *The Conquest of the Desert: Argentina's Indigenous Peoples and the Battle for History*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2020.

The so-called “Conquest of the Desert,” in which Argentine military forces successfully invaded the lands held by Indigenous peoples in the Pampas and Patagonia regions of the southern cone of South America between 1878 and 1885, is an event that has not received sufficient scholarly attention, especially in the English language. This collection of essays is a wonderful addition to the literature and explores both the military actions as well as their aftermath from various perspectives, including that of the Indigenous peoples.

The book consists of nine essays by some of the top scholars on this topic, plus an introduction by the editor. Unlike many edited volumes, the essays fit together well and complement each other. In the first chapter, Carolyn Larson provides the overall context for how and why the invasion took place. The author summarizes the military actions over the course of the invasion and then highlights the attitudes of the Argentine leaders who advocated for these actions. She delves into the discourse of the Argentine leaders who justified this invasion by emphasizing the supposed savagery of the Indigenous peoples. The rhetoric included an appeal to nationalism, in which newspaper articles tried to show that the region had been taken over by “foreigners”—Araucanians who were *indios chilenos*. This, after all, was inimical to the “internal security” of the Argentine Republic, as if the land to be invaded belonged to the state.

The following chapter, by Julio Vezub and Mark Healey, is a bracing contrast to the previous one, as it delineates the perspective of the Mapuche and Tehuelche caciques. Based on correspondence between the Indigenous leaders, military reports, and ethnography, the essay describes the desperate measures that the leaders took to minimize the impact of the invasion. The authors show the complexity of the Indigenous response and how the Argentine invasion in fact took longer than most have thought. The authors argue that one of the reasons for the success was that the chiefs did not recognize the severity and the finality of the *huincas*' (whites) plans, assuming that this was just another attack in a back-and-forth that had been going on for centuries. In the end, the

interplay between negotiation and war that the Indigenous leaders attempted was insufficient to stop the taking of all of the land.

Chapter 3, by Robert Christensen, shows why the Argentine army was able to defeat the Indigenous peoples of the Pampas and Patagonia so easily from an environmental perspective. Christensen (who is my Ph.D. student at Georgetown) posits that a prolonged drought in the 1870s throughout the region created a subsistence crisis for the natives. In addition, smallpox devastated Indigenous populations just before the invasion, decimating the number of warriors who could fight, and weakening Indigenous society as a whole. To make matters worse, the initial years of the invasion coincided with increased precipitation, making it impossible for people to escape across rivers or over the Andes mountains while permitting Argentine warships to navigate far up the Rio Negro to assist in the invasion. The confluence of all of these environmental factors made possible the conclusive victory of Argentine forces.

Ricardo Salvatore discusses the lives of two caciques, Incacayel and Foyel, and their families, who after their capture spent the rest of their lives as prisoners at the Natural History Museum of La Plata. They were living specimens of the Indigenous peoples and their cultures on display to the museum's visitors. Salvatore analyzes how the Argentine social scientists thought about these peoples as part of an evolutionary scale that kept them from being recognized as fully human. Complementing the previous essay, Walter Delrio and Pilar Pérez in Chapter 5 show how the dictatorship helmed by Jorge Rafael Videla (1976-1981) used the centenary celebration of the Conquest of the Desert to justify its methods as a part of the fight against the "internal enemy" and glorify the military. In the following chapter, Jennie Daniel expresses how the concept of the desert is vital to understanding much of Argentine literature and thus contextualizes the Conquest through this trope. Using examples from well-known works from the early post-independence period, the period of the 1870s and 1880s, and the twentieth century, Daniel shows how strong the identification of the desert in Argentina has been as a liminal space that starkly evidences the inclusion and exclusion that people suffer in the country.

The last three chapters are some of the strongest contributions. David Sheinin's chapter links again the Conquest to the military dictatorship of the late twentieth century. Sheinin shows how these celebrations are not a new phenomenon, but go back to earlier times, when the military for example invaded the Chaco to "civilize" the natives. In the military's memory of the Conquest of the Desert, the themes of frontiers, race mixture, moral danger, and foreign (Chilean) invasion stand out. The military dictatorship tried, through the celebration of the Conquest, to conjure up a country that was imbued with Iberian culture and Catholicism in a deeply conservative and racist way. In contrast, Ana Ramos's ethnographic

essay, Chapter 8, hits home by showing what Indigenous peoples themselves had to say about their defeat and their displacement. She tells of the “sad stories” that the descendants of the survivors of the invasion tell each other; they are deeply tragic and harrowing tales. The last chapter, by Sarah D. Warren, looks at how Indigenous activists in Argentina (and, to a lesser extent, Chile) have incorporated their understanding of *Wallmapu*—the land of the Mapuche—into their understanding of ethnic geography. She analyzes a number of maps that these activists have created to show how the Mapuche nation-building projects go beyond those of the Chilean or Argentine nation-states.

Although some contributions are stronger than others, what a reader will get out of this collection of essays depends in large part upon their own disciplinary inclinations. Be that as it may, the collection coheres very well and a reader who knows little about this momentous event in Indigenous history will be able to orient themselves well. Scholars who are specialists on the topic will also learn much; the approach to the Conquest of the Desert from many different branches of learning is useful. The Argentine government’s and the military perspective are well represented and so is, as much as is possible, that of the Indigenous peoples. It is fortunate that the volume does not just discuss the invasion itself, but also deals with the aftermath and some of the consequences of the annexation of native lands and the imprisonment and dispersal of its peoples. When dealing with books on such significant events, it is always possible to wish that something else had been added; a separate chapter on the distribution of usurped lands and on the consequences of the taking of this vast land for large estates might have been useful. There is still much to be done, but this tome will serve as a point of reference for all those who seek to understand more.

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MAURICIO RUBILAR LUENGO & AGUSTIN SÁNCHEZ ANDRÉS (COORDS.), *Relaciones internacionales y construcción nacional: América Latina, 1810-1910*. Concepción: Universidad Católica de la Santísima Concepción, 2019.

The book edited by Rubilar Luengo and Sánchez Andrés is a rich, useful, and novel compilation of chapters dealing with the first century of independence of several Latin American countries, in terms of the evolution of the new nation-states (which were not yet consolidated nation-states, to say the least) and their emerging international relations. The editors refer to four major themes, which are interrelated. First, the impact that armed conflicts throughout the nineteenth