

Battleship Vieques: Puerto Rico from World War II to the Korean War

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Battleship Vieques: Puerto Rico from World War II to the Korean War is a detailed history of the U.S. Navy's establishment of its Caribbean training "crown jewel" on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques within the context of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War. It offers a regional context and documents the profound impact of military occupation upon the social, economic, and cultural life of the people of Vieques. That occupation, while devastating in multiple ways, also provided the seeds of resistance that culminated in a massive non-violent civil disobedience movement that captured global attention and forced the Navy to leave in 2003.

Following the introduction, the book is divided into seven chapters. Chapters One and Two set the regional and local contexts for the militarization of Vieques during World War II. Chapter One provides a regional overview of the German navy's activities in the Caribbean during World War II, including a blockade and attacks on oil refineries. Among other problems, the war severely disrupted shipments of foods, fuel, and other materials between Puerto Rico and the U.S. The authors discuss the importance of war-related shortages as part of the ruling Popular Democratic Party's (PPD) strategies to consolidate power through land reform (especially the breakup of large farms with absentee owners), and targeted, state-sponsored industrialization. Faced with the dire scenario of possible starvation of an "essentially rural population" where overspecialization in sugar cane production forced it "to rely on food imports" (p. 19), wartime militarization through construction and expansion of U.S. military bases provided some economic relief. This chapter also discusses base construction during the 1930s in San Juan, where the Navy's propensity for excluding local contractors and dislodging residents foreshadowed its much larger construction projects during World War II in Puerto Rico, including Vieques. The authors note that while many historians "have emphasized the role of the insular government" in the transformation of Puerto Rico's economy during the 1940s from plantation agriculture to rapid industrialization, federal government expenditures during the same period—particularly related to the military—"had a profound transformative effect" (p. 25).

Chapter Two offers a brief summary of Vieques' history, from colonial "frontier"—with Spain struggling to maintain control despite constant attacks and settlement attempts by its European rivals—to "plantation society." The latter began with sustained nineteenth-century development of a mainly sugar cane and cattle-based economy, encouraged by land grants to Europeans and dependent on formerly enslaved labor from eastern Puerto Rico and the eastern Caribbean. The authors emphasize that the extreme concentration of land ownership in few hands—unlike most of Puerto Rico (p.45), but typical of the sugar cane regions (Berman Santana 1996)—greatly facilitated expropriation by the U.S. Navy.

Chapter Three provides considerable detail regarding the evictions and expropriations of land in most of the western and eastern sections of Vieques, as part of the Navy's plan to convert the island (along with nearly all of Ceiba's coast across the Vieques Sound and Culebra Island) into a giant military fortress during World War II. In this chapter, the authors are careful to distinguish between the formal expropriations (which affected relatively few because of the extreme land concentration) and the actual evictions. Nearly overnight, the latter drove thousands of small property owners and workers with long-held land use rights out of their homes, dumping them onto barren lands also taken by the military. Besides lacking amenities or sources of sustenance, the newly homeless families lived constantly under threat of possible new evictions, should the Navy decide to expand again. The Navy's account focuses on what they called "fair value" of the price paid to the major landowners, and those transactions are well documented in this chapter. However, numerous testimonies (recorded in books and studies referenced here) tell of the most devastating tragedy to befall the people of Vieques—the overnight disappearance of entire communities coupled with the realization that no one could or would help them to resist such injustice. In fact, this defining moment of being "cast out of paradise" and isolation from the rest of Puerto Rico continues to mark Viequeses in many aspects of lives. While the initial employment created by base construction did help to replace jobs and income from the loss of so much land, its effects were merely temporary until the Navy halted construction in 1943.

Chapter Four—appropriately named "Interlude"—briefly describes efforts by the Puerto Rican government to address the serious economic crisis in Vieques, which was caused first by expropriations and then by the drying up of Navy construction jobs. In great part, the administrative transfer of unused Navy property to the Department of the Interior (and then to the Puerto Rican government) allowed it to be leased to the Puerto Rico Agricultural Company (PRACO) for a variety of agricultural projects, which "restored some jobs and alleviated some of the extreme poverty of 1943-1946" (p. 86).

However, such progress was short-lived, for as Chapter Five recounts, the Navy used the Cold War to justify its return to Vieques with a vengeance. This time it retook all of the lands previously “transferred,” expropriated even more land and imposed military occupation upon the island through ever-intensifying war games, weapons experiments, and the virtual destruction of economic activities not directly associated with satisfying the needs of thousands of soldiers in training. The imposition of and resistance to U.S.-style racial segregation in Vieques and Puerto Rico as part of renewed militarization is described in Chapter Six, while Chapter Seven recounts the destruction during the 1950s of what remained of Vieques’ pre-Navy economy—but also, of the social powder keg thus created that would fuel resistance to military occupation. Indeed, the situation in Vieques—effectively a society under direct and callous military occupation—called into question the true nature of “so-called ‘decolonization’ brought about by the creation of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico” (p. 147).

Chapter 8 is an epilogue entitled “Long-Term Effects.” While acknowledging that an account of the long-term effects of Navy occupation until the base finally closed in 2003 is beyond the scope of the book, the authors touch on issues such as population loss, economic development, and health. The latter in particular deserves much more attention than is devoted in this final chapter, since the negative ecological and social effects of military toxins will continue to multiply for generations to come. References for further research in this last chapter are sketchy, and would have been enhanced by including more fieldwork-based publications (see, for example, Berman Santana 2006).

Throughout the book, the authors emphasize the Navy’s interest in Vieques as taking shape during World War II, and continuing throughout the Cold War. As such, there is a tendency to minimize U.S. military designs beforehand. For example, they argue “no new major base construction had been undertaken in Puerto Rico since 1898...the only new major naval presence was...in Culebra that was acquired in 1899...but had not been developed or fortified” (p. 21). Some readers may interpret this as an argument that the social and economic impact of U.S. military presence from the 1898 invasion of Puerto Rico until World War II was fairly minimal. However, such an impression would contradict both the historical record and the well-documented perceptions of the local population. For example, the Navy arrived on Culebra in 1901 and forcibly removed the population from most of the island, in order to develop their base and practice ranges; this event is still referred to by Culebrenses as a collective trauma (Pérez Vega 2005). President Theodore Roosevelt declared the Culebra Naval Reservation in 1903; although military exercises varied in intensity during the next thirty years, there is little doubt that by 1939, bombing practice was a regular feature of life on Culebra. As for Vieques, Navy Secretary Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1919 conceived the idea of a huge

naval complex in eastern Puerto Rico, including Vieques and Culebra (Global Security 2005). As president, he personally supervised naval exercises in 1938 and 1939, which included temporarily removing Vieques residents from the eastern lands for bombing practice. The death in 1940 of two eastern Vieques residents from an explosive left over from military exercises offers graphic evidence that the island was indeed used by the Navy for military maneuvers before World War II (Giusti 2000). In 1939, Roosevelt appointed Admiral Leahy as Governor of Puerto Rico with orders to design the new complex and prepare Puerto Rican and federal legislation to expropriate the lands. While one might agree with Ayala and Bolívar that FDR was preparing the way for his “Caribbean Gibraltar” with a view toward eventual entry into World War II, it is clear that such plans predated the war by several decades. One might alternatively argue that the militarization of Vieques, Culebra, and much of Puerto Rico’s eastern coastline was a logical extension of Alfred Thayer Mahan’s nineteenth-century plan to make the United States a global naval power (1890). Indeed, by 1926, Puerto Rican newspapers were already reporting on Navy plans to establish a base in Vieques (Meléndez 1982).

Nonetheless, these are relatively minor issues when considering the value of this study. In *Battleship Vieques*, Ayala and Bolívar have produced a study rich in detail and nuanced with all the complexities of colonialism, militarism, and social change, and it deserves careful reading and analysis.

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