



**“Mexican Americans in the Great Migration, the Depression, and World War II”**

**Martin Mercado**

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**Dr. Andrade**

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After the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed in 1848, the Mexican American War came to an end and the living conditions of Mexicans living in the United States became hard. Many suffered from discrimination, racism, prejudice and injustice. Nevertheless, Mexican Americans showed This Treaty added additional territory to the United States including Arizona, California, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah and Wyoming, and Mexico also gave up all claims to Texas and gave recognition to the Rio Grande as a southern boundary. Nevertheless, the Mexican government had received a \$15 million payment by the American government and an agreement of reducing \$3 million in Mexican debts to the U.S. in compensation for the loss of their territory. Gonzales states, “The Mexican Republic paid a heavy price for its setbacks at midcentury. The loss of Texas and the war in the United States contributed more to Mexico’s impoverishment, its apparent sterility, its xenophobia, its lack of self-esteem, and its general demoralization than any other event of the nineteenth century” (Gonzales, 80). Following the Mexican- American War, Mexicans underwent a number of events that affected not only them, but millions of other people as well. The Great Migration, The Depression, and World War II, were events where millions of Mexicans played an important part.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, over a million of Mexicans left their hometowns and fled to the United States, where the majority settled in the Southwest, as well as other parts of the country. This great movement is historically known as “The Great Migration”. Prior to this great event, in Mexico, a Revolution was taking place. In the year 1910, General Francisco I. Madero along with thousands of poor indigenous people rose against Porfirio Diaz and the Mexican

government. For years the Indigenous people of Mexico had dealt with discrimination and injustice from the government, the land that they owned was taken away and they were forced to work as peons in *haciendas* where they were treated like slaves. In *Mexicanos*, Manuel G. Gonzales states, “The most unfortunate victims of progress were Indians. At the end of the twentieth century, the indigenous community in Mexico was still enormous; more than a third of its inhabitants were listed as Indians in official records...” (Gonzales, 116). Diaz himself was part *Mixtec*, yet he still held prejudice against the Indigenous population of Mexico, he was convinced that the native population was hopelessly backward and that their existence posed a grave obstacle to modernization.

When the Mexican Revolution came to an end in 1920, the situation between the Indigenous peasants and the government were somewhat alleviated. Nevertheless, there was not enough arable land to meet satisfy the needs of a desperate rural population. On the other hand, another situation that lead a great population of Mexicans to flee to the North, was a religious rebellion that took place in the western Mexico in the late 1920's, this event was labeled as the Cristero Rebellion. During this period of time, foreign priests were being expelled from the country and parochial schools were being closed. A holy war was then initiated between the government and the clergymen along with the peasants who had allied with them. Violence emerged throughout western Mexico, killing thousands of peasants and innocent bystanders. Therefore, this tragic event led thousands of Mexicans to flee to the north and enter the United States.

“Altogether, during the Revolution and its aftermath, a million people, some of them

political exiles representing every class of society, most of them starving peasants, moved north to seek a better life across the border... in fact a large numbers of Mexicans had been entering the United States even before the revolution” (Gonzales, 120).

Once Mexican Immigrants were settled in the United States, mostly in the southern regions, work opportunities in industries such as mining, railroad maintenance, and agriculture were occupied by these immigrants who were seeking a better life. Although, Mexicans had escaped their country due to the crucial circumstances in which they lived in, in the United States they found nothing but the same treatment from their superiors. “The exploitation Mexican immigrants suffered in industry and agriculture was galling, but the options for these workers were extremely limited. Unable to speak English and ignorant on their legal rights, most were forced to endure indignities in silence” (Gonzales, 131). It is important to acknowledge the hard work and suffering that Mexicans had to go through in order to overcome discrimination, racism, prejudice and injustice, not only in their country, but also in the United States. On the other hand, another event that later affected the Mexicans and Mexican-Americans living in the U.S. was the great depression.

By the mid 1930's, Mexicanos in the U.S. joined labor movements, striking for better working conditions. Due to this event, thousands of Mexicans were forced to repatriate to Mexico, while others did voluntarily. Nevertheless, the most important historic event that emerged in the 1930's, was The Great Depression. It became the most long lasting economic crisis in the history of the United States, where in 1929; the stock market crashed and wiped out hundreds of investors. For the next several years, industrial output declined, causing extreme

unemployment levels around the country. The Mexican community was one of the most affected during this period. The region where most Mexicans resided was in the southwest, therefore this region became the most affected during the Depression, Gonzales states, “Less industrialized than other sections of the United States, the Southwest, where the great majority of Mexicanos resided, appeared better able to weather economic fluctuations. Both mining and railroads, however, were forced to make major cuts, and southwestern farmers were not much better off” (Gonzales, 140). Due to these major events, unemployed Mexicans were forced to leave the countryside and move to the cities. East Los Angeles became home for thousands of Mexicans escaping the effects of The Great Depression. “By 1930, Los Angeles, with 97,116 Mexicanos living within its city limits, had the second-largest Mexican population in the world, surpassed only Mexico City itself” (Gonzales, 142).

Other issues regarding Mexicanos during The Great Depression dealt with racial tensions among white supremacists organizations. During the 1920’s the “Mexican Problem” was a popular topic all throughout the nation, where anti-immigrant organizations accused the Mexicans of increasing crime, lowering educational standards, and creating slums. Nevertheless, in the 1930’s, these negative stereotypes against Mexicanos were still in practice. Professor Roy L. Garis, who saw Mexicans as the “human swine” relates to them as the following:

“Their minds run to nothing higher than animal functions-eat, sleep, and sexual debauchery. In every huddle of Mexican shacks one meets the same idleness, hordes of hungry dogs, and filthy children with faces plastered with flies, disease, lice, human filth, stench, promiscuous fornication, bastardy, lounging, apathetic peons and lazy squaws,

beans and dried chili, liquor, general squalor, and envy and hatred of the gringo. These people sleep by day and prowl by night like coyotes, stealing anything they can get their hands on, no matter how useless it may be. Nothing left outside is safe unless padlocked or chained down” (Gonzales, 148).

However, in order to restrict Mexican entry into the United States, congress was forced to pass legislation in 1929, making illegal entry a criminal offense. Despite all the negative accusations against Mexicanos during this period, they fought to stay in the country, although a majority of them were sent back to Mexico.

Another important role played by Mexicanos in the United States, was during World War II. On December 7, 1941, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor forcing the United States into war. A large number of Mexicano/Latino men were chosen to fight for a country that had always rejected them. “Estimates of Latinos engaged in active military service vary between 250,000 and 500,000, huge number considering an overall population of 2.7 million. Most Mexicanos were drafted into the service, like their compatriots-altogether, 10 million men were inducted” (Gonzales, 164). After World War II ended, many veterans had no jobs or education degrees; therefore, the U.S. government introduced a new bill known as the G.I. bill. The G.I. bill passed on 22 June 1944 was one of the most important legislative forces for social change in the United States, this bill paid for the education of 7.8 million soldiers reentering civil life, many of them Mexicanos.

Although Mexicans have been victims of social injustice and discrimination in their own country, they came to the United States for a better life, just like today, not only Mexicans, but

many other immigrants, come to this country in search for a better life. It is important to mention that without the hard work of the immigrants of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the work of the immigrants of this century, the economy of this country has would not be where it stands today and perhaps it would be just like in The Great Depression.

#### Work Cited:

- Gonzales, M. (2009). *Mexicanos: A history of Mexicans in the United States* (2nd ed.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.