


Latinos, World War I and World War II

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As far back as the Revolution, Latinos in the United States have made important contributions to the American military and war efforts. However, it was not until the twentieth century that the Latino community played significant roles in the military. World War I marked the beginning of assimilation for many Latinos, and World War II saw an increasing number of Latinos in the military. The two world wars also influenced the Latino homefront, as Latinos moved into new occupations and dealt with wartime discrimination.

LATINOS IN WORLD WAR I

Although a lack of records makes it difficult to precisely measure the role of Latinos in the U.S. military during World War I, documentation demonstrates their important, though largely unrecognized, contribution to the war effort. Many Latinos from states such as Texas and New Mexico served during World War I.

Because the United States was largely unprepared for war, the military had to induct and train soldiers quickly. Many of the new recruits spoke little or no English, including some Latinos. At first, these men were sent to development battalions at military training camps, where they were given little attention. Sometimes ridiculed by English-speaking soldiers, many Latinos and other ethnic minorities wanted to leave the military. In response, the military developed the Camp Gordon Plan, in which soldiers were separated into language groups with officers who spoke the language of the soldiers. Once this communications gap was bridged, their military training then continued in their native language. Most of the Latinos who received such training were at the Camp Cody, New Mexico, training camp.

Some Latinos saw combat duty, and a few received honors. Nicolas Lucero, a nineteen-year-old soldier from Albuquerque, won the French Croix de Guerre. Marcelino Serna, an enlisted man in the army, fought on the front-line trenches of France, where he earned numerous medals. However, despite capturing twenty-four German soldiers, he never received the Medal of Honor. An officer told Serna that he would not receive such an award because he was merely a private and that he could never advance to a higher level because of his limited English-language skills.

At the same time, for many Latinos in Texas and other states, World War I represented their first experience with assimilation into mainstream U.S. society. For the first time, the government and society in general sought active involvement of Latinos in national life. Although some Latinos refused to register for the draft to protest being treated as second-class citizens, others hoped that active participation in the war effort would increase opportunities for them. Much discrimination remained, and Hispanic participation in World War I can be seen as the start of a struggle for equal rights in the twentieth century.

LATINOS IN WORLD WAR II

Exact figures for the number of Latinos who fought in World War II are not known. Estimates range from 250,000 to 500,000, or about 2.5 to 5 percent of the number of soldiers who fought in the war. The only precise information available is for Puerto Ricans, who numbered about 53,000. In addition, some 200 Puerto Rican women formed part of the Women's Army Corps. One reason why it is difficult to know the number of Latinos is that, with few exceptions, they were not segregated into their own units. Rather, soldiers of Hispanic descent could be found throughout the military, particularly those units that originated in the Southwest.

Latinos were among the first U.S. soldiers who saw combat in the war. Before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the United States sought to bolster the defense of the Philippines. Two of the units sent came from the New Mexico National Guard, which contained a heavy representation of both Hispanic officers and enlisted men. In part, these men were selected for their Spanish-speaking abilities because many in the Philippines still spoke Spanish.

A number of Hispanic soldiers received honors for their participation in the war. One of the most famous is Private José P. Martínez. Martínez was born in 1920 in Taos, New Mexico, to a family with a long line of Spanish-speaking ancestors in New Mexico. In 1927 his family moved to Colorado seeking a better life. Both Martínez and his brother were drafted during the war. Martínez was killed in action in the Aleutian Islands in an

attack on Japanese positions in May 1943. He was the first Hispanic Medal of Honor recipient during World War II. Today, Martínez's name can be found on scholarships, a chapter of the Disabled American Veterans, and an American Legion post.

The heroics of soldiers such as Martínez helped to temper anti-Hispanic sentiments in the military that resulted from the Zoot Suit riots in Los Angeles in June 1943. Confrontations between servicemen and Mexican-American youths, known as *pachucos*, erupted into a race riot in that city. The police did little to stop attacks by soldiers on the Hispanic community, and the media played up the anti-Hispanic sentiments. U.S. enemies in the war used the riots as propaganda against the United States.

Many other Latinos served in noncombatant roles during the war, including numerous Hispanic members of the 713th Railway Operation Battalion of the Military Railway Service. Also known as the Santa Fe Battalion, the 713th was formed at Camp Clovis, New Mexico, in 1942 of experienced railway personnel. The unit went to North Africa in 1943, where it operated trains, built new track, and repaired old track along the coast of North Africa to supply U.S. and British units. The 713th later served in Italy, France, and Germany.

Latinos also played an important role on the home-front during World War II. During the Great Depression, many Hispanic Americans, especially Mexicans, had been repatriated because of a lack of jobs. However, once the United States entered the war, there was great demand for additional workers to replace those who left their jobs for the military. The governments of Mexico and the United States forged an agreement known as the Bracero Program, which brought Mexican contract laborers to work in agricultural jobs in the United States starting in 1942. By 1947 some 200,000 Mexican workers came to the United States under this program. The Bracero Program allowed these workers both to earn an income and to show their patriotism.

Many other Latinos worked in the defense industry during World War II. Traditionally, they had been excluded from such jobs. However, with the onset of the war and the demand for new workers, Latinos could be found in shipyards, armament factories, and aircraft facilities. In 1941 there were no Mexican Americans in the shipyards of Los Angeles, but by 1944 there were more than 17,000. Most of these Mexican-American workers toiled in the lowest-paying jobs in the defense industry. Thousands of Mexican-American women joined the ranks of defense workers, often working as riveters in factories. Formerly limited to jobs as maids, garment workers, or farm laborers, Mexican women in defense jobs found higher wages and an opportunity to intermingle with female workers of other racial groups.

The history of Latinos in the first half of the twentieth century illustrates one of the ironies of America's wars. World Wars I and II provided expanded and new opportunities for Latinos, as it did for African Americans, to advance economically and to integrate further into the society. Latinos demonstrated their patriotism by either carrying arms or supporting the war effort with their labor. Latinos built on their achievements to challenge discrimination. In this way, multiculturalism and the extension of civil liberties in America were as much outcomes of two world wars as were victories over imperialism and totalitarianism abroad.

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