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The US-Mexican War (1846–48) in School Textbooks: Mexico and the United States in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century

Eugenia Roldán Vera

1 Introduction

Between 1846 and 1847 Mexico and the United States fought a war that brought dramatic consequences for both countries. For Mexico, defeat led to the loss of more than half its territory, to an internal political crisis and to the beginnings of a strong national consciousness. As a result of victory in the war, the United States became a much larger country and obtained an undisputed position of power within the Western hemisphere. At the same time, however, winning the war created an imbalance between the number of slavery- and agriculture-based states in the South and industrial states in the North. This disparity would play an important part in the outbreak of the Civil War (1861–65).

E. Roldán Vera (✉)

Department of Educational Research, Center for Research and Advanced Studies (CINVESTAV), Mexico City, Mexico
e-mail: eroldan@cinvestav.mx

Despite the importance of this event for both nations, the war has not been given equal scholarly attention, featuring far less in US than in Mexican historiography. While the so-called American invasion remains an open wound in Mexican public consciousness—it is still very present in current Mexican history textbooks—American historical imagination has largely forgotten the US-Mexican War and has relegated it to a minor place in present-day history textbooks. Nevertheless, the war featured prominently in nineteenth-century textbooks in both countries.

This chapter compares representations of the US-Mexican War in a sample of nineteenth-century US and Mexican history schoolbooks written during the five decades that followed the event. I will demonstrate how differently those representations evolved between the late 1840s and the 1890s, arguing that even if early descriptions of the war were rather similar in both countries, with time the war narratives of the two countries varied considerably and new elements were introduced. I will suggest some explanations for those variations, which will also enable us to understand why the war prevailed in the historical imagination of one country and almost disappeared from the historical imagination of the other.

For this chapter, I have analyzed a sample of fourteen textbooks, seven from Mexico and seven from the United States, some for elementary, others for secondary level (see list of textbooks referenced). These books were often used for both levels and were also read by adults outside of school. To gain a diachronic view of representations of the war, I have selected books from all decades, especially those that were re-edited several times and thus can be considered widely used. My methodology consisted of comparing various aspects of the representation of the US-Mexican War: causes, sequences of events, responsibilities, heroism and reasons for victory and defeat. I have also considered the place that the narrative of the war occupies within the entire history of each nation.

In my diachronic analysis of these textbooks, assuming that facts become historical events only by means of their insertion into a historical narrative (White 2008), I will argue that the time between the occurrence of events and their narration affected the ways in which those events were observed and the manner in which relations between

events in the past, present and future were established. This consideration is particularly relevant for the analysis of school materials from a time when textbooks, in the absence of specialized and comprehensive academic histories that could be used as a base, were actively constructing the teleological story of their nations.

In the next two sections, I will briefly discuss the peculiarities of nineteenth-century national history textbooks and their relationship with historical scholarship in their own time; this is relevant for the ensuing comparison of the evolving representations of the war in textbooks from the two countries. Throughout this comparison, I will demonstrate how rewriting the representation of the US-Mexican War contributed to the introduction and reinforcement of asymmetric power relations between the two countries while at the same time playing into the construction of each national identity. In the final section, I will advance some historiographical explanations as to why those representations evolved in such different ways over time.

2 National Histories and National History Textbooks in Nineteenth-Century Mexico and the United States

In Mexico and the United States, the first primary and secondary school national history textbooks were published in the 1840s and 1850s. However, after the end of the Civil War, the United States made national history from primary school level mandatory in 1865 (Kraus and Joyce 1985) and Mexico followed after the Liberal army's victory over the French invasion and the Conservative party in 1867 (Roldán Vera 1996). As in most of the Western world, national history as a school subject was created to serve the consolidation of nation states (Carretero 2007). Nevertheless, the first national history textbooks, despite covering a new curricular demand, were not based on prescriptive, detailed syllabus guidelines. Thus, their authors were relatively free to organize and interpret their subject matter. Moreover, these first textbooks were not merely simplified, standardized accounts of scholarly

national history books, for those scholarly, comprehensive national stories from foundation to the present did not yet exist. In both the United States and Mexico, national history textbooks predated national academic histories. George Bancroft's monumental *History of the United States*, which first appeared in 1834, went only as far as 1789 (and only in its last volume, published in 1878). George Tucker's 1856 *History of the United States, from Their Colonization to the End of the Twenty-Sixth Congress*, of 1841 (4 vols.) was the earliest extended account to address recent events, closely followed by Richard Hildreth's six-volume *History of the United States* (1849–52), though neither of them included the period of the US-Mexican War. With the 1880s and 1890s' increase in scholarly work based on critically assessed documentary sources, and with the foundation of history professorships in universities and the creation of professional associations of historians, a large number of specialized historical monographs and histories of the different states of the Union came into existence. The next comprehensive history of the country did not appear until the six volumes of Edward Channing's *History of the United States* were published between 1905 and 1926, while an abridged version, for school use, was published in 1908.

In Mexico, comprehensive scholarly national histories also appeared after the first national history textbooks, yet by the end of the nineteenth century Mexico had produced many more of these academic works than the United States. In 1862 Francisco Carbajal Espinosa published *Historia de México, desde los primeros tiempos de que hay noticia hasta mediados del siglo XIX* (2 vols.), but his account only reached as far as the end of the Spanish conquest. In the 1870s and 1880s, along with the recovery of sources and the publication of the first richly documented, erudite accounts of individual periods, comprehensive histories were produced, including Ignacio Álvarez's *Estudios sobre la historia general de México* in six volumes (1875–77) and Niceto de Zamacois' *Historia de México* in eighteen volumes (1876–82). Interestingly, between 1880 and 1884 the US-based History Company, led by Hubert Bancroft, published a *History of Mexico* in forty-one volumes. Although concerted appeals for a national, comprehensive history from the Liberal viewpoint began in 1867, they did not bear fruit until 1884–89 with the publication of the monumental and

luxuriously printed *México a través de los siglos* (4 vols.), coordinated by Vicente Riva Palacio. This publication was later followed by the positivist *México: su evolución social* (3 vols.), which was highly attuned to Porfirio Díaz's regime and was published between 1900 and 1902 under the direction of Justo Sierra.

This overview indicates that nineteenth-century national history textbooks were among the first works to give an intelligible and teleological account of both countries as unified nations with future directions in relation to other countries. In presenting a succession of events from an extended period and integrating these events into an intelligible story of the nation, history textbooks made intended and unintended connections between occurrences in the past, present and future: they offered causal relations, contextual explanations, conclusions and—often—moral and political lessons. This is evident in their representations of the US-Mexican War.

3 The US-Mexican War in Nineteenth-Century Historiography

The US-Mexican War of 1846–48 (known in Mexico as “the US Invasion”) broke out when the United States annexed Texas (1845–46). The province of Texas had separated from Mexico in 1836, after a war that Mexico lost; the US acknowledged its independence, but Mexico, which still considered it part of its territory, did not. This annexation was taken by Mexico as an act of war, but for the United States Texas's agreement to the annexation was a sovereign act by a sovereign country. After a series of threats were exchanged, war between Mexico and the United States broke out in 1846. Following a series of bloody battles on two fronts, one in the north of Mexico and the other on the Gulf coast—the Americans led by the generals Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott, the Mexicans by General Antonio López de Santa Anna—the American army advanced through the territory until it seized Mexico City and Mexico accepted defeat. In the ensuing peace treaties signed by both nations, Mexico gave the United States the territories that

are now the states of California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, most of Arizona and Colorado, and parts of Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas and Wyoming (that is, for Mexico, the former territories of California, New Mexico and Texas, and parts of its own states of Tamaulipas, Chihuahua and Sonora). With this, Mexico lost more than half the territory it had possessed as an independent country since it had gained independence from Spain in 1821.

During the war, countless books about the conflict were published in the United States. Most of them were accounts written by soldiers and war correspondents, and almost none were based on documentary sources or attempted to consider the Mexican side. These works were paralleled by numerous literary war narratives published in the form of novelettes, dime novel series, crime gazettes and paper stories (Rodríguez 2010). Influenced by William Prescott's widely read *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843), these first accounts used romance and heroic drama to place Hernán Cortés's conquest of the Aztecs on the same level as Winfield Scott's American conquest of the "degenerated" race of Mexicans—degenerated because they were the descendants of the degenerated Spanish empire (Johannsen 1986, 241–69). Most of these works were closer to romanticized chronicles than to historical accounts looking for order or logic to the war itself. As *The American Review* said of these works in a book review of June 1848, although accounts written with the perspective of time may provide correct "statistics" (even if "the spirit is wanting"), those written closer in time to the events may be a better expression of "the spirit of the people, the deep emotion underlying all" (653).

In narratives written shortly after the end of the war, which were based on more substantial research of primary sources and often written by teachers or history professors, a somewhat contradictory view developed in which the United States became involved in the war because of its ambitions for power, but it was the last foreign war that Americans should participate in and its outcome was readily celebrated (Johannsen 1986, 263–69). Although the Civil War virtually erased the Mexican war from public discussion and no specific works on it were published in the following decades, the US-Mexican War resurfaced in the more academic historiographical accounts of the 1880s and

1890s. For example, in Hubert Bancroft's *History of Mexico, 1824–1861* (1880–84) and in James Ford Rhodes' *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850* (1893), responsibility for the war was placed on the ambitions of the pro-slavery and land-hungry American Southerners who happened to be in power at the time. By the early twentieth century, the war was subject to both defence and criticism in American historiography: for the critics, the United States had deviated from its principles and values by entering a war out of aggression; the defenders, like Charles H. Owen (*The Justice of the Mexican War*, 1908) and Justin H. Smith (*The War with Mexico*, 1919), supported the idealized self-portrait of the United States as a nation unlike any other, incapable of the sin of territorial aggression that was common in the Old World. Discomfort around the US role in the war and questions as to whether it was to blame for an act of aggression that brought great benefit have, according to several scholars, contributed to making this war “forgotten” by historians (Benjamin and Velasco Márquez 1997).

On the other side of the border, the first accounts of the war were likewise published during or shortly after the war by eyewitnesses and participants. Carlos María de Bustamante's *El nuevo Bernal Díaz del Castillo, o sea historia de la invasión de los anglo-americanos en México* (1847) was a subjective war chronicle that narrated events from 1845 on. In 1848 a number of statesmen, writers and journalists who had fought in the war or worked in the Mexican government compiled *Apuntes para la historia de la guerra entre México y los Estados Unidos*, a series of eyewitness accounts that sought coherence and some degree of objectivity. These first accounts were not focused so much on finding someone to blame for the outbreak and result of the war as a whole, but on describing how it began and developed. The first history of the war based on documentary sources from both countries, not published until 1883, was José María Roa Bárcena's *Recuerdos de la invasión norteamericana (1846–1848) por un joven de entonces*. This account was followed by other scholarly histories by Enrique de Olavarría y Ferrari (1885, a chapter in *México a través de los siglos*), Eduardo Paz's *La invasión norteamericana en 1846; ensayo de historia patria-militar* (1889) and Emilio del Castillo Negrete's *Invasión de los norteamericanos en México* (1890). These accounts tried to do justice to the Mexican army, whose role

had been effaced by the negative outcome of the war for the Mexicans. The monumental *Mexico a través de los siglos* (1884–89) and *México: su evolución social* (1900–02) dedicated many pages to passionate narratives of the war and blamed it on the Americans’ territorial ambitions. By the turn of the century, the publication of compilations of documents about the war by Genaro García, Francisco del Paso y Troncoso and Alberto María Carreño—which began to reveal the complexity of the war and the responsibility of all sides—overtook publication of narratives of the war (Vázquez 1999).

As suggested in this brief overview of the historiography of the war in the decades that followed it, there was no authoritative account upon which textbooks could base their narratives: authors had to construct their own versions. Some textbooks reflected the trends and discussions that were going on in academic historiography at the time, but only partially. As I will demonstrate, these books responded to a different logic, a logic sometimes termed “school history” (Carretero 2007) or, rather, the logic of the nineteenth-century national history textbook.

4 The Representation of the War in US History Textbooks

To understand how this war was represented in US textbooks and how that changed over time, it is important to consider the ways in which the history of the United States was portrayed with respect to other parts of the world. In the 1840s and 1850s, before national history was made compulsory in primary schools, US history textbooks were never only about US history. They included long sections on the ancient history of the entire continent before the European conquest and even details of the history of Mexico after independence. For example, Marcius Willson’s *History of the United States* (1847) had the following subtitle: *Comprising Historical Sketches of the Indian Tribes; a Description of American Antiquities, with an Inquiry into Their Origin and the Origin of the Indian Tribes; with Appendices showing Its Connection with European History; History of the Present British Provinces; History of*

Mexico; and History of Texas, Brought Down to the Time of Its Admission into the American Union. Published during the years of the US-Mexican War, with a long chapter on Mexico and a chapter on the history of Texas, Willson's book certainly meant to provide an explanation for the onset of the war. As Willson stated in the introduction, "The design of the following work is to present the histories of all those countries of North America that are now of sufficient political importance to demand the attention of the scholar and awaken the interest of the general reader" (Willson 1847, iii). Yet the attention given to the history of Mexico went far beyond the events of the war—significantly, the war was narrated in a chapter on the history of Mexico as a whole.

Similarly, Goodrich's *Pictorial History of the United States, with Notices of Other Portions of America* (1852) began with a section on the geography and history of the entire continent, with emphasis on the common origin of American tribes and especially on Columbus's discoveries. Once again, at the end of three hundred pages on US history, a few short chapters (fifteen pages in total) told the history of Mexico, Guatemala, Texas and "South America". Earlier, Goodrich had published a *Pictorial History of America* (1844, 1851, 1853)—"America" meaning the entire American continent—"embracing both the Northern and Southern portions". Although that text already included long sections on the history of the United States, the evolution in the focus of Goodrich's textbooks suggests that indeed the national history of the United States was a development of a previous school history that focused not on the nation but on the Western hemisphere.

Most US textbooks of this period had a map of the "Western continent" at the beginning. In these early books, the representation of the United States within the American continent resonated with the ideas of the so-called Monroe Doctrine, that is, President James Monroe's 1823 statement that defined America as a continent of independent nations, where European powers should no longer intervene ("America for the Americans"). This, however, was not yet an expression of the idea of a Manifest Destiny: the Americans' alleged God-given role to expand and colonize the continent.

By the 1870s and 1880s US history textbooks lost that continental dimension. Their titles reflected US affairs only—*First Lessons in*

our Country's History: Bringing Out Its Salient Points (1874), or *A First Book in American History, with Special Reference to the Lives and Deeds of Great Americans* (1889)—and separate chapters on the history of Mexico (or any other Latin American country) were no longer included. Considering this trend, it is not surprising that in textbooks of the 1840s and 1850s the Mexican War occupies a substantially larger number of pages than in textbooks of the decades that followed. In these textbooks, the war is an important event that happened during the presidency of James Polk, the alleged cause of the confrontation is the US annexation of Texas and the conflict is narrated as a series of battles described in some detail.

In earlier textbooks (Willson 1847; Lossing 1854; Goodrich 1852), the war is depicted as a war between nations which are, so to speak, equivalent: both have their own history and both are sovereign, republican states, even if Mexico is portrayed as the weaker of the two. For example, Willson wrote in 1847, when the war was still in progress:

As Americans, we feel a deep and absorbing interest in all those countries of the New World which have broken the chains of European vassalage, and established independent governments of their own Although Mexico was settled nearly a century before the United States, yet the latter had gone through all the discouragements and trials of their colonial existence, steadily progressing in general knowledge and in the growth of liberal principles, had outgrown their vassalage, and firmly established their independence, while Mexico was still groping in spiritual and intellectual darkness, without being fully aware of her enslaved condition. (Willson 1847, 617–18)

That “intellectual darkness” is the result of a process of colonization and independence that was different from what took place in the United States, of which Mexicans are not completely “aware”—and therefore not guilty. They are, in any case, countries that can be compared.

While Willson is cautious when attributing responsibility for the war itself, textbooks from as early as 1850 began to blame Mexico for starting the war. Mexico’s “aggression” and “hostile movements” in response to the annexation of Texas led Americans to react:

The hostility of the Mexicans, which had been displayed for years in petty insults and injuries to American citizens, was now openly and fiercely avowed. Strong forces were said to be gathering for the invasion of Texas. Under these circumstances, the US government felt justified in assuming that the boundary claimed by Texas was correct The US government proposed to fix on a line by negotiation, but Mexico scornfully refused all overtures. (Quackenbos 1857, 424)

Another cause of the war was that the Mexican authorities, “impoverished by civil war”, did not hesitate to replenish the country’s treasury by “plundering American US vessels in the Gulf of Mexico, or by confiscating the property of American merchants within its borders” (Lossing 1854, 298). Lossing endorses President Polk’s statement that “war existed by the act of Mexico” (301). His textbook does not have a chapter on Mexico and the war is told as part of US history—as a passage in the chapter entitled “Polk’s administration”.

Textbooks of the 1850s devote a significant number of pages to describing the war, with detailed narratives of battles, generals’ strategies and heroic acts. In these accounts, there is no suggestion that winning the war would be inevitable for the American army; although the story is told in such way as to emphasize the heroism of the inferior numbers of American soldiers, the battles are described as if they had been fought between equal parties who had the same chance of winning. Lossing described the battle of Buena Vista as follows:

The Americans fell back [February 21] to Buena Vista, within eleven miles of Saltillo, and there, in a narrow defile in the mountains, encamped in battle order. At about noon the next day ... the Mexican army approached within two miles of them; and Santa Anna, assuring Taylor that he was surrounded by twenty thousand troops, and could not escape, ordered him to surrender within an hour. Taylor politely refused the request, and both armies prepared for battle. There was some skirmishing during the afternoon; and early the following morning ... a terrible conflict commenced. It was desperate and bloody, and continued until sunset. Several times the overwhelming numbers of the Mexicans appeared about to crush the little band of Americans; and finally Santa Anna made a desperate assault upon the American center, commanded

by Taylor in person. It stood like a rock against a billow, and by the assistance of the artillery of Bragg, Washington and Sherman, the martial wave was rolled back, the Mexicans fled in confusion, and the Americans were masters of the bloody field. (Lossing 1854, 303–4)

The textbooks of the 1850s were also the first to refer to Mexico using pejorative adjectives. For Lossing (1854), Mexico is “an unjust and injurious neighbor”; by contrast, American soldiers are brave, ordered and civilized. The Mexican defeat in the port of Veracruz is described by Quackenbos as “another victory against tremendous odds” which “reflected glory on the American arms”; however, “No injury to the person or property of private citizens was allowed. The harbors were opened to the commerce of all nations” (Quackenbos 1857, 432–34). Nevertheless, Mexican soldiers are never described as cowards.

Some textbooks of this decade begin to show signs of an asymmetric depiction of the United States and Mexico. Goodrich, for example, does not hesitate to call Mexico a “distracted state”: although it was already independent from Spain and other powers, “internal convulsions” and the “struggles of rival leaders” prevent the author from considering it “in a settled state” (Goodrich 1852, 342). This depiction of Mexico as a politically inferior country enables Goodrich to prepare his readers for the terms of the peace treaty that followed the end of the war:

Negotiations for peace being commenced, a treaty was finally ratified. One of the conditions of this transferred to the United States a large tract of territory, extending from the western boundary of Texas to the Pacific, and including New Mexico and the northern portion of California. (Goodrich 1852, 336)

The expression “transfer” of territory would have sounded like a euphemism even in the United States, where political disagreement at the time had arisen over whether democracies should be entitled to grow by means of war with their neighbours. In a way, portraying Mexico in a “distracted” or “unsettled” state was a way of justifying the American seizure of land from another country. This initiated the effacement of Mexico as an equal partner or interlocutor of the United States and helped explain the continental dominance of the latter.

After the Civil War, not only did the US-Mexican War cease to be a major topic in US historiography—as previously discussed—but textbooks of the 1870s became increasingly national in outlook. They no longer had chapters on the history of Mexico and devoted few pages to the events of the war. In Swinton’s book (1874), the Mexican War occupies a three-page section of the chapter “Growth of our Country”; by contrast, the War of Secession is given thirty pages. Its “causes” are explained in simple terms:

First, the Mexicans, were very angry because Texas had joined the Union, committed many outrages on the Texans; this stirred up a very hostile spirit. Secondly, the Southern States were jealous of Mexico, because slave-holding had been abolished by its government, in obedience to the Pope of Rome; and Mexico was likely to afford an easy place of refuge to fugitive slaves. The third reason was that ever since Texas had separated from Mexico the Mexican government had been disputing about what was the right boundary between its territory and Texas. (Swinton 1874, 152–53)

Despite the brevity of his account, Swinton’s textbook allocates space to narrating the war as a succession of battles. His language is simple and highly emotional, probably because the book is meant for schoolchildren. However, emotion is attributed not only to the “angry” Mexicans but also to the Southern states, which were “jealous” that Mexico offered a refuge to fugitive slaves. At the same time, the victory over Mexico emerges as a reason for the exaltation of the United States as the best nation in the world in all respects:

To the future progress of our country there seems to be no limit. Our vast resources give to every one a fair chance of success in life. Under the Constitution we have the best government in the world Though we must not think that we have no faults as a nation, it may fairly be claimed that no people are more upright, prosperous, and happy than the Americans. (Swinton 1874, 199)

This already feeds a sense of historical exceptionalism: the United States is presented as a country following a different path than the rest of the

world. The counterpart of American exceptionalism is the representation of Mexico as a country so unstable and its population so ignorant that war was the only way the United States could deal with it. As Eggerston (1888) put it:

There has always been a difference of opinion in the United States about the Mexican War. Even at the present time opinions are divided as to whether it might not have been wisely avoided No doubt, the ignorance and prejudice prevailing in Mexico at that time, and the frequent overthrow of one government and the setting up of another, made it difficult to treat with that country without war. (Eggerston 1888, 286)

By the 1880s, the Mexican war is represented as evidence for the inevitability of the United States becoming a more significant and powerful country. Eggleston (1888) narrates the victory in Buena Vista as if it had been preordained by the succession of previous victories:

By this time the war had shown the immense superiority of the American troops, the most of whom were volunteers The Americans of that time were brave and enterprising, and a little too fond of military glory. They fought with great boldness and steadiness, and their early victories made them expect success. (280)

In a version of Eggleston's textbook for younger children (1889), the US-Mexican War appears as a very short episode of the chapter entitled "How the United States Became Larger", which is meant to be reinforced by an "Object-Lesson in Historic Geography". After reading a brief description of how the United States became larger, students had to cut and paste the "seven additions to the United States" on a bird's eye map: Louisiana, Oregon, Florida, Texas, two "Additions from Mexico" and Alaska (Eggleston 1889, 196). In this book the war is described in three short paragraphs and the history of Mexico is summarized in one sentence: "Mexico, which was at first a Spanish colony, rebelled against Spain, and secured its independence. One of the States of the Mexican Republic was Texas" (194).

By the end of the 1880s, the war with Mexico lost importance and Mexico ceased to be considered an equivalent nation to the United

States. The war was no longer an event that had happened during Polk's administration; it belonged to the greater history of how the United States grew big, successful and exceptional. What we see in the development of the representation of the US-Mexican War in the second half of the nineteenth century in the United States is a transition from what Jaime Rodriguez, based on the study of American popular literature on the war, calls a "chivalric narrative" between equal nations, to a "frontier narrative", in which one nation is inferior to the other, and finally to a narrative that exalts American exceptionalism. As a result, Mexico was effaced as an agent of history from US narratives (Rodriguez 2010). At the same time, by detaching the United States from its role in everyday events and by underlining its exceptionalism among the nations of the world, textbooks deprived the United States of its own historicity and placed it somewhere above time. By this deprivation of historicity I do not only mean that the historical actuality of persons and events (as opposed to myths) from the past was undermined; as in fact this happens in almost every national history textbook. I also mean that concepts such as nations and their practices and values are not represented as the outcome of historical processes and developments but as the manifestation of innate qualities or preordained destiny.

5 The Representation of the War in Mexican History Textbooks

The portrayal of the war in Mexican textbooks also changed over the years, but in a different way. In the 1850s, early Mexican history textbooks, like their American counterparts, place the history of Mexico within the American continent. One of the first national history textbooks written in Mexico for higher education and the public in general, *Compendio de historia de Mexico, desde los tiempos primitivos hasta la muerte de Agustín de Iturbide en 1824* (1852), had a first chapter on the "History of the Americas". Although it focused only on the Spanish discoveries and conquests, such details are no longer present in later Mexican textbooks. From the 1860s onwards, all history was exclusively Mexican. As of 1867, when the last foreign invasion of the century

(1862–67), by Napoleon III, was defeated and the Liberal party won an indisputable and lasting victory over the Conservatives, textbooks took on an increasingly nationalist tone, in tune with efforts to unify the nation in economic and political terms.

In contrast with American textbooks, the war remains an important topic in all textbooks throughout the second half of the nineteenth century: many detailed pages are dedicated to the war. In general, the war is described as a painful event, and the United States is always blamed for starting it by annexing Texas. This is how Roa Bárcena's textbook of 1862 refers to the outbreak of the war:

The neighbouring state took on the role of aggressor and brought us a war with the barely dissimulated purpose of ensuring its conquest of Texas and acquiring the part of the territory that, as well as Texas, was eventually surrendered to it. (Roa Bárcena 1862, 257; unless otherwise specified, translations my own)

The explanation given for Mexico's defeat was rather consistent throughout the period—the Mexicans' lack of unity. For Arróniz (1858), defeat was due “to so many mistakes, inconsistencies and revolutions, but in no way to a lack of courage in Mexican soldiers” (185). Payno (1870), a textbook author who fought in the war, attributes defeat to the civil division and unrest of the Mexicans:

While in the capital and in some states, social order was constantly disturbed by military uprisings ..., the Americans were sending forces and squadrons to the most important points of the republic. The republic, with scarce resources and torn by civil war, faced each enemy front with little success. (180)

Later textbook authors also blame the outcome of the war on General Antonio López de Santa Anna's poor leadership:

Santa Anna was unable to bring order and, in spite of the courage of the Mexicans ... twelve thousand Yankees took over Mexico City and we

had to make peace with them, giving them Texas, California and New Mexico, that is, an immense territory. (Sierra 1894a, 414)

Despite acknowledging lack of unity and poor leadership, textbooks throughout these five decades praised soldiers' courage and heroism in adverse circumstances, and the Mexican army's few moments of glory were exalted. In the final battles around Mexico City, "acts of courage were numerous among officers; troops followed their officers' example; but there was no ammunition, no plan, no leadership: Santa Anna changed his orders at every turn" (Sierra 1894b, 366). Payno stressed the "resistance" and "heroism" of the National Guard, composed largely of "well-off people from good social positions", in the final battles around Mexico City—which "were heroic even if Mexico lost" (Payno 1870, 184).

By the 1890s, a period in which history textbooks attempted to create a conciliatory view of the Mexican past and move beyond century-long disputes between Liberals and Conservatives, textbooks sought to draw lessons about national unity for the present out of that negative episode:

Disagreements between different factions prevented the implementation of a decent administration and generated the ill-fated political practices that contradicted the Nation's true interests. That was the cause of the disaster in the American War, and of the loss of a great part of our territory Those are the lessons history taught us, which should not be forgotten by the men whose hearts beat to the drum of true patriotism. (García Cubas 1890, 185)

Although reasons for defeat were interpreted in many ways, all textbook authors of this period narrated the war as a succession of highly contingent historical events, that could practically have been won by either side. Authors describe how each battle developed, who was leading, what the military strategies of each side were and who won and why. Arróniz described the war of 1858 as "a long chain of victories inflicted over our army", a metaphor that suggests that if some of the battles had

not been won by the Americans the “chain” would have broken and the outcome could have been different. He highlights the contingency of defeat and attributes it both to bad Mexican military strategy and civil unrest at the time of the war.

None of the textbook authors saw the defeat in the war as preordained by some historical, cultural or racial inferiority of the Mexicans. Consider this description of the battle of Molino del Rey, one of the last battles before Mexico City was taken, written by Guillermo Prieto in 1886:

Repelled, shattered and almost defeated, the enemy was chased by our forces; but help came and they turned back towards our men, inflicting horrible carnage on them: then the heroic General Echegaray, gathering some of the brave men of the 3rd battalion, launched himself onto enemy lines, got hold of their artillery and reestablished his troops' morale with magic energy. Until the enemy started a new effort and defeat was complete. (370)

The war was fought by equivalent (yet not equal) forces and its outcome was not determined by the predestined superiority of the Americans, but by contingent reasons. As the same author put it:

Although both armies were equally courageous, Americans showed more unity in their actions, a more intelligent leadership and perfect discipline, which led to the precision and violence of their movements and to abundant resources in terms of weapons, ammunition, provisions and care for the wounded, etc. This comparison is essential to forming an exact and impartial judgement. (362)

Certainly, insistence on the contingent nature of events gives Mexican authors a way to cope with defeat in a war that, in their view, could have been won. But this narrative also addresses the war through a framework of historical facts, so it remains embedded in historicity. This perspective contrasts with the exceptionalism and thus lack of historicity of the way that American textbook authors narrate the war to represent their nation's unique superiority.

In the 1880s and 1890s, however, there is a shift in textbook narrative that tends to extract the war from the framework of historical events and processes and ends up also depriving the United States of its historicity. Textbooks of those decades begin to introduce terms and adjectives that are emotionally laden to describe the war, something unseen in previous years. Justo Sierra describes the annexation of Texas by the United States as “an atrocious abuse” (*abuso atroz*) (Sierra 1894a, 413), while Prieto calls it a “scandalous robbery” (*robo escandaloso*) (Prieto 1886, 360). Prieto describes the Americans as “ambitious”, “greedy” and “perfidious” in their expansion towards new land:

The prosperous development of the American Union encouraged the ambition to possess greater extensions of land; which they achieved by acquiring Florida, Louisiana and Oregon with little effort. The rich and fertile province of Texas tickled the greediness of the North Americans; the government made itself a vessel of those desires and proposed to Spain first, and then Mexico, the purchase of that territory. When this was rejected, the USA turned to a more perfidious political strategy. (359)

The same author concludes his narrative of the war: “The rich territory acquired by the United States does not clean the stain of wickedness this invasion made on the pages of their history” (Prieto 1886, 375). This explanation of the war as the result of the wickedness, greed, ambition and perfidy of the Americans, which eventually became dominant in the popular understanding of the war in Mexico during the twentieth century, is another kind of overarching interpretation of historical events that undermines the role of events and processes in the war. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, there was an increasing tendency in school history teaching to insist that the past should be taught in ways that moved children’s emotions. Combined with the increasingly nationalist purpose and content of history textbooks, this resulted in a very powerful trend, which would gain in dominance throughout the twentieth century: to set the history of the Mexican nation against all other nations, presenting it as a unique country invaded several times by ambitious foreign powers, and to deprive Mexico of its own agency in its historical development.

6 Final Remarks: Writing and Rewriting the Past in Textbooks

So far I have shown that the narrative of the US-Mexican War, although similar in Mexican and US textbooks of the 1850s, progressively took different directions in the two countries. Moreover, that narrative became increasingly detached from a framework of historical events that accounted for the war's development and outcome in textbooks written in both countries between the 1850s and the 1890s. In the United States, this took the form of the replacement of the narrative of a war between equal nations with a narrative of American exceptionalism, where the war became an episode in the country's growth. In Mexico, although the story of the war remained anchored in historical contingency, the introduction of emotions and value judgments into the account in the last part of the century also ended up removing the war from its historicity.

Why did the accounts evolve in such a way as to deprive the war of its historicity in both countries, and why did they take such different directions? Although it would be easy—and correct—to respond to this question broadly in terms of how nationalisms developed during the second half of the nineteenth century, I want to offer an explanation on a different level. This explanation has to do with the specificities of historical writing: the distance in time between the occurrence of events and the writing about them plays a decisive role in the kind of history that is produced. Inspired by Ranajit Guha's (1983) distinction between primary, secondary and tertiary historical discourses according to the "measure of the distance from the event to which it refers", intended audience and function, I will suggest that textbook writing is also affected by that distance.

Using the example of how a popular uprising in India would be accounted for, Guha distinguishes between three types of discourse: primary discourses are those first-hand documents, usually created for administrative purposes and including letters, telegrams and edicts, which refer to the event—and describe it as a "rebellion". Secondary discourses are the accounts made on the basis of those primary discourses

by officials for colonial authorities, who insert the account into a certain logic: in this case, the logic of political control and Britain's civilizing mission. Finally, tertiary discourses are proper historiographical accounts written later by professional historians from all sides of the political spectrum, which look for causal explanations of the rebellion and set it in a broad interpretative framework of the trajectory and ultimate destiny of the British Empire (for better or for worse).

Although Guha is aiming to show that the experience of the people—the subaltern—in the rebellion is never considered nor explained “in its own terms” by those who write about it in any of the three types of discourse, he is referring to a larger epistemological problem for the observation of the past in general. Writing about the past necessarily entails distortion, since the experience of past agents is incorporated into and shaped by the writer's ulterior experience, conditioned by the present and culture of the writer/historian. This distortion is proportional to the distance that exists between the time of the event and the time of the historical account. So, instead of adding “perspective”—which is only understandable as an element of teleological accounts—distance effaces the experience and consciousness of the people that history is attempting to describe.

If we view textbooks as historical discourses, the distance in time between the historian and the event narrated is an important factor even though the function and the audience of the textbooks do not vary as they would in Guha's three discourses model. Some textbooks may be written by contemporary witnesses of and participants in the events—such as Payno, who fought in the US-Mexican War—but most of them could be loosely considered secondary or tertiary discourses. In any case, the writers' distance from the time of the events and their position in a different social and cultural context, together with their need to tell the story of the nation in a way appropriate to the textbook genre, influenced the ways in which the history of the war was told. The further textbooks were removed from the event, the more they distanced themselves from the experience of the war and the more prone to causal explanations and thus ideological interpretations they became. As the power of the two countries became asymmetrical—as a result, in part, of the outcome of the war itself—this gap in time opened up a space

for these historical interpretations: on the one hand, the effacement of Mexico as an agent of history in US historical discourse, and on the other the deprivation of the historical agency of the United States in Mexican historical discourse about the war.

History textbooks are about writing and rewriting the past. Although textbooks nowadays are based on a number of authoritative scholarly sources and clear guidelines from education authorities, they still retain the nationalist logic and concerns of “school history” of the nineteenth century. For this reason, as I have argued here, it is important to examine how the first history textbooks were produced and to pay attention to the specific dynamics of history writing.

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