
Militarismo y clases sociales en Vieques: 1910-1950

By Miguel Ángel Santiago Ríos

San Juan: Ediciones Huracán, 2007

192 pages; \$21.95 [paper]

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Few authors are jailed defending their beliefs. Miguel Ángel Santiago is one of these. On Mother's Day 2000, Santiago was headed for the Naval Base of Roosevelt Roads with dozens of other protesters, detained for trespassing on naval property on the Island of Vieques. And so began the author's battle against the Navy and his quest for justice.

Santiago delights in sharing with his readers his struggles searching through multiple archives in order to obtain his most prized possession: a record detailing the expropriations. He studied the population census and income tax file returns. He searched for documents at the National Archives, the Architecture and Construction Archive at the University of Puerto Rico, the Puerto Rican Collection at the University of Puerto Rico's library, the General Archives of Puerto Rico, the Conde de Mirasol fort in Vieques, and the Luis Muñoz Marín Foundation. With this information at his disposal, Santiago details in *Militarismo y clases sociales en Vieques*, the expropriations on the Island of Vieques between 1910 and 1950.

The period studied in *Militarismo* covers the agricultural heyday in Vieques, traces the social and economic web of the powerful and influential Benítez family, and

details each and every one of the expropriations by the U.S. Navy, including the exact date of the expropriation, the original owners, the value of the land, and its location. The book also includes a valuable collection of maps, which help to illustrate the enormous amount of land expropriated by the military. Santiago states that this research hopes to provide an integral vision of the pillaging of Vieques by the armed forces of the United States.

In *Militarismo*, Santiago traces the history of the Benítez Sugar Company—at the time the only sugar factory in Vieques—and its collapse by the mid-1930s. It goes on to describe the bankruptcy prompted by its largest creditor, the Bank of Nova Scotia, and its purchase by Juan Ángel Tió, a wealthy San Germán entrepreneur. About two years after he purchased the Benítez Sugar Company and renamed it Central Playa Grande, it was forcibly “purchased” by the U.S. Navy. It is unclear from the discussions presented whether Tió actually benefited from this transaction. Santiago details all of the expropriations that occurred in Vieques between 1941 and 1950, and the short economic boom experienced as a result of the construction of the naval base between 1942 and the summer of 1943. In his findings, Santiago replicates the findings of Ayala (2001a, 2001b) and Ayala and Carro (2005), who had previously studied the same process of expropriation. Santiago does not seem to be aware of these previous studies, as they are not cited in his book.

Though not explicitly stated, *Militarismo*'s thesis is that the construction of the naval base was not necessary, for after the conclusion of Operation Barbarossa, which ended with the German defeat in Moscow by the Russian armed forces in late 1941, the tide of the war had turned in favor of the allies. Santiago also claims that the Popular Democratic Party, headed by Luis Muñoz Marín, could have been more forceful in persuading the U.S. Navy not to build the naval base, or once there, to return the expropriated lands at the conclusion of the war. Most historians would disagree with these assumptions.

On the timing of the turnaround of the war, the Caribbean theater was very active in 1942. Eighty percent of the sinkings of Allied boats by German submarines in the Caribbean occurred that year. It is also important to point out that with the exception of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, the Caribbean theater was the most successful hunting ground for German submarines during the war. Thus, from the point of view of the Navy, construction of the bases in the Caribbean at full speed in 1942 seemed like a rational course of action, not an unnecessary project, as Santiago claims. (For the collapse of shipping and the threat of starvation in Puerto Rico due to German submarine warfare, see “The Puerto Rican Economy during the War Year of 1942,” June 1943. AFLMM, Sección XII, Material de Proyecto de Recopilación de Documentos, Biblioteca Harry S. Truman.) Because German submarine warfare is out of the picture, and Santiago focuses instead on the land war on the Russian front, the actions of the Navy appear to Santiago as irrational, and the construction of the bases as whimsical and arbitrary. Instead of exploring the logic of U.S. imperial behavior during the war, Santiago assumes it to be purely irrational. Its only logic is disregard for the colonial population of Puerto Rico. While disregard for the well-being of the Puerto Rican population certainly characterized the behavior of the Navy, the driving force propelling the construction of the bases at hectic speed (causing many accidents and loss of human life in Vieques, for example) was German naval warfare in the Caribbean.

During the years when the United States was a participant in the Second World War, its economy was transformed from one whose main focus was producing consumer goods to an economy bent on producing military hardware. At both the economic and political levels, the needs of the armed forces were given the utmost priority. During the war years, and up to 1948, Puerto Rico's economy depended on federal grants, loans, and subsidies. It is therefore almost inconceivable to suggest that any one person or political party in Puerto Rico could have stood up to such a formidable opponent as the U.S. armed forces. Both of these assumptions detract from the archival research of this book. Even after the end of the war, when Puerto Rican Governor Jesús T. Piñero asked William D. Leahy, then a presidential aide, if the Navy would return Vieques, he said:

I don't think I can do anything about Vieques except tell Washington what you want. There is not much purpose in my talking about that to you. The island is strategically valuable. I think nowhere they can get a better one of higher value. This is a very important training area. It is a key in the overall Navy defenses. (Rodríguez Beruff 2002: 47)

Militarismo assumes an intricate knowledge of Puerto Rican history. When the author mentions the Partido Unión, or local personalities such as Eduardo Georgetti, Mariano Abril, Martín Travieso, Antonio R. Barceló, and Miguel Guerra Mondragón, as Santiago does on pages 28 and 29, he assumes that the reader knows who these characters are, and how they relate to the underlying storyline. This assumption possibly reduces the readership of this book, as most readers are not versed in all these details of Puerto Rican history. Reading this book would then require the average reader to study another book on Puerto Rican history, so that he or she may fully comprehend Santiago's intent.

The naval base construction in Vieques afforded its citizens an economic boom, though this was short lived. A severe economic bust was felt by the summer of 1943, as the construction of the base was hastily terminated. According to Santiago, the local government's effort to shore up the faltering economy through the use of Puerto Rico Agricultural Company (PRACO) was a failure, as it did not decisively improve the plight of the workers (pp. 138–9). Santiago dismisses all efforts by this state-financed corporation, as he states that PRACO only hired workers for a day and a half per week at a salary of \$2.62 per day. He is not aware of published research on precisely this topic, showing the impact of PRACO in Vieques during the period in question (Ayala and Bolívar 2004).

Recent studies have shown that PRACO did indeed have a significant social and economic impact in Vieques. Between 1946 and 1948, PRACO employed 40 percent of the workforce and invested \$1,900,000, buying land and cattle, and financing construction projects. Though the salary was lower than that previously paid by the military contractors, it was higher than the average \$1.50 per day paid by the sugar industry (Ayala and Bolívar 2004). When analyzed within this context, Santiago's \$2.62 per day is a pretty attractive salary.

Given the thorough research required to write this book, we were disappointed that no mention was made of recent articles that might have greatly enhanced the value of this publication and clarified some of the factual points we are challenging here (Ayala 2001a and 2001b, Ayala and Bolívar 2004, Ayala and Carro 2005).

For anyone interested in learning about Vieques and the naval expropriations during this time frame, *Militarismo y clases sociales en Vieques* serves as a good reference point.¹

NOTES

¹ For those interested in contextualizing the Vieques experience within the broader framework of the history of Puerto Rico, I would suggest also reading Ayala and Bernabe (2007).

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