

*Soldiers of the Nation:
Military Service and Modern
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BOOK REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Puerto Rico's military history represents the intersection of colonial control and indigenous agency, where military service functioned both as an instrument of imperial power and a means of local empowerment. The U.S. military sought to integrate Puerto Ricans into the armed forces while reinforcing its power, yet service members used military opportunities to reshape their own identities and political landscape. This created a positive economic impact and maintained the island as a territory. Puerto Rican veterans played an important role in post-war political changes, showing how military service in a territorial environment elevates unification and opposition. This review highlights the continued impact of colonial legacies on military structures and national identity.

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Harry Franqui-Rivera describes the continuing impact of colonial history on military recruitment, deployment, and experience in the modern-day United States (U.S.) territory of Puerto Rico. Not long before American rule over Puerto Rico, Spain suppressed political and military resistance in Puerto Rico until losing the island to the U.S. in the 1898 Spanish-American War. However, Puerto Rico's alienation from the American mainland population fueled Puerto Rican national identities. Furthermore, when U.S. troops arrived in Puerto Rico, Spain could not count on Puerto Rican loyalty despite 4 centuries of colonial rule because, in the late 19th century, Puerto Ricans had begun forming distinct national identities. They began separating themselves from Spanish colonial rule while maintaining cultural ties to Spain. Franqui-Rivera argues that this complex relationship demonstrates how a colonized population can reject political loyalty while retaining cultural connections to their colonizers. The transition of Puerto Rico from Spanish to U.S. control reflects the lasting influence of colonial rule on both national identity and military dynamics (pp. 35–40).

In Puerto Rico, military service was vital in shaping individual and national identities. Franqui-Rivera explains how the incorporation of Puerto Ricans into the U.S. military, especially during World War II and the Korean War, shows an extensive colonial legacy. Furthermore, that colonial legacy is one in which military institutions serve as mechanisms of control and opportunity. The U.S. government planned to use Puerto Ricans for military service to recreate Puerto Rican society. However, Puerto Ricans ultimately hijacked this process, leading to unplanned political and cultural transformations. This important relationship between colonial structures and local population demonstrates how military service can function as both an instrument of imperial power and a platform for local empowerment (pp. 40–47).

Franqui-Rivera explains the historical recruitment of Puerto Ricans into the U.S. Armed Forces as a direct extension of colonial military practices. He mentions how colonial powers have long used military service to integrate and control their subjects by incentivizing them to create economic stability, social mobility, and national belonging. However, this was done intentionally to maintain complete control over the status and political rights of Puerto Rico and its people. His analysis explains how the U.S. military's use of Puerto Rican service members symbolizes a pattern of using recruitment not only to fill military ranks but also as a tool for promoting loyalty and reshaping Puerto Rican identity. Franqui-Rivera then argues that providing Puerto Ricans with access to higher education and economic benefits (i.e., the GI Bill) through military service aided in the creation of a new Puerto Rican middle class, which mirrored an extensive colonial pattern that serving in the

U.S. Armed Forces provides an economic opportunity and a way of reinforcing dependence on the colonial power (pp. 50–62).

Subsequently, the increased recruitment into the U.S. Armed Forces by Puerto Ricans led to unexpected consequences for U.S. policymakers. As Puerto Ricans entered the military in significant numbers, they gained skills, experiences, and a sense of agency that reshaped their relationship with the island and the U.S. mainland. Franqui-Rivera explains how the process of “creolization” transformed military institutions into spaces where Puerto Ricans could declare their identities and ambitions. Moreover, this experience aligns with Benedict Anderson's Theory of Nationalism, which suggests that exposure to metropolitan institutions can inspire colonial subjects to reimagine their own national communities. Franqui-Rivera argues that in the case of Puerto Rico, service in the U.S. Armed Forces became a key element in developing the modern-day *Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico* (Commonwealth) due to veterans leveraging their newfound status to participate in the island's socioeconomic restructuring and political realignment (pp. 145–153).

Franqui-Rivera describes how the lived experiences of Puerto Rican military personnel highlight the difficulty of serving within a colonial structure. Military service members navigated an institution that provided opportunities and reinforced structural inequalities. Furthermore, military service was a pathway to economic mobility and social prestige; however, it sustained U.S. control over the island. For example, the GI Bill allowed U.S. military veterans in Puerto Rico to finish their high school education, attend vocational programs, and enroll in college courses at prominent educational institutions (i.e., The University of Puerto Rico), which provided the skills needed to industrialize the island to U.S. standards. Puerto Rican service members found themselves balancing their American military roles with their distinct cultural and national identities, which mirrored the experiences of other colonial subjects who served in imperial armed forces. Franqui-Rivera explains that dual identity reflects how colonialism influences military operations, decision-making processes, and interactions with post-colonial societies. While Puerto Rican service members contributed to U.S. military objectives, their service also reinforced the structural realities of colonial governance, where their roles were shaped by decisions made far from the island itself (pp. 153–158).

Franqui-Rivera explains that Puerto Rican veterans returning to the island were vital in shaping its political discourse. Their service experience gave them a new sense of agency, enabling them to advocate for political and economic change while emphasizing how this

transformation occurred within a colonial framework that limited full autonomy. The contradiction of military service as a tool for integration and a trigger for political consciousness underscores the broader struggles of colonized peoples within military institutions. Franqui-Rivera explains how the experience of Puerto Rican veterans demonstrates how colonial subjects often serve as agents of imperial military power and participants in their own national struggles. This pattern is seen in many other post-colonial societies where military service has shaped post-colonial governance and identity (pp. 158–168).

Franqui-Rivera explains that the process of military popularization did not lead to complete decolonization. Instead, he argues, it reinforced Puerto Rico's continued dependency on the U.S. while simultaneously fostering a unique Puerto Rican identity that was neither fully American nor entirely independent. He further discusses how Florencia Mallon's framework of hegemony suggests that military mobilization can lead to significant political transformation. However, this occurs within a contested space where competing forces negotiate power. Franqui-Rivera explains how, by appropriating military institutions for their own purposes, Puerto Ricans reshaped their political landscape. However, with the colonial framework remaining intact, it demonstrates the complexities of military service as a means of empowerment and a tool of imperial control (pp. 169–172). Ultimately, Puerto Rico's experience displays the dual nature of military service in colonial and post-colonial contexts. While the U.S. military sought to use service as a means of assimilating Puerto Ricans and maintaining control over the island, Puerto Ricans themselves utilized military service to advance their own social and political agendas (pp. 199–213).

In conclusion, Harry Franqui-Rivera's work explains how military institutions serve as imperial control and avenues for local agency, shaping national identity in complex ways. The U.S. military integrated Puerto Ricans into its ranks to maintain control while offering economic and social benefits that created new identities. Military service in the U.S. Armed Forces created tensions as Puerto Ricans used their lived experiences to challenge colonial hierarchies and assert their own political aspirations. The transformation of Puerto Rican service members from imperial subjects to agents of local change reflects broader patterns in colonial military history, where service often leads to unintended political consequences. When exploring colonialism, this book explains that Puerto Rico is an example of how military organizations can strengthen and overturn imperial power, demonstrating the continued difficulty of colonial military service and the formation of national identity.

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For my daughter, who is the greatest blessing in my life.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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