

## Making War to Make the State

Review by David R. Mares

MIGUEL ANGEL CENTENO. *Blood and Debt: War and the Nation-State in Latin America*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002, 329 pp. \$45.00 cloth.

Centeno tackles an old theme in international relations: the relationship between war and state capacity, or state-building. Thucydides gave us an answer in Pericles' funeral oration: Athens was strong and the envy of others because she was powerful in war, and she was powerful in war because her citizens understood that they were better off if Athens was strong. Centeno provides an updated version of this answer by critiquing the argument that war makes the state. Along the way he addresses the developmental failure of Latin American states and the "Long Peace" in Latin America's international

relations. The book questions the bellicose model of state development. The bellicose model, built upon a stylized model of European state-building, argues that the demands of fighting total war produce states that are capable of extracting resources from society to fight. States unable to generate the resources to fight are eliminated along the way. As a byproduct of making war, states wind up providing the public goods required for social and economic development. Jackson and Rosberg used the African case to demonstrate the importance of historical circumstances in understanding the link between war and state-building.<sup>1</sup> An international system that delegitimized conquest made it too costly for African powers to dismantle each other, while colonial borders that were incongruent with tribal borders made leaders of these new states reluctant to question the territorial integrity of neighbors lest their own minority tribes raise the same issues at home. The consequence was an absence

of war and the survival of states incapable of providing the context for development and stability. Centeno adds the Latin American case (excluding Central America and the Caribbean) to this literature.

Centeno is at his best in the historical analysis of the dynamics of nation and citizen-making in Latin America (Chapters 4 and 5, respectively). He weaves in and out of intra-elite conflict, making an excellent case that, combined with racial and class divisions, it produced a situation in the nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries in which those in control of the state did not want a strong state.

cently fewer wars than Europe: three compared to eleven.<sup>2</sup>

The characteristics for determining whether these were the right type of wars are sometimes contradictory. Latin American wars in the nineteenth century were less intense than in Europe, North America, the Middle East, and Africa as measured by the percentage of population deaths per year. But the mortality rates of war as an average percentage of the population killed were far higher, indicating that these wars were longer

---

## The U.S. experience provides an alternative explanation for weak states in Latin America.

---

and deadlier. The intensity of twentieth century wars is significantly less than that for Europe, North America, and Asia, but similar to Africa and slightly less than for the Middle East and North Africa.

The mortality rates for twentieth century wars in South America and Mexico, however, are higher than anywhere else. It is hard to believe these figures, but Centeno's single paragraph discussion of them simply claims that Latin America's wars were "generally nonviolent."

What about the argument that Latin America's wars came "at the wrong time?" Following standard criteria, Centeno argues that "nation-states" were not created in Latin America until after 1880. The wars Latin America experienced in the twentieth century were not total wars except for the Chaco War between Bolivia and Paraguay. Yet, a short war that leads to important losses of people, territory, resources, and symbols should stimulate the loser to increase state capacity. Were there disputes with major stakes in the twentieth century in Latin America? The

Following the standard view, Centeno argues that Latin America has a "lack of war experience." But the comparisons of war occurrence across regions do not support that claim. In the nineteenth century, Europe had fifteen wars, and Latin America had seventeen. In the post-World War II period, Europe has had five wars, Asia five, and Latin America three wars. Only in the first half of the twentieth century did Latin America have signif-

icantly fewer wars than Europe: three compared to eleven.<sup>2</sup>

2,000-5,000 Honduran dead in the 1969 war would be the equivalent of the U.S. losing 100,000-250,000 people today. In 1941, Ecuador lost 40 percent of the territory it claimed. Argentina in 1982 and Ecuador in 1995, engaged in wars over small territories with the knowledge that they would lose if they became total wars, and did so with overwhelming popular support at the outset. Disputes over boundaries, fisheries, trade routes, and migration flows continue to plague the region. That state elites tried to increase capacity after these losses is clear even in the case of Argentina's defeat in the Malvinas.<sup>3</sup> That they failed is better explained by factors other than the type or timing of war.

Centeno argues that disputes in the twentieth century could not produce war because the elite and popular opinion did not consider war a "feasible policy." But six wars did occur, two conflicts had over 500 battlefield related deaths, important arms races occurred in 1906-12 and in the 1970s, and the elite did not protest when military regimes in Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina mobilized for war in 1976-78. The Militarized Interstate Dispute database contains over 200 instances in the twentieth century when Latin American politicians, whether military or civilian, used military force in their relations with neighbors. If elites and popular opinion both believed war to be infeasible, leaders would not have rattled sabers.<sup>4</sup>

Another reason Centeno cites for the alleged absence of war is that Latin Americans lack the hatred to fight their neighbors. But hatred is often developed after war begins. The British royal family changed its name to the House of Windsor only after war with Germany; Germans became "the Hun" for the United

States only after World War I threatened U.S. interests. Hatred may be less a cause of war than a strategy for fighting it. Stalin went from representing evil to "Uncle Joe" when the United States wanted an ally against Hitler; "the Hun" disappeared after peace was signed.

Centeno's critique of the argument that "war creates capable states" is convincing, but not for the reasons he postulates. The U.S. experience provides an alternative explanation for weak states in Latin America. U.S. nationalism is not based on shared experiences of war; rather it develops out of the definition of the political community. For all its weaknesses in implementation and willingness to accept injustices, the United States is defined by the Constitution. Individuals are willing to fight for the United States because they see themselves as Americans. That was true for African-Americans before World War II and even for Japanese-Americans during the war, even while their families were in internment camps. U.S. elites were divided from Independence through the Civil War: Washington's army had trouble getting money, supplies, and men, as less than half the population actively supported Independence; and the New England states refused to lend money to the federal government or call up soldiers, but lent money to England. During the War of 1812, Westward expansion produced near civil war in "Bloody Kansas." Yet, the state continued to develop its capacity to govern and promote social and economic development. The difference between North and South America's ability to overcome these obstacles, absorb immigrants, and educate them lies more in the creation of a limited state rather than in a state able to "impose its will on a population,"

which Latin American elites and Centeno prefer.

Lastly, Centeno suggests that his analysis uncovers a “conundrum for policymakers” by pitting the requisites for international peace against those for internal peace and welfare. Latin American states do not make war because they are weak, and because they are weak their societies and economies are underdeveloped. To strengthen these states would make development more likely, but would also produce war. The dominant paradigm in international studies today, however, argues that democratic states do not make war against other democratic states, as well as that democratic states are more likely to be stable and prosperous

than non-democratic ones. Centeno does not address why his pessimistic view is more likely than the democratic peace.

*Blood and Debt* presents an interesting narrative about state development in Latin America. Centeno has added to the literature that questions the link between war-making and state-making. However, his argument remains within that paradigm, only demonstrating that the link is historically conditioned, not inevitable. War can happen and weak states may result and survive. Fortunately, other scholars have pointed the way in which capable states can develop without war.

David R. Mares is Professor of Political Science and Director of Graduate Studies at the University of California, San Diego.

#### NOTES

1 Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg, “Why Africa’s Weak States Persist,” *World Politics* 35 (1982):1.

2 *Militarized Interstate Dispute data base, hostility level 5*, revised version to 1992. Author’s addition of Croatia-Yugoslavia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Ecuador-Peru. See my discussion in *Violent Peace: Militarized Interstate Bargaining in Latin America*, (New York: Colombia University Press, 2001).

3 The Argentine decision to be the unassailable ally of the U.S. under Menem was designed to garner the resources and credibility to develop the Argentine state (smaller but more efficient) and nation.

4 For more information see Arie Kacowicz, *Zones of Peace in the Third World: South America and West Africa in Comparative Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998). and Mares, *Violent Peace*.