

of Peru difficult. Méndez does not argue for the exceptionality of northern Ayacucho, but sees it as a place where problems afflicting the national society take sharper contours or more extreme expression. The question remains, however, how much can be extrapolated from this example. That she chooses to extend her conclusions until the 1850s, when the material presented only goes until the 1830s, is also problematic because this work does not show how these particular groups acted during the convulsed years that followed the Peru-Bolivia Confederation (1836–1839) and how they participated in the caudillo politics of the 1840s and 1850s.

The lack of work on peasant political mobilisation in Republican Peru, leads Méndez to assert that it is plausible that the scenario she describes for Huanta applies elsewhere and that national caudillos may have sought to court local powers with sway over the peasantry in order to enlarge their armies. However, we will not know for certain until more studies of the quality of this one appear. Her conclusion, that in the early caudillo period the fiercest political antagonism occurred not between the national ruling elites and the peasants, but rather between the various political factions competing for control of the state (p. 241), is proven by the evidence she presents, showing how peasants were not just cannon fodder whose support could be taken for granted, but that they had to be won over. This is an immense contribution not only to the study of nineteenth century Peruvian history, but to the scholarship of the region and must be read by every specialist wishing to gain further understanding of the rural Andes.

*University of Kent*

NATALIA SOBREVILLA PEREA

*J. Lat. Amer. Stud.* 40 (2008). doi:10.1017/S0022216X08004471

James Schofield Saeger, *Francisco Solano López and the Ruination of Paraguay: Honor and Egocentrism* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), pp. xi + 239, £53.00, £22.99, pb; €83.48, €36.21, pb.

Francisco Solano López, who ruled Paraguay for just eight years (1862–70), is notorious in Latin American history as the president who led the small nation into the disastrous Triple Alliance War against the combined forces of Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay. Refusing to capitulate, Paraguay finally lost a quarter of its national territory to Argentina and Brazil, and up to 60% of its population, including a staggering 90% of its adult male population. Without doubt, López is the most controversial figure in the history of the country, in part due to repeated efforts over the past century to reinterpret events from a partisan and ideological point of view. Indeed, the *lopista/anti-lopista* debate over whether López was the glorious hero or irredeemable villain continues to this day in different and evolving forms. Most importantly, the dominant *lopista* discourse – which presents López as the personification of the country's heroism – has played a central role in the ideological narrative of the Colorado Party, in power since 1947.

James Schofield Saeger's new book, *Francisco Solano López and the Ruination of Paraguay: Honor and Egocentrism*, stands out in a number of ways. First, it identifies a theme which is not only permanently topical in Paraguay, but has also recently enjoyed renewed interest in contemporary academic historical analysis in English. Historians such as Thomas Whigham, Jerry Cooney and Chris Leuchars have produced some outstanding work to add to our knowledge and understanding of

the period. Second, there is a conscious attempt to make the book exciting, fast-moving and interesting, with the aim, one imagines, of reaching a wider audience. Thirdly, and perhaps most interestingly for a historian, this book takes a bold political stance, with Saeger planting his flag firmly and unashamedly in the anti-*lopista* camp. This is no balanced or nuanced analysis of the life of López, but rather an attempt to dispel the myths, challenge the hegemonic (Colorado) narrative, and present the dictator as Saeger believes he was; a violent and egocentric tyrant who led his country to disaster.

Given the politicised manipulation of the López myth in the dominant Colorado discourse, Saeger is perhaps justified in seeking to correct a clear imbalance. The danger of course is that the analysis may go too far the other way and present a distorted or one-sided analysis. And this is precisely what occurs. What comes across in the book is an almost personal hatred of López, a figure repeatedly criticised for his distorted sense of honour, his obsession with pride, and his lust for fame and glory. He is presented as cowardly, incompetent, arrogant and lacking in empathy – in short ‘an evil and disgusting man’ (p. 218) with no redeeming features. There is little doubt López was personally an unlikeable figure who was increasingly despotic towards the end of his rule. However, it seems slightly unbecoming in a historian to take such a personalised and one-sided stance. The aim of the biographer is surely not so much to judge or condemn a character – however despicable – but to seek to understand, explain and deepen our understanding of the character, his decisions, his drive, his motives or his aims.

Whatever his faults, López alone was hardly responsible for the Triple Alliance War. From independence onwards, Paraguayans firmly believed that their very existence was threatened by invasion from both Brazil and Argentina, an attitude that fed into the country’s unique form of autonomous development, its isolation and its obsession with defence. Thus the sections on contextualisation are particularly important for us to gain a greater understanding of López and the War. It is to be regretted therefore that these contextual sections are so brief and superficial. Indeed, analysis of José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia, the dominant figure of the first 30 years of independence, a figure crucial in reflecting Paraguay’s perspective on regional affairs, is given just two pages. The combination of thin contextualisation, and the fact that Saeger limits blame for the War on the obsessive ego and quest for personal glorification of López, means the reader is left with little idea of the deeper causes of the conflict, or indeed why so many Paraguayans willingly followed López to almost certain death. A despot can compel obedience through punishment and threat, but he cannot compel courage, blind loyalty and extraordinary self-sacrifice, especially on such a vast scale.

Perhaps the main criticism of the book is that of its approach. Recent academic works on the period have sought to go beyond the tired, ahistorical and distorting lens of the *lopista* vs anti-*lopista* dichotomy, using the wealth of archival and published material in Paraguay to cast light on new areas of research, broaden the parameters of academic study and offer a more nuanced analysis. However, instead of building on this, Saeger returns to the well-trodden and ideologically fuelled debate on López, relying greatly on interesting but well-known secondary sources written by foreign observers at the time. In this sense, the book is polemical but unproductive, adding little in terms of new research, analysis or understanding.

Finally, Saeger makes a conscious effort to inject excitement into the book through anecdote, light diversion or exaggeration. Thus substantial attention is

paid to the more sensationalist side of the López ‘story’. For example Elisa Lynch is referred to as his ‘fair, foreign treasure’ (p. 183), with the style at times bordering on the journalistic. Neither of these approaches quite works. The story is already gripping, while the effort to produce a more readable book results in awkward, stilted expressions, such as where Saeger refers to current perceptions of López in Paraguay in the following way:

*‘Professional historians and a significant number of able men and women know the truth. They fear giving the public an honest appraisal of López. Ambivalence characterizes the twenty-first-century view of him. Privately, competent historians have taken the measure of the cowardly López’* (p. 218).

Overall, the project has a clear, timely and interesting pitch; an accessible, fast-moving account of López which seeks to rectify alleged distortions of the truth, for a wider academic community. Unfortunately, the book does not quite deliver. Instead, we have a biography that is heavily partial in terms of analysis, light on contextual interpretation and both limited and repetitive in terms of argument. It is also weak in terms of style and expression, with non-standard referencing and little effort to produce any fluency, much less lyricism, in the text. The overall impression is that this is a missed opportunity and that the work would have benefited from a longer period of gestation and more ambitious aims. There is still much to be written about this era of Paraguayan history, and much archival and published evidence to be analysed and brought together – and some very able historians are doing just that. It is therefore a shame that this book should have evolved into a rushed, polemical, almost sensationalist work, rather than the considered, analytical and balanced biography that would have contributed to our understanding of the man and the era.

*University of Bath*

PETER LAMBERT

*J. Lat. Amer. Stud.* 40 (2008). doi:10.1017/S0022216X08004483

Jürgen Buchenau, *Plutarco Elías Calles and the Mexican Revolution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), pp. xxvii + 277, £22.99, pb.

Jürgen Buchenau’s *Plutarco Elías Calles and the Mexican Revolution* is a well-crafted life and times of one of the revolution’s most important figures. Focusing on Calles’ political career and eschewing psychological analysis, Buchenau concludes that Calles was ‘an authoritarian populist who defied easy characterization’ (p. 204). His career reflected the contradictions of revolutionary populism, which flourished as a result of the revolution’s lack of ideological clarity; it also, Buchenau argues, anticipated the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas in more respects than historians have recognised.

Buchenau begins by exploring how Calles was shaped by life in Sonora, where the positivism taught in the schools and the modernising effects of US investment were critical influences. Calles failed in his early economic enterprises, but before the Porfiriato ended he managed to achieve local political office. He joined the opposition to the regime only when forced to choose sides. When the fighting of the revolution’s first stage was over, Calles opened a store on the border in Agua Prieta. Appointed political boss, he was able to capitalise by smuggling in goods from the United States. The pillars of his programme were order, morality and public education (he had briefly been a school teacher, and the need to improve education became one of his few core political values). In 1912, he was drawn into military service against rebel Pascual Orozco, but demonstrated little ability on