

Mexican Americans & World War II



Edited by Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez

To the Latinos and Latinas of the World War II generation

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Introduction

Sixty years after the conclusion of the Second World War, a distinct sense of awe of the period remains undiminished. It was a time of high drama, as our country displayed a remarkable ability to rise to a daunting challenge—the Germans and the Japanese had already demonstrated their military cunning, as well as their resolve to ruthlessly vanquish their foes. Even today, in analyzing contemporary international wars and events, World War II is frequently used as the vantage point, the compass that grounds us, that situates the international community in somewhat of a unified history. The war served as the great turning point for many countries, and for their peoples.

To gauge the continued fascination with the war, one need look no further than the continued output of books and documentaries related to World War II, works which seek to apply new information or new perspectives to historical events—how aware were Catholic Church officials about atrocities toward the Jews in Germany, and could the Church have protested more vigorously? Were the commanders at Pearl Harbor unfairly scapegoated for being caught off guard on that “day that will live in infamy”? Did British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s controversial policy of appeasement toward Germany in the late 1930s actually work to his country’s advantage in the long run?

And in our country, we saw how that one war struck our own social structures like a meteor; the dust is settling. American women’s longtime participation in the lower levels of the nation’s workforce had been largely ignored—until their labor became necessary to meet the gargantuan need for labor to build the thousands of ships, airplanes, and other armaments. The government responded with color-

ful posters depicting women factory workers as patriots doing their share for their country. By the end of World War II, nearly nineteen million American women were working outside the home—an unprecedented number.¹

African American men, serving in segregated units, distinguished themselves for their valor, although they were often relegated to the less desirable duties, such as loading explosives aboard ships. The 996 pilots and support staff of the Tuskegee Airmen, who served as pilots in the 332nd Fighter Group, escorted Allied bombers in the European theater.² Back home the African American community galvanized a “Double-V” campaign—Victory overseas and Victory at home—victory, that is, against the racism that continued to oppress some Americans.

On the West Coast, 120,000 Japanese Americans were herded into internment camps, as alarmists worried that these Americans would sooner side with the Pacific Rim nation than with the United States.³

And for Mexican Americans, World War II would indeed prove to be the war that led to substantial headway in the fight toward desegregating public institutions, and lessening, if not eliminating, the intransigent discrimination that had existed since the end of the Texas-Mexico war. Even in early 1940, there were small communities of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the Midwest, the Northwest, and elsewhere in the United States. The largest concentrations were in the Southwest, home to 90 percent of Americans of Mexican descent.⁴ And it was in the Southwest, perhaps most notably in Texas, where discrimination and prejudice were rampant. Socially segregated schools were commonplace, in particular in the smaller, rural areas; it was not uncommon to see placards in restaurant windows stating that the proprietors would serve neither dogs nor Mexicans.

Consider an anecdote related by Armando Flores of Corpus Christi, Texas. Mr. Flores vividly recalled a chilly winter day in 1942, standing with a group of soldiers in Sheppard Field, Texas. The men had jammed their fists into their pockets against the frigid cold. Noticing it, a lieutenant rebuked them: “American soldiers stand at attention, on a cold day, or a hot day. They never keep their hands in their pockets.”

Private Flores marveled at the officer’s choice of words.

“The funny thing about it—and the reason that I remember that—was because nobody had ever called me an American until that time,” he recalled many years later.

“I had been called a lot of things . . . wetback and spic, and greaser. . . . That was the first time in my life that I had been called an American,” he said.⁵

Mr. Flores’s family, in fact, had lived in Texas since before 1846, when Texas became a state. And yet . . . and yet, no one had called Armando Flores an American until 1941. And, it might be noted, the citizenship of U.S. Latinos is still routinely challenged. World War II, then, imparted to Mr. Flores and other Mexican Americans a sense of belonging. For once, there was inclusion, although it was fleeting and it would require the strongest efforts of this World War II generation of Latinos to reclaim any part of that inclusion.

General treatments of World War II, of the Great Depression, and of the postwar years in America generally exclude stories of U.S. Latinos and Latinas. There is, in fact, even today, a lingering and curious dismissal of U.S. Latinos, as if Latinos had not lived here, had not served the country, had not, as a matter of fact, made the ultimate sacrifice for inclusion.⁶ It is as if, to apply Ralph Ellison’s analogy to Mexican Americans, they were invisible men and women—part of the landscape, supporting actors in a drama that purported only to affect them, not to be affected by them, a history that denies them the recognition of the very agency they courageously demonstrated time and again.

It was not the actual battlefield experiences that set apart the Mexican American World War II experience, although Mexican Americans did have more Medals of Honor than any other ethnic group. Tens of thousands of Mexican American men—and some women—accepted military service as a way to a regular paycheck, just as tens of thousands of other American men did. Mexican American women on the home front likewise got good jobs with good wages and experienced the liberating effects of self-sufficiency, as did other American women.

What did separate the war-years experience for Mexican Americans, however, was that it would be the first time that they were participating fully in mainstream society, even working alongside Anglos as equals. They discovered, if there was any doubt, that white Americans were, after all, only humans, no worse and no better. Also, with

the introduction of the G.I. Bill of Rights, many returning veterans were able to afford training and other schooling that would have been impossible otherwise. It is no coincidence that many of the founders of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund—men like Pete Tijerina, Albert Armendariz, and Ed Idar—were themselves returning World War II G.I.'s who availed themselves of the G.I. Bill.

World War II, then, imbued the ongoing Mexican American civil rights movement with new leadership and a new attitude of entitlement—Mexican American men had, in large numbers, served their country as Americans; now it was time to reap the benefits of full citizenship rights.⁷

Not that there was a shortage of activism before World War II. One early chronicler—and battler—of the dual system was Alonso Perales, a veteran of World War I and a member of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). Perales collected depositions, letters, and newspaper clippings that documented instances of discrimination.⁸ His book, published just after World War II, gave voice to the many men and women, Mexican and Anglo, who were outraged by a system rife with unfair treatment for Mexican Americans. However, the persistence of the inequities indicates how futile those protests were.

This book considers the effect of World War II on Mexican Americans and Mexicans living in the United States, on several levels: the family level, within locales, and in perceptions of how the world viewed Mexican Americans and how Mexican Americans viewed themselves.

The essays presented here endeavor to appeal to a general audience, as well as an academic one; it is hoped that this volume will be of interest to the broadest possible readership. This is not the complete Mexican American World War II experience, but it is an effort to gather this group of writers and academics around this very important topic. It is hoped that future treatments—by these and other writers—will be representative of the larger Latino experience, as we compare and contrast this American Latino experience.

This volume opens up with the scene-setting essay by Rita Sanchez in which she writes about her own family's experience. Sanchez's essay centers on one Mexican American family's involvement in the war effort and how that was understood by a young

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