

## **The question of defense: reflections on the militia in nineteenth century Latin America**

### **El dilema de la defensa: reflexiones sobre la milicia en América Latina (siglo XIX)**

Flavia Macías  
*Instituto de Historia Argentina y Americana “Dr. Emilio Ravignani” –  
Universidad de Buenos Aires – CONICET*  
[flamac00@gmail.com](mailto:flamac00@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** This essay centers on a single subject: the role of the armed forces in nineteenth century Latin American republics. The purpose is to discuss the Spanish-American militia experience, its coexistence with the regular professional forces and its place in the frame of politics. First, I re-examine the militia’s pathway from colonial to republican institution, considering not only the impact of war but also the political practices inaugurated in the process of revolution and independence. Second, I revisit the National Guard from the point of view of state construction. I discuss its role in the framework of the mixed defensive system, paying attention to the modes of organization and the distribution of military power that this institution embodied. I consider its often tense coexistence with the standing army and ask, in the framework of these new nation-states, what issues, and solutions did the National Guard represent, in defensive, military and political terms. Finally, building off of recent historiography, I re-examine the relationship between politics and violence through the principle of the “citizenry in arms,” a concept embodied in the militia tradition and institutionalized through the National Guard. Although historiography has made significant progress in its understanding of the "citizenry in arms" principle -and its impact on both the republican construction and political practices-, key questions remain regarding how the exercise of the “right to bear arms” was shared with-or disputed- by members of the standing army: How did republican institutions react to the participation of professional soldiers in revolutions and armed uprisings? How

might we understand the tension between a so-called “crime of sedition” and the instituted “right and obligation” of citizens to take up arms in defense of the nation? I will examine these questions at the end of the nineteenth century, a time when the issue of defending the republic was reactivated in several cases.

**Keywords:** militia, National Guard, standing army, political violence, defense.

**Resumen:** El presente ensayo propone reflexionar en torno a una cuestión central: el lugar de las fuerzas armadas en los procesos de construcción estatal decimonónicos en América Latina. En ese marco, me propongo discutir la experiencia miliciana hispanoamericana, su convivencia con las fuerzas regulares y su lugar en la vida política republicana teniendo en cuenta, en primer lugar, la intervención de las milicias en dos escenarios: el de la revolución y el de las guerras por la independencia. Allí, propongo reexaminar su pasaje de la colonia a la república prestando atención no solo al impacto de la guerra sino también al de las prácticas políticas inauguradas con los procesos revolucionarios y la independencia. ¿Qué hizo de las milicias coloniales unidades defensivas cruciales de la mayor parte de las nuevas comunidades independientes y, a su vez, instancias clave de ejercicio de la soberanía popular? En segundo lugar, propongo visitar a la Guardia Nacional en el marco de la construcción estatal. Rediscutiré su rol en el marco de los sistemas defensivos mixtos y pondré atención en los modos de organización y de distribución del poder militar que dicha institución plasmó, teniendo en cuenta su convivencia en tensión con las fuerzas de línea. ¿Qué solución -o controversia- encarnó la Guardia Nacional en términos defensivos, militares y políticos en el marco de los nuevos Estados nacionales? Por último, retomaré el análisis de la relación entre política y violencia a través del principio de "ciudadanía en armas" encarnado en la tradición miliciana e institucionalizado a través de la Guardia Nacional. Si bien la historiografía ha avanzado notablemente en la discusión en torno a dicho principio, el problema se plantea cuando el mismo es compartido -o más bien disputado- por los miembros del ejército de línea. ¿Cómo reaccionaron las instituciones de la república frente a la participación de fuerzas armadas regulares en revoluciones y levantamientos armados? ¿Cómo explicar la tensión entre el llamado “delito de sedición” y el instituido “deber-derecho ciudadano de tomar las armas en defensa de la nación”?

**Palabras clave:** milicias, Guardia Nacional, ejército de línea, violencia política, defensa.

Para citar este artículo: Flavia MACÍAS: “The question of defense: reflections on the militia in nineteenth century Latin America”, *Revista Universitaria de Historia Militar*, Vol. 12, N° 24 (2023), pp. 137-166.

Recibido 27/03/2023

Aceptado 12/06/2023

## The question of defense: reflections on the militia in nineteenth century Latin America\*

Flavia Macías

*Instituto de Historia Argentina y Americana “Dr. Emilio Ravignani” –*

*Universidad de Buenos Aires – CONICET*

[flamac00@gmail.com](mailto:flamac00@gmail.com)

*Un ciudadano usará o no de sus derechos políticos,  
acudiendo o no a registrar su nombre en el censo electo-  
ral, votando o no en las elecciones... -Sin embargo- no  
le es facultativo servir o no en la Guardia Nacional<sup>1</sup>*

**T**his essay centers on a single subject: the role of the armed forces in nineteenth century Latin American republics. Classic interpretations long suggested that the use of force in nineteenth century political life was anomalous or residual, but recent historiography has questioned this assumption, revealing a more complex picture. These recent works have also called into question previous understandings of political order, a concept that traditional historiography had more strictly associated with the centralization and state monopoly of force. An alternative analytical path has thus emerged that involves temporal, spatial and even specific political-institutional frames, and focuses its attention on the concepts and terms used by historical actors in order to avoid the anachronistic conclusions that result when analytical categories that were designed to address political processes of subsequent centuries are retroactively applied to the past. These new works have elaborated on the role of force and of the people in arms in post-revolutionary political systems, shedding new light on classic themes such as *caudillismo* and *montoneras*; they have also analyzed new topics, including the notion of the armed citizenry as a key component in the exercise of popular sovereignty, the organization of militias and the National Guard as defining

---

\* Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the “Taller de Historia Global” – Universidad de San Andrés, (2017) and at the International Colloquium “Región y Poder,” Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia. Tunja - Boyacá, Colombia (2018). I would like to thank Hilda Sabato, Lisa Ubelaker Andrade, Victor Peralta Ruiz and Lauren Sawyer for their readings, comments and valuable suggestions. This work is part of a research in progress started with a Fulbright-CONICET Scholarship at the Department of History - Princeton University (2016) which studies the simultaneous processes occurred in Latin America and the United States.

<sup>1</sup> Domingo Faustino SARMIENTO: *Obras Completas*, 31, Buenos Aires, Imprenta y Litografía Mariano Moreno, 1899, pp. 310-311.

institutions for the citizen in arms, the tense coexistence between professional and civic-military forces, and disputes around the control of force within the framework of nineteenth-century state organizations.<sup>2</sup>

Inspired by this renewed historiography, this text considers relevant questions, approaches, and hypotheses in order to contemplate, in a global and interconnected frame, one of the central questions facing the «republican experiments» in nineteenth century Latin America: how to organize national systems of defense.<sup>3</sup> In the years following the wars of independence, most Latin American «polities in the making» opted for a republic built upon the principle of popular sovereignty;<sup>4</sup> when it came to the question of defense, they tested a mixed framework that introduced a rather tense coexistence of two concepts: that of a citizenry in arms and that of professional service.<sup>5</sup> What were the origins of this experience, where did this decision lead? To what extent might the analysis of the armed forces contribute to our understandings of the place of violence in the political life of the new nations?

To address these questions, I examine a military institution that was both central to nation-formation and pivotal during key moments in the construction of the new

---

<sup>2</sup> New approaches in Juan ORTIZ ESCAMILLA (coord): *Fuerzas militares en Iberoamérica siglos XVIII y XIX*, México, El Colegio de México, 2005; Manuel CHUST and Juan MARCHENA (coords.): *Las armas de la Nación. Independencia y ciudadanía en Hispanoamérica (1750-1850)*, Madrid/Frankfurt, Iberoamericana Vervuert, 2008; Juan Carlos GARAVAGLIA et al. (eds.): *Las fuerzas de guerra en la construcción del Estado. América Latina, siglo XIX*, Rosario, Prohistoria, 2012; Flavia MACÍAS (coord.): *Milicias, levantamientos armados y construcción republicana en Hispanoamérica. Estudios y propuestas para el siglo XIX*, Monográfico, *Boletín del Ravignani*, 42 (2015); Hilda SABATO: “Milicias en Hispanoamérica. Apuntes para una historia”, in Nuria TABANERA and Marta BONAUDO (coords.), *América Latina. De la independencia a la crisis del liberalismo*, Madrid, Marcial Pons, 2016, pp. 271-289; and Hilda SABATO: *Republics of the New World. The Revolutionary Political Experiment in 19th Century Latin America*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2018; Alejandro RABINOVICH et al. (coords.): *Ejércitos y repúblicas en el mundo Hispanoamericano*, Monográfico, *Revista Caribe*, 14:35 (2019); Nicolás DUFFAU and Álvaro PARÍS (coords.): *La política a través de las armas: milicias y fuerzas armadas en Iberoamérica*, Monográfico, *Claves. Revista de Historia*, 6:11 (2020); Véronique HÉBRARD and Flavia MACÍAS: *Milices et Gardes Nationales latino-américaines dans une perspective atlantique (XIXème siècle)*, Rennes, Les Perséides, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Hilda Sabato offers the term «republican experiments» to contemplate the array of republics during the 19th century in Latin America. The experiences are analyzed from three key dimensions of nineteenth-century republican political life: elections, public opinion, and arms. Hilda SABATO: *Republics...*

<sup>4</sup> «...the polities in the making, the short and the long-lived alike, all adopted forms of government based on the principle of popular sovereignty [...] At the time when most of the Western modern polities endorsed the [constitutional monarchy], the Americas both North and the South, and with the sole exception of Brazil, opted for the republic...”. *Ibidem*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> The defense of the nation in the face of foreign or domestic enemies and the question of who should take control of that defense was a controversial subject intrinsically linked with the republican option. Diverse republican projects, from the most ancient to the most modern, varied in their approaches. They also demonstrate a central conflict: there were those who sustained that citizens should formulate an armed force in order to prevent the loss of liberty and tyranny, and those that argued that a regular and professional military was the only guarantee of an effective army at a time of war. Flavia MACÍAS and Hilda SABATO: “La Guardia Nacional: Estado, política y uso de la fuerza en la Argentina de la segunda mitad del siglo XIX”, *POLHIS*, 11 (2013), pp. 70-81.

republics: the militia.<sup>6</sup> As has been demonstrated in other works, militias were auxiliary forces of the army, summoned and mobilized for specific occasions. In independent Hispanic America they were inherited from the colonial era; in the aftermath of the revolutions and the wars for independence the militias remained but reformulated in a republican register. Militias engendered a particular conception of defense that set them apart from the regular professional armies, as well as the system of compulsory conscription that arrived later. They were made up exclusively of citizens who, in enlistment, committed to the defense and protection of their homeland. Enlistment implied a commitment, understood as both a duty and right to take up arms against internal or external actors that put the «republic and its laws» in danger. These principles also defined one of the central dimensions of nineteenth-century citizenship –«the citizen in arms»– as well as its best-known mechanism of political action: revolutions.<sup>7</sup> As the militia’s organization was largely local in nature, local authorities could intervene directly both in its operation and in its mobilization.

In almost all the Spanish-American republics of the nineteenth century, this civic-military tradition was institutionalized through a type of national militia known as the National Guard. The National Guard, organized by the central governments, maintained the militia’s local characteristics.<sup>8</sup> Associated with nation-state building, the National Guard coexisted with another form of military organization, the standing army. The latter was composed of individuals exclusively dedicated to military tasks. The service was intended to be professional, permanent and monitored by the national authorities. These rather different military forces, which were built around distinct concepts of defense, maintained their coexistence throughout the nineteenth century. Although the ultimate goal was for them to operate in a complementary manner, in some cases their coexistence fragmented military power and fueled tensions that gave rise to

---

<sup>6</sup> In this essay, analysis will focus on the Spanish-American republican experience with special reference to the River Plate. We will test hypotheses and conclusions discussed for northern Argentina in my book *Armas y política en Argentina. Tucumán, siglo XIX*, Madrid, CSIC, 2014, and which focused on the role of militias and National Guards in the nation-state building and political practices. Given that Brazil experienced a unique monarchical path until 1889, that case is taken up in another collaboration (Véronique HÉBRARD and Flavia MACÍAS: op. cit., in particular the chapter by Miqueias Mugge: “Inégalités sociales, guerre et gardes nationales dans les zones frontalières brésiliennes (1850-1870)”, pp. 149-180). For more: Jeanne Berrance de CASTRO: *A milícia cidadã: a Guarda Nacional de 1831 a 1850*, São Paulo, Companhia Editora Nacional, 1979; José Murilo de CARVALHO: *Desenvolvimento de la ciudadanía*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1995; Richard GRAHAM: “Formando un gobierno central. Las elecciones y el orden monárquico en el Brasil, siglo XIX” en Antonio ANNINO (comp.), *Historia de las elecciones en Iberoamérica, siglo XIX*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1995, pp. 347-380.

<sup>7</sup> We refer to the armed uprisings based on the principle of citizenship in arms. Their objective, far from evoking the structural changes associated with the “revolutions of independence”, was to restore the republican order under threat. Paula ALONSO: *Between Revolution and the Ballot Box: The Origins of the Argentine Radical Party in the 1890s*, Cambridge, Cambridge Latin American Studies, 2001; Hilda SABATO: “El ciudadano en armas: violencia política en Buenos Aires (1852-1890)”, *Entrepassados*, 12 (2002), pp. 149-169.

<sup>8</sup> This text uses the word “central” to describe those powers attributed to the national government.

permanent debates and questions about the problem of defense, control of violence, the distribution of military power and the citizen arms service.<sup>9</sup>

The purpose of this essay is to discuss the issue of defense in 19<sup>th</sup> century Latin America by understanding the organization of the militia and its critical role in the building of the republic. First, I re-examine the militia's pathway from colonial to republican institution, considering both the impact of the war and the political practices developed in the process of revolution and independence. What made the colonial militias both crucial for defense in these newly independent polities and vital in the exercise of popular sovereignty?

Second, I revisit the national version of the militia, the National Guard, in the frame of the nation-state construction. I discuss its role in the framework of the mixed defensive system, paying attention to the modes of organization and the distribution of military power that this institution embodied. I consider its often tense coexistence with the standing army and ask what conflicts, --and solutions-- did the National Guard embody, in defensive, military and political terms?

Finally, building off of recent historiography, I re-examine the relationship between politics and violence through the principle of the «citizenry in arms», a concept embodied in the militia tradition and institutionalized through the National Guard.<sup>10</sup> Although historiography has made significant progress in its understanding of the «citizenry in arms» principle -and its impact on both the construction of the republic and political practices-, key questions remain regarding how the exercise of the «right to bear arms» was shared with-or disputed- by members of the standing army. How did republican institutions react to the participation of professional soldiers in revolutions and armed uprisings? How might we understand the tension between a so-called «crime of sedition» and the instituted «right and obligation» of citizens to take up arms in defense of the nation?<sup>11</sup> I will examine these questions at the end of the nineteenth century, a time when much of Latin America underwent a turn toward military professionalization, centralization and pacification of politics.

---

<sup>9</sup> In her book *Buenos Aires en armas*, Hilda Sabato argues that, within the Army, different defensive criteria coexisted which ultimately reflected differing views in regard to the nation-state organization and the notion of political order. Hilda SABATO: *Buenos Aires en armas. La revolución de 1880*, Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI, 2008. In the case of Argentina, these criteria expressed clear conceptual and practical clashes regarding the use and control of force, the modes of enlistment, the dynamics of internal functioning (the selection processes of commanders, for example) and the citizen in arms service. In fact, within the framework of the federal system instituted with the constitution of 1853 in this country, the provinces functioned as political laboratories that tested alternative responses to this mixed configuration for defense. Cf. Flavia MACÍAS: *Armas y política...*

<sup>10</sup> For a specific discussion on the concept of the citizenry in arms, Hilda SABATO: *Buenos Aires...* and Marta IRUROZQUI: *Ciudadanos armados de ley. A propósito de la violencia en Bolivia, 1839-1875*, La Paz, PLURAL-IFEA, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> A theoretical approach in Marta IRUROZQUI: “A resistir la conquista: ciudadanos armados en la disputa partidaria por la revolución en Bolivia, 1839-1842”, *Boletín del Ravignani*, 42 (2015), pp. 60-91.



## Militias between war and independence

At the beginning of the 19th century, the newly independent republics of Latin America adopted militias as the natural custodians of the polity. In Peru, for example, after the Cadiz experience, local militias participated in the creation of an anti-Spanish movement that identified Peruvians with the republican option and against the monarchy. In the case of Mexico, the *Milicia Cívica* (after the National Guard) embodied a notion of defense in which republican principles, the federative articulation of the Mexican sovereign states and the principle of citizenship in arms converged against the conservative party. In the framework of the so-called «Insurgent America» (in reference to the former viceroalties of the River Plate and New Granada and the Captaincies –*Capitanías*– of Chile and Venezuela) the militias, once pillars of the revolutionary forces and of an enduring experience of war, became, in large part, pillars of the nascent polities and their armies.<sup>12</sup> Why did the militia obtain such a critical role in the defense in the new polities? How did a colonial institution created under the parameters of the *Ancien Régime* become a defensive pillar of new nations organized on republican principles?

Recent work on the abdications of Bayonne, the political crisis of 1808 and the revolutions and processes of independence have inspired new approaches to the study of the militias and their incorporation into the republic and have shed light on their role within the revolutionary armies. The historical events are worth retracing here, in order to then contemplate this historiography and discuss specific hypotheses in more depth.

The Napoleonic invasion of Spain and the abdication of Ferdinand VII sparked an unstoppable political process of territorial dismemberment in the Spanish empire. As scholars have pointed out, cities and municipalities, both colonial and *peninsulares*, conceived of themselves as «sovereign peoples» and demanded the retroversion of their sovereignty in the face of the so-called *vacatio regis* (power vacuum).<sup>13</sup> To weather the

---

<sup>12</sup> “Insurgents” and “loyalists” are terms taken from Jaime RODRÍGUEZ (coord.): *Revolución, independencia y las nuevas naciones de América*, Madrid, Fundación Mapfre Tavera, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> From seminal works by Antonio Annino, Raffaele Romanelli, François-Xavier Guerra, Jaime Rodríguez, Luis Castro Leiva, Annick Lempérière, José Carlos Chiaramonte, Natalio Botana and Tulio Halperín Donghi, a crucial and referential historiography has been developed on this topic, among others, Hilda SABATO: *Ciudadanía y formación de las naciones. Perspectivas históricas para América Latina*, México, Fideicomiso Historia de las Américas, 1999; Gabriela TÍO VALLEJO: *Antiguo Régimen y Liberalismo. Tucumán 1770-1830*, Tucumán, Humanitas, 2000; Jeremy ADELMAN: *Sovereignty and Revolution in the Iberian Atlantic*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006; Marcela TERNAVASIO: *La revolución del voto. Política y elecciones en Buenos Aires, 1810-1852*, Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI, 2002; and Íd.: *Gobernar la revolución. Poderes en disputa en el Río de la Plata, 1810-1816*, Buenos Aires, siglo XXI, 2007; Federica MORELLI: “Orígenes y valores del municipalismo Iberoamericano”, *Araucaria. Revista Iberoamericana de Filosofía, Política y Humanidades*, 18 (2007), pp. 116-129; Alfredo ÁVILA and Pedro PÉREZ HERRERO (coords.): *Las experiencias de 1808 en Iberoamérica*. Madrid-México, Universidad de Alcalá, Universidad Autónoma de México, 2008; Noemí



political crisis taking place in the peninsula and in the American kingdoms, all the Spanish territories underwent an unprecedented *juntista* process that momentarily fractured reactions and political loyalties of Spanish America. On the one hand, the viceroyalties of Mexico and Peru decided to follow the political leadership of the Supreme Central Junta of Aranjuez, then of Seville and finally of the Cortes of Cadiz –«an assembly meant to represent the whole of the Spanish body politic».<sup>14</sup> American and peninsular representatives gathered in the Iberian Peninsula to sanction the Constitution of 1812, «a liberal-orientated constitution, a radical novelty in the tradition of the kingdom».<sup>15</sup>

These political changes not only established a new set of rules until Ferdinand VII's return, but also configured a new scheme for the organization of sovereignty in the Spanish kingdoms. Within this framework, and in the face of the Napoleonic threat, the new liberal and monarchical-constitutional parameters sanctioned by the Constitution of Cadiz reorganized the military forces of the viceroyalties of Mexico and Peru under the umbrella of the new National Militia. The civic institution started of reorganizing and centralizing local militias activities in all the regions of the empire. As Natalia Sobrevilla has shown, this change implicated a shift in the referent for patriotic identity, from king to nation.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, the «citizens in arms» of the new Cádiz monarchical state underlined the Hispanic nation as «one and indivisible», placing the connection with nation above even the figure of the king.

For their part, the viceroyalties of New Granada and the River Plate, as well as the *Capitanía General de Venezuela* and Chile responded to the political crisis in a more radical manner. They engaged in emancipatory –then pro-independence– processes that contrasted with the so-called «loyalist» reaction of Mexico and Peru and their participation in the “Cadiz experiment”. The *juntista* emancipatory processes were grounded in the proliferation of autonomous *juntas* throughout South America that, first, resisted the leadership imposed upon them by the peninsular institutions and then claimed the right to self-government. At the same time, an unprecedented armed conflict expanded across the region, accompanying the emancipatory *juntas* as well as subsequent

---

GOLDMAN (coord.): *Lenguaje y Revolución. Conceptos político clave en el Río de la Plata, 1780-1850*, Buenos Aires, Prometeo, 2008; Véronique HÉBRARD: *Venezuela independiente. Una nación a través del discurso (1808-1830)*, Madrid/Frankfurt, Iberoamericana/Vervuert, 2012; Clément THIBAUD et al. (eds.): *L'Atlantique révolutionnaire (Une perspective ibéro-américaine)*, Bécherel, Les Perséides, 2013; Javier FERNÁNDEZ SEBASTIÁN (dir.): *Diccionario político y social del mundo iberoamericano. Iberconceptos II*, Madrid, Universidad del País Vasco-Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales, 2014; Pilar GONZÁLEZ BERNALDO (dir.): *Independencias Iberoamericanas. Nuevos problemas y aproximaciones*, Buenos Aires, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2015; Mónica QUIJADA: “El pueblo como actor histórico. Algunas reflexiones sobre el municipalismo y la soberanía en los procesos políticos hispánicos”, in Nuria TABANERA y Marta BONAUDO (coords.), op. cit., pp. 19-35.

<sup>14</sup> Hilda SABATO: *Republics...*, p.24. Supreme Juntas were integrated by delegates from each of the local *juntas* and designated to rule in the name and place of the king.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> Natalia SOBREVILLA: “Del imperio a la república. Las milicias peruanas de la primera mitad del siglo XIX”, in Véronique HÉBRARD and Flavia MACÍAS (coords), op. cit., pp. 97-121.

movements for independence. The enduring war was marked by broad social mobilization, profound violence and significant episodes of fear and uncertainty;<sup>17</sup> it aimed to defend and preserve the autonomous decisions of the «peoples» (represented in the *juntas*) as well as their declarations of independence. What role did militias occupy in this process?

Local militias supported the *juntas*' pronouncements and became the material expression of the sovereign «peoples in arms». As Clément Thibaud explains for New Granada, in the face of the threat imposed from Peru and Mexico, these emancipated peoples, organized in their corresponding regional *juntas*, formed revolutionary armies immediately by calling upon their local militias.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, once the revolution and the war of independence began, enrollment in the militia was extended to all inhabitants «of the city and the countryside», broadening the criteria for inclusion even in the more distinguished and traditional, colonial-era urban battalions, which were made up of *vecinos*.<sup>19</sup>

In this way, the independence armies ended up becoming a formative institution in revolutionary society, one that offered the possibility of promotions, was a space for

<sup>17</sup> See Alejandro RABINOVICH: *La batalla de Huaqui, o la derrota de la Revolución (1811)*, Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Clément THIBAUD: *Las Repúblicas en Armas, Ejércitos Bolivarianos en la guerra de independencia de Colombia y Venezuela*, Bogotá, Planeta-IFEA, 2003; and Íd.: “Definiendo el sujeto de la soberanía: repúblicas y guerra en la Nueva Granada y Venezuela, 1808-1820”, in Manuel CHUST and Juan MARCHENA (coords.): op. cit., pp. 185-219. About the concept of “peoples in arms”, see the pioneering work of François-Xavier GUERRA: *Modernidad e independencias. Ensayos sobre las revoluciones hispánicas*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993

<sup>19</sup> *Vecino* was a Hispanic colonial subject socially constituted. It was such a flexible concept that included male, creole, who lived in Hispanic American colonial cities and had “honest way of life” (*modo honesto de vivir*). That condition supposed education and “useful or lucrative trade, or known property” (*oficio útil y lucrativo o propiedad concida*) affirmed by their peers. Despite of significant political changes derived from the revolutionary processes, that concept informed the later notion of citizenship (see note 13). Once the war of independence reached different regions of the River Plate and local elites started to organize their own armies, cities such as Tucumán (in the north of the River Plate)—where many of the urban militia corps had maintained for years their exclusive connotations—started to include vast sectors of the urban population. These decisions accompanied others that occurred in the veteran ranks: commanders enlisted *pardos* and *morenos* and, following the revolutionary authority decisions, created corps of slaves in exchange for their freedom. Such social and ethnic flexibilization complemented previous militia experiences, such as those of the Patrician Corps in Buenos Aires during the so-called “English Invasions” (1806-1807). See Jobita NOVILLO: “La fuerza de trabajo esclava en Tucumán a fines del periodo colonial”, *XVI Jornadas de Historia Económica*, UNQ, Buenos Aires, 1998; Gabriel DI MEGLIO: *Viva el bajo pueblo. La plebe urbana de Buenos Aires y la política entre la revolución de mayo y el rosismo*, Buenos Aires, Prometeo, 2006; Gabriela TÍO VALLEJO: op. cit., Sara MATA: *Los gauchos de Güemes. Guerras de independencia y conflicto social*, Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 2008; Flavia MACÍAS and María Paula PAROLO: “Guerra de independencia y reordenamiento social. La militarización en el Norte argentino (primera mitad del siglo XIX)”, *Ibero-Americana*, X:37 (2010), pp. 19-38; Florencia GUZMÁN: “Bandas de Música de Libertos en el ejército de San Martín. Una exploración sobre la participación de los esclavizados y sus descendientes durante las Guerras de Independencia”, *Anuario de la Escuela de Historia*, 7:7 (2015), pp. 18-36; Alex BORUCKI: *From Shipmates to Soldiers: Emerging Black Identities in the Rio de la Plata*, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 2015; Magdalena CANDIOTTI: *Una Historia de la emancipación negra. Esclavitud y abolición en la Argentina*, Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI, 2021.

the formation of future leaders, and also generated new networks and social relational systems. This argument regarding the critical social and institutional role of these forces, particularly for the former Spanish colonies in South America, has brought to light new explanations on the reconfiguration of the leadership during the early independence period and the modes of operation of armed men in the new political order.<sup>20</sup> However, it has also suggested, together with the new approaches to war and its typologies, new ways to interpret how the revolutionary principle of popular sovereignty were incorporated in the new political communities. Thibaud suggests that after years of war and social and economic devastation, the Bolivarian army materialized a definitive political break with the recent colonial past: this army embodied the «people in arms», «one and indivisible», who, as «sovereign», entrusted the military leader, Simón Bolívar, with broad powers, giving way to a new republican experience based on a militarized, centralized and strong executive power. With this thesis, Thibaud, in addition to addressing the relationship between war and the construction of new political communities, opens up a discussion on the reviled *caudillista* phenomenon in Spanish America, placing the military leader in a critical position: as the articulation between «the people» and politics. This role stems from a specific conjuncture of creation and at the same time of rupture with the past. What happened then with «the peoples» –in plural– and their militias? After the war and military experience in New Granada, the notion of patriotism was charged with new meanings disassociated from “the peoples” –and its local bodies, the militias–, and reidentified with the army, its chiefs, and experience of war.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, in her analysis of Venezuela, Véronique Hébrard observes that «citizens and soldiers», as well as the political and military spheres, became intrinsically

<sup>20</sup> This hypothesis was sustained by Tulio Halperín Donghi in his seminal book *Revolución y guerra. Formación de una élite dirigente en la Argentina criolla*, Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI, 2002. For a study of the revolutionary officialdom in the River Plate and Chile, as well as its projections to the independence stage, Alejandro RABINOVICH: *La société guerrière. Pratiques, discours et valeurs militaires dans le Rio de la Plata, 1806-1852*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2013 ; and Juan Luis OSSA: *Armies, politics and revolution. Chile, 1808-1826*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> In this exceptional context of war, it must be considered that in New Granada, the army constituted the electoral body which organized and chose political representatives. Clément THIBAUD: “Definiendo...”; and Íd: “Entre les cités et l’État. Caudillos et pronunciamientos en Grande-Colombie”, *Genèses*, 1:62 (2006), p. 5. On the new thesis around *caudillismo*, Noémí GOLDMAN and Ricardo SALVATORE: *Caudillismos rioplatenses. Nuevas miradas a un viejo problema*. Buenos Aires, EUDEBA, 1998; Víctor PERALTA RUIZ and Marta IRUROZQUI: *Por la concordia, la fusión y el unitarismo. Estado y caudillismo en Bolivia, 1825-1880*, Madrid, CSIC, 2000; Ariel DE LA FUENTE: *Children of Facundo. Caudillo and gaucho insurgency during the Argentine state-formation process (La Rioja, 1853-1870)*, Durham y Londres, Duke University Press, 2000; James SANDERS: *The Vanguard of the Atlantic World. Creating Modernity, Nation, and Democracy in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2014; Cecilia MÉNDEZ: *The Plebeian Republic: The Huanta Rebellion and the Making of the Peruvian State, 1820-1850*. Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2005, among others.

linked through the professional army which, in turn, became identified with the homeland and the nation, «one and indivisible».<sup>22</sup>

This revolutionary experience coexisted with a revitalization of the militia both within the army and in a new post-revolutionary political landscape. In the River Plate, the revolutionary armies made visible both the fragility of the traditional *Blandengues* military corps (an inheritance from the colonial army) and the virtues of the militia system for the organization and execution of the so-called «patriotic armies». Militias even proved themselves superior in combat.<sup>23</sup> The River Plate militias' importance in the military sphere can also be observed in the revolutionary political arena, especially in regard to practices of the direct exercise of sovereignty: «popular assemblies» and armed uprisings. During the revolutions of independence, political and military leaders and the *cabildo*, used the militias to legitimize popular convocations and challenge certain central government decisions.

In the year 1815, this became particularly apparent when the Supreme Director of the United Provinces of the River Plate issued a decree to modify several laws, an act that called into question the local military authority of the *cabildos*. The militiamen of Buenos Aires strongly identified with their city and the gains made following the «English Invasions» and rose up against the central power.<sup>24</sup> The uprising was meticulously organized, and it set in motion a wide network of relationships. Landowners and merchants collaborated by providing goods while peons and employees operated as a shock force; the *chasques*, for their part, delivered money, weapons and messages between the revolutionary leaders to ensure coordination between the ringleaders and their groups. Commanders mobilized their militia battalions and, in parallel, the *Cabildo* of Buenos Aires drafted an official proclamation signed by «all the *vecinos*» against the Supreme Director. As a result, the Director resigned.

---

<sup>22</sup> Véronique HÉBRARD: “¿Patricio o soldado: qué uniforme para el ciudadano? El hombre en armas en la construcción de la nación (Venezuela, primera mitad del siglo XIX)”, *Revista de Indias*, 225 (2002), pp. 429-462, and *Íd: Venezuela...*

<sup>23</sup> Sara MATA: op. cit.; Beatriz BRAGONI and Sara MATA (comps.): *Entre la colonia y la república. Insurgencias, rebeliones y cultura política en América del Sur*, Buenos Aires, Prometeo, 2008; Raúl FRADKIN: “Realistas rebeldes en el último pueblo del mundo: conspiraciones y sublevaciones en Carmen de Patagones, 1812-1817”, *Claves*, 6:11 (2020), pp. 75-103; and *Íd*: “Sociedad y militarización revolucionaria. Buenos Aires y el Litoral rioplatense en la primera mitad del siglo XIX”, in *La Construcción de la Nación Argentina. El rol de las Fuerzas Armadas. Debates Históricos en el marco del Bicentenario (1810-2010)*, Buenos Aires, Ministerio de Defensa, 2010, pp 63-79.

<sup>24</sup> During the revolutionary decade (1810-1820), the former River Plate Viceroyalty experienced many different forms of government. In this framework, central authorities –which coexisted with local governments (councils, governors)– permanently tried to centralize the power to prevent the separation of the River Plate region. In particular, the Supreme Director constituted a type of unipersonal executive power that replaced the previous system of the *Triunvirato* -executive power made up of three governors. Gabriela TÍO VALLEJO: op. cit.; Marcela TERNAVASIO: *Gobernar...*

This particular episode serves as an illustration of a political-military operation that was actually quite common during the revolution; its principles, dynamics and actors would also prove to be rather enduring. Armed uprisings, which had become quite common since the years of the independence revolutions, constituted a practice that was reproduced, with variations, throughout the continent. The movements were grounded in the traditional principles of «the sacred right of insurrection» or «the people's resistance» to preserve «the original pact» and overthrow a «despotic government». They questioned governmental decisions, or the reigning authority itself, and such questions were translated into proclamations and written petitions signed by a numerous and diverse group of *vecinos* and military leaders that represented the sovereign «will» of «the people». The referential notion of the «people in arms», which legitimized military action, was materialized through the army, as in the case of New Granada, or through the militia, as was the case in the River Plate. These uprisings were often connected to *pronunciamientos* (pronouncements) issued by *cabildos*, boards of representatives (*juntas de representantes*), «popular assemblies», military officers, etc. Although, *pronunciamientos* were often associated with armed action, they did not necessarily involve an act of violent confrontation; they «[...] could result in an armed rebellion if the government did not attend to them». <sup>25</sup> Likewise, whether or not a coup de force was planned, the rallying of the militia was intended to make the *pronunciamento* effective and, at the same time, to show the support of the “people in arms”.

The so called «popular assemblies» made up another well-oiled practice of direct exercise of popular sovereignty in the River Plate in the 1810s and also opened great

---

<sup>25</sup> Will FOWLER et al.: “The Pronunciamiento in independent Mexico (1821-1876)”, in <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/pronunciamientos/glossary.php> (Last accessed: 08-17-2022). As we will analyze, *Pronunciamientos* became institutionalized over time in several nations (Mexico serves as one example) and were deeply rooted in the political traditions of the imperial nations of Spain and Portugal. As will be detailed later for Latin America in the frame of the republican era, *pronunciamientos militares* implied a form of exercise of popular sovereignty and were associated with citizen's rights and duties. Cf. the pioneering work of François-Xavier GUERRA: “El pronunciamiento en México: prácticas e imaginarios”, *Travaux et Recherches dans les Amériques de Centre*, 37 (2000), and of Hilda SABATO: “El ciudadano...”. See also Rebecca EARLE (ed.): *Rumours of Wars: Civil Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*, London, ILAS, 2000; Sonia ALDA: “Las revoluciones y el sagrado derecho de insurrección de los pueblos: pactismo y soberanía popular en Centroamérica (1838-1871)”, *EIAL*, 15:2 (2004), pp. 11-39; Alicia HERNÁNDEZ CHÁVEZ: “From *res publicae* to Republic. The evolution of republicanism in Early Mexico”, in Jaime RODRÍGUEZ (ed.), *The Divine Charter: Constitutionalism and Liberalism in 19th Century Mexico*, Lanham, Maryland Wilmington, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005, pp. 35-63; Josefina VÁZQUEZ: “Political plans and collaboration between civilians and the military, 1821–1846”, *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 15 (1996), pp. 19-38; Will FOWLER (ed): *Forceful Negotiations: The Origins of the Pronunciamiento in Nineteenth-Century Mexico*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2010; Marta IRUROZQUI: *Ciudadanos...*; Valentina AYROLO and Véronique HÉBRARD (coords): *Las nuevas gramáticas de la movilización política local*, Almanack, 28 (2021), pp. 1-6; and Silke HENSEL: “[Social practices of representation: pronunciamientos in Mexico at the beginning of republican life](#)”, *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, 28 (2022), pp. 261-281. For a historical anthropological approach that questions the relationship between “violence” and “anarchy” after independence: Agustina CARRIZO DE REIMANN: *Una historia densa de la anarquía posindependiente. La violencia política desde la perspectiva del pueblo en armas (Buenos Aires-México 1820)*, Madrid-Frankfurt, Iberoamericana-Vervuert, 2019.



political debates. Like the uprisings, they also linked the militias with revolutionary politics, and serve as example of challenges derived from the principle of popular sovereignty. We can take as example an episode in Tucumán in the year 1814. The Supreme Director, Gervasio Antonio de Posadas appointed Bernabé Aráoz as governor of that province. However, despite the top-down assignment, Aráoz summoned «all the militiamen of the city and the countryside» to a «popular assembly» to endorse his appointment and elect future representatives to the Constituent Congress of 1816. That is to say that «the people», summoned through the militia and gathered in assembly, were not only being asked to back Aráoz's appointment but to select representatives to the congress, thus calling into question the *cabildo*'s mechanisms of election, which included the «double vote» of the *capitulares* in case of *cabildos abiertos*.<sup>26</sup> Also, by means of this popular convocation, the disproportionate representation of the city in the *cabildo* as compared to the countryside emerged as a topic of debate.

The event was quite singular: through the militia, Aráoz gathered «the people» in its broadest expression –about «4000 souls», *vecinos* with varying social statuses, including judges, priests, commanders, and troops. The assembly proclaimed a provincial governor, discussed how they would select authorities and the sovereign origin of that selection. During revolution, these assemblies coexisted with direct and indirect electoral systems that in some circumstances also called «the people» to vote through their militia battalion; they functioned as deliberative, elective or referendum mechanisms.<sup>27</sup>

Militias thus played a central role in revolutionary and post-revolutionary politics: they were institutions that not only served as channels to call forth the «sovereign people» in the face of the political challenges related to the revolution, but they also made the “sovereign people” visible and tangible.

### **Militias and the defense of the republic**

Militias retained their relevance in the new independent polities, transforming into key institutions for both defense and politics. In their new roles, they often maintained «radical» political vocations that they held during revolution but also became vessels

<sup>26</sup> The mode by which representatives were selected to the constituent meeting was left to each province. The statute of 1815 specified some consensus on the definition of electors and eligible voters as individuals. In force only until the end of the revolution, it explicitly excluded “domestics and wage earners”. This formula was discarded by several provinces after 1820 and definitively annulled in all of them, after the sanction of the national constitution in 1853. See Hilda SABATO et al.: *Historia de las elecciones en Argentina*, Buenos Aires, El Ateneo, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> In complement with this research, some scholars briefly examined the role of the militia in electoral processes. They revealed that, in some circumstances, *cabildos* called “the people” to vote through their militia battalion. Gabriela TÍO VALLEJO: op. cit.; Marcela TERNAVASIO; *La revolución...*; and Gabriel DI MEGLIO; “Milicia y política en la ciudad de Buenos Aires durante la Guerra de independencia (1810-1820)”, in Manuel CHUST and Juan MARCHENA (coords.), op. cit., pp. 137-148.

for post-emancipation political conflicts that centered around debates over the control of violence, and the distribution of military power.

From very early on, the militias played a crucial role in the decentralized defensive systems of the provinces of the River Plate, which were connected in a lax confederative system until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>28</sup> On the one hand, the militia served as the basic unit of the provincial armies; in some cases, the provinces also employed standing army regiments to permanently defend their borders. On the other hand, militias were a key element in the configuration of the governor's power. Divided into urban and rural militias, they were distributed in each provincial district under the command of a local military chief appointed by the governor. Local commanders and their militias were in charge of security, defense and even electoral tasks, many of them regulated, codified or even decreed by the governor –who, in turn, was the highest provincial military authority.<sup>29</sup> Based on strong and efficient local and personal networks –which, indeed, guaranteed the control of volatile military relations–, the provincial armies represented and put into action a complex administrative bureaucracy that had a wide territorial scope. As head of this system, the governor appointed loyal commanders in each district in order to ensure their subordination.<sup>30</sup>

In turn, this provincial and military reorganization meant advancements in a process of registering the population: each provincial district had one or several militia corps, and its local military chief was in charge of enlisting every inhabitant «with address» (*avecindado*) in his district. Residence was the main qualification for enlistment, which was voluntary or compulsory depending on the province. In many cases, provincial military authorities organized militia battalions according to occupation –they

---

<sup>28</sup> Before 1853, the provinces had been gathered under a loose, problem-ridden confederate system in which they operated as sovereign, autonomous political units with power over their armed forces. The confederation was based on an interprovincial pact –despite some attempts, provinces never sanctioned a constitution until 1853.

<sup>29</sup> In addition to local defense, the militiamen performed police duties, confronted indigenous people, carried mail, acted as guards in prisons and even watched over the normal electoral activity on election days. The commanders were key players in this last case: not only did they play a role at polling stations, but they also guaranteed the attendance of militiamen.

<sup>30</sup> On the role of commanders and militia corps in the construction of the provincial executive power: Pablo BUCHBINDER: *Caudillos de pluma y hombres de acción. Estado y política en Corrientes en tiempos de la organización nacional*, Buenos Aires, Prometeo, 2004; Roberto SCHMIT: *Ruina y resurrección en tiempos de guerra. Sociedad, economía y poder en el oriente entrerriano posrevolucionario, 1810-1852*, Buenos Aires, Prometeo, 2004; Raúl FRADKIN: “Notas para una historia larga: comandantes militares y gobierno local en tiempos de guerra”, in Beatriz BRAGONI and Eduardo MIGUEZ: *Un nuevo orden político. Provincias y Estado Nacional (1852-1880)*, Buenos Aires, Biblos, 2010, pp. 293-306; Paula PAROLO: “Juicio, condena y ejecución de Francisco Acosta ‘consentidor de ladrones’. Alcances y límites del poder de los comandantes de campaña en Tucumán a mediados del siglo XIX”, *IEHS*, 23 (2008), pp. 175-198; Mónica QUIJADA (ed.): *De los cacicazgos a la ciudadanía. Sistemas políticos en la frontera. Río de la Plata, siglos XVIII-XX*, Berlín, VGM, 2011; Sol LANTERI and Flavia MACÍAS: “Actores intermedios y nuevo ordenamiento político desde un enfoque interescalar. Río de la Plata, siglo XIX”, in Luis CASTRO and Antonio ESCOBAR OHMSTEDTE (coords): *Independencia, repúblicas y espacios regionales. América Latina en el siglo XIX*, Madrid-Frankfurt, Iberoamericana-Vervuert, 2022, pp. 99-136, among others.



created battalions of merchants, artisans, among others, all of them with distinctive uniforms and standards; the purpose was for militiamen to consolidate bonds of identity with their battalion and, therefore, with the local militia. Participation in both occasional training (*ejercicios doctrinales*) and patriotic rituals –wearing their uniforms and carrying their banners– sought to reinforce this sense of individual-group belonging to the militia. Militias reproduced a hierarchical command structure similar to that of the standing army and the differences between militiamen and standing army soldiers became blurred during frontier service. However, every citizen who enlisted in the militia did so in full exercise with his civil rights; this did not apply to criminals (*vagos, delincuentes*) recruited into forced service (*levas*) in the standing army.<sup>31</sup> Thus, militias embodied a distinctive and particular defensive dynamic based on patriotic commitments –intrinsically linked with the “provincial citizenship”. This notion of provincial citizenship was built on a concept of patriotism that combined local and personal referents; the militia was a way of displaying this patriotism whose meaning transcended the strict contingency of war.<sup>32</sup>

An early inclusion of militias within a decentralized defensive system can also be found, with variations, beyond the River Plate, in other regions of Latin America. In Mexico, for example, after deep disputes between «conservatives» and «liberals», the constitution of 1824 sanctioned the creation of a decentralized federal army.<sup>33</sup> This

<sup>31</sup> Oreste Carlos CANSANELLO: *De súbditos a ciudadanos. Ensayos sobre las libertades en los orígenes republicanos*. Buenos Aires, 1810-1852, Buenos Aires, Imago Mundi, 2003, pp. 74-61.

<sup>32</sup> Mario Etchechury suggests that early republican militias also turned into transnational institutions: in Montevideo, for instance, they integrated French, Italians, and Spaniards into local battalions and, consequently, into the local militia. This integration generated controversy among different political groups: on the one hand, some leaders professed their support for the concept of “citizens in arms” including for foreigners that served in arms; on the other hand, some local parties refused foreigners the right to use the militia to resolve their community issues and, at the same time, to claim for political rights in turn for their service. Mario ETCHECHURY: “Las milicias de voluntarios franceses en el Río de la Plata. Tradiciones bélicas, politización y diplomacia informal en tiempos de crisis (1829-1851)”, *Historia Caribe*, 14:35 (2019), pp. 85-118; and Íd: “Debates políticos e imaginarios culturales en torno al ‘armamento de los extranjeros’ (Montevideo, 1843-1851)”, in Véronique HEBRARD and Flavia MACÍAS: op. cit., pp. 33-49.

<sup>33</sup> As scholars explain, the Mexican defensive experimentation reflected the struggle between different political parties: the so-called «liberals» (federal republicans) –who supported the principle of citizens in arms and the right of the States to build and control their own militias– and the «conservatives» –who considered the standing army as the safest means of guaranteeing the defense of the polity. This opposition was connected to the revolutionary past: «liberals» associated the standing army with threatening monarchical vestiges that still existed among the standing army officers; «conservatives», on the other hand, considered the implementation of the militia system as a way of updating violent movements and radical ideas such as those led by Hidalgo and Morelos. Cf. Ivana FRASQUET: “El Estado armado o la nación en armas: ejército vs milicia cívica en México, 1821-1823”, in Manuel CHUST and Juan MARCHENA (cords.), op. cit., pp. 111-135; Alicia HERNÁNDEZ CHAVEZ: *Las fuerzas armadas mexicanas. Su función en el montaje de la república*, México, El Colegio de México, 2012; José Antonio SERRANO ORTEGA and Manuel CHUST: *¡A las armas! Milicia cívica, revolución liberal y federalism en México, 1812-1846*, Madrid, Marcial Pons, 2018; Carlos ARELLANO GONZÁLEZ: “La verdadera Guardia Nacional” *Institucionalización, politización y régimen disciplinario de la milicia active de Michoacán, 1823-1855*, BA Thesis, Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, 2021; Héctor STROBEL: “La Guardia Nacional en México: origen, contradicciones y memoria histórica, 1846-1893, 2019”, *ISTOR*, 86 (2021), pp. 119-143.

decentralized army included the coexistence of regular forces –the standing army– under the command of the nation with civic militias –subordinated to the States and their local authorities. Militias could eventually be summoned to collaborate with national defense needs –although, as specific studies show, local leaders often denied or postponed this assistance. Indeed, the civic militias were powerful means of questioning federal authority and their patriotic identity was consolidated at the local level. In 1830, Lucas Alamán enforced a moderate liberalism that demobilized local militias and reduced them to an almost symbolic level. Technically, with the establishment of the conservative centralist republic in 1836, central authorities suppressed them –although certain governors kept their local militias active in secret. As we will see, this legal relegation would not last long.<sup>34</sup>

The institutional military impact of the struggle between «liberals» and «conservatives» was also visible in Colombia and was directly related to the reorganization of militias after independence. With the dissolution of New Granada into nine sovereign states –first gathered into the *Confederación Granadina* (Constitution of 1858) and then into the *Estados Unidos de Colombia* (Constitution of 1863)– the «liberals» –who controlled the majority of the governments of each State and the national central power– led a process of ideological and organizational transformation of the military forces claiming the militia system.<sup>35</sup> The leaders of this process sought, on the one hand, to distance the Colombian military forces from the Bolivarian experience –described in the first section of this article– and, on the other hand, from the recent “coup d’état” experiences –led by traditional chiefs of the regular army. Through the formalization of the militia system, «liberals» materialized their principles in terms of defense: to decentralize the armed forces, to reduce public spending on military matters and to organize a civilian defensive policy based on freedom, individual commitment to public peace and the principle of citizenship in arms. The result was the organization of a national army that combined a regular central force called the Colombian Guard (*Guardia Colombiana*) –a sort of standing army with a reduced military scope of action– that coexisted with nine “Federal Armies” (*Ejércitos Federales*) subordinated to the sovereignty of each State. Collaborations granted by the States reinforced the *Guardia Colombiana*, if

---

<sup>34</sup> José Antonio SERRANO ORTEGA and Manuel CHUST: op cit.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Malcolm DEAS: “Algunas notas sobre la historia del caciquismo en Colombia”, *Revista de Occidente*, 127 (1993), pp. 118-140, Juan Alberto RUEDA CARDOSO: *Los Ejércitos Federales de Colombia, 1855-1886*, Colombia, Universidad Industrial de Santander, 2013; Isidro VANEGAS (coord.): *El siglo XIX colombiano*, Bogotá, Ediciones Plural, 2017; Carlos CAMACHO et al. (coords): *Paz en la república. Colombia, siglo XIX*, Bogotá, Universidad Externado de Colombia, 2018; Luis Ervin PRADO ARELLANO: “Desplegando el Estado: los ejércitos republicanos en las provincias del Cauca, 1832-1855”, *Historia Caribe*, 14:35 (2019), pp. 149-178; e Íd: *La organización de los ejércitos republicanos en la Nueva Granada: provincias del Cauca (1830-1855)*, PhD Thesis, Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, 2019.

necessary.<sup>36</sup> The militia of each State was regulated according to the corresponding constitutions, regulations and local military codifications. The president of the State and the State legislature shared the control of the *Ejército Federal* by combining different responsibilities and powers regarding organization, mobilization, expansion or reduction of human and material support. The latter, as in Mexico and the River Plate, came from a complex –and sometimes conflictive– combination of public and private funds – in many cases «forced», given the stress of wartime circumstances.

The political laboratory opened after the disarticulation of the colonial system gave rise to a moment of experimentation that involved, among other questions, the issue of defense. Traversed by inter-political party conflicts and, in turn, the search for legal and legitimate tools to build the republic, these experiments did not put an end to violence, nor did it eliminate the revolutionary armed forces built during the revolution and independence eras. However, it also did not give rise to a period of «anarchy, *caudillismo* and predominance of *montoneras*». Rather, the political leaders capitalized upon and reoriented these inherited systems by using the institutional tools at their disposal and recycling their functions for a wide range of political opportunities the republican option offered. In this framework, the militia system served as an efficient tool at a time in which politics and defense were in reorganization.

#### a) *The National Guard*

Over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, governments in several countries institutionalized a national version of the militia, the National Guard. Because it inherited the militia's localized roots, the National Guard became a focal point of conflicts related to the distribution of military power. In almost all the cases, the National Guard coexisted with a second form of military body, the standing army, manned by professionals engaged in permanent military duty; technically this force was directly dependent upon the national authorities.<sup>37</sup> In general, the coexistence of these two types of military

<sup>36</sup> Although during the *Confederación Granadina* some corps of the *Guardia Colombiana* reinforced the border defense of States such as Boyacá or Panama, the Constitution of 1863 vindicated the sovereignty of each State and formally limited national intervention in military matters –even in case of internal confrontation. Cf. Doyana Angélica RUEDA CÁCERES: “La institución militar del Estado Soberano de Panamá, 1855-1885”, in Juan Alberto RUEDA CARDOSO: op. cit., pp. 15-45, María Victoria DOTOR RABAYO: “El ejército del Estado Soberano de Boyacá. La cuestión militar para el liberalismo radical”, in Juan Alberto RUEDA CARDOSO: op. cit., pp. 215-260.

<sup>37</sup> There were exceptional cases as Ecuador and Costa Rica: their national armed forces were built exclusively around the militias. Viviana VELASCO HERRERA: “Ejército y milicias del Estado ecuatoriano (1830-1861)”, in Juan Carlos GARAVAGLIA et al., op. cit., pp.161-183; Esteban CORELLA OVARES: “El Ejército y la guerra en la formación del Estado costarricense”, in Juan Carlos GARAVAGLIA et al., op. cit., pp.59-72. By contrast, in Venezuela, the militia system was not established as such. According to Véronique Hébrard, although some revolutionary political groups supported the militia, the long and profound experience of war of independence and the inherent association between professional service, defense and citizenship

institutions -which represented different defense criteria- fed political tensions that erupted in debates over the subject of defense, control of violence, and armed citizenship. Experiences across the region nevertheless varied in significant ways.

In Chile, the National Guard quickly came to serve as an important symbol of the “one and indivisible” nation, made up of citizens who, through acts and rituals, renewed a sense of patriotism and declared allegiance to the central state, the nation and the constitution. In the context of a series of post-independence military and political events, both the standing army and the National Guard became intrinsically linked with a centralized republic.<sup>38</sup> In contrast, in Peru, as Victor Peralta Ruiz demonstrates, post-revolutionary republican elite from Lima associated the standing army with monarchy and the recently devastated Peruvian-Bolivian confederate experiment. Consequently, the 1839 constitution positioned the National Guard as «the republic’s most solid guarantee» of national defense.<sup>39</sup> In 1846, after Mexican «liberals» recovered control of politics, militias were federalized and renamed «the National Guard». When it repelled the U.S. occupation (1846-1847), the National Guard proved its relevance.<sup>40</sup> In

---

relegated the militia system to a minor role. Véronique HEBRARD: “Une expérience d’échange de savoirs entre agents locaux et gouvernement national: la fabrique des lois de milices vénézuéliennes (1830-1858)”, in Véronique HEBRARD and Flavia MACÍAS, op. cit., pp. 123-148.

<sup>38</sup> According to Juan Luis Ossa standing army chiefs supported the foundation of the republic and became part of the revolutionary leadership. The permanent threat of Chiloé, the proven republican loyalty of the professional army, and the political role of the military officers bolstered the significance of the standing army in the creation of both the new republican political elite and a centralized force that combine the standing army and a subordinated National Guard. Juan Luis OSSA: op. cit; Roberto HERNÁNDEZ PONCE: “La Guardia Nacional en Chile. Apuntes sobre su origen y organización”, *Historia*, 19 (1984), pp. 53-114; Joaquín Rodrigo FERNÁNDEZ ABARA: “Los orígenes de la Guardia Nacional y la construcción del ciudadano soldado (Chile 1823-1833)”, *Mapocho*, 56 (2004), pp. 313-327; Edward BLUMENTHAL: “Milicias y ciudadanía de residencia: la revolución chilena de 1851 en perspectiva transnacional”, *Illes Imperi*, 17 (2015), pp. 91-112.

<sup>39</sup> Víctor PERALTA RUIZ: “La milicia cívica en Lima independiente. De la reglamentación de Monteagudo a La Mar”, *Boletín del Ravignani*, 42 (2015), pp. 37-63; Íd.: “El mito del ciudadano armado. La “semana magna” y las elecciones de 1844 en Lima”, in Hilda SABATO (coord.), *Ciudadanía...*, pp. 231-252. See also Natalia SOBREVILLA: “Ciudadanos en armas: el Ejército y la creación del Estado, Perú (1821-1861)”, in Juan Carlos GARAVAGLIA et al., op. cit., pp. 161-185.

<sup>40</sup> There were less guardsmen serving in the war than the federal authorities expected. Conflicts with local governors and desertion appeared to be the causes. In a recent article, Peter Guardino postulates the intimate relationship between the desertion of the guardsmen and the «material suffering of their families». He addresses the “building of citizenship”, the role of military service and the tense coexistence between patriotic and private duties. Peter GUARDINO: ““Sus familias sufren las consecuencias”. Tensiones entre el compromiso con el hogar y el deber patriótico en las guardias nacionales mexicanas durante la invasión norteamericana”, in Véronique HÉBRARD and Flavia MACÍAS: op. cit., pp. 17-31; and Peter GUARDINO: *The dead march. A history of the Mexican-American war*, Cambridge, Harvard University, 2017. It is notable that even despite the disappointing enlistment, the National Guard played a remarkable role in war and fomented the myth the effective “militia system”. See Guy THOMPSON: “Bulwarks of Patriotic Liberalism: The National Guard, Philharmonic Corps and Patriotic Juntas in Mexico, 1847–88”, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 22: 1-2 (1990), pp. 31-68. Pedro SANTONI: “The Powerful Element That Would Certainly Have Saved Us’: Debating the Revitalization of the National Guard in Post-War Mexico”, in Íd. and Will FOWLER (eds.), *México, 1848-1853. Los años olvidados*, Nueva York, Routledge, 2019, pp. 72-114; Pedro SANTONI: ““Where Did the Other Heroes Go?’ Exalting the ‘Polko’ National Guard Battalions in Nineteenth-Century Mexico”, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 34:4 (2002), pp. 807-844; Héctor STROBEL: op. cit.; Omar URBINA

this way, the Guard became the structural and functional base of the Mexican Army. The Mexican National Congress passed several military acts in which enlistment and other military tasks fell within the power of the federal government. At the same time, and following a federal criteria, governors organized the National Guard corps; local and federal authorities shared financing responsibilities.<sup>41</sup> Technically, local authorities had to respond promptly and without reluctance to calls for mobilization from the national power. In practice, that became a point of conflict.

This was also true in the case of Argentina. In line with some aspects of the former confederal experience, the national defense system inaugurated in Argentina with the 1853 National Constitution materialized a decentralized notion of military power. However, under this new version of the nation-state, provinces had to share their military power with a newly nationalized power. According to the 1853 National Constitution, former provincial militias would become national forces. The National Guard would have thus been organized by provincial authorities but subject to the command of the national executive. The central government had the power to mobilize the National Guard; however, the constitution contemplated the possibility that in the case of «immediate danger», provincial governments could mobilize the National Guard and later provide an account of the situation to the central power.

Given that political agitation and instability had been an inherent part of the polity since 1853, this clause allowed the National Guard to become an almost natural agent for the defense and security of the provinces. The provincial authorities came to control the civic institution with the argument that state sovereignty had to be protected «against any type of threat». The standing army was expected to guarantee efficient, continuous service in the case of war and was also a crucial institution in defining the military powers of the nascent central government. In order to respond to these challenges, the National Executive power decentralized the standing army, established regional units –*circunscripciones militares*– within the national territory and chose the coronels who would lead them. The purpose of this organization was to expand the military reach of the national government and guarantee quick enlistment in the standing army. In practice, these military leaders had a great deal of autonomy, a hand in local politics and, in some cases, even served as provincial governors. Practices such as these made it difficult for the newly national executive power to control the use of force in the state-building process in Argentina and, at the same time, brought back certain aspects of the confederation experience: governors with broad military powers, war as a tool for dealing with conflicts between provinces, the regional dynamic of provincial

---

PINEDA: *La Guardia Nacional de la Ciudad de México durante la Guerra entre México y Estados Unidos, 1846-1848*, BA Thesis, UNAM, 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Alicia HERNÁNDEZ CHÁVEZ: “La Guardia...”, p. 235. As Alicia Hernandez Chávez has demonstrated, the Mexican standing army command did not play a decisive political role until Porfirio Díaz administration.



politics.<sup>42</sup> However, several Argentinian presidents tolerated this convention as long as it posed no risk to nation sovereignty or to each province's adherence to the recent national constitution.

Despite tensions and conflicts, nation-states' experimentation with mixed defense systems laid the groundwork for regimes in which military power was generally shared between national and local authorities –with the constant negotiations and conflicts that this entailed. Though there were controversies associated with this arrangement, it also enabled the birth of national sovereignty with an eye towards the future.

### *b) Citizens in arms*

The dispute over control of violence involved another crucial actor, the citizen in arms, who by enlisting in the National Guard committed to act as the custodian of «national sovereignty», taking up arms against any internal actor that put «the republic and its laws» under threat. In this sense, the «right to bear arms» also constituted a public mechanism of political intervention and citizen control over the elected authorities. That pledge became a sovereign right that defined nineteenth century citizenship and was constitutionally associated, thus, with the civic commitment to internal defense; its institutional framework was the National Guard.<sup>43</sup>

This right also gave way to one of the most common forms of civic violence in Latin American republics, revolutions. Leaders of the National Guard described them as an «extreme decision» against «tyranny» that could be used, for example, in cases of «electoral fraud». In this way, revolutions were not a form of challenging the existing order but rather of restoring republican order when it was threatened. As Florencio del Mármol put it in his description of the *revolución mitrista* –one of the most significant military uprisings in 19<sup>th</sup> century Argentina:

---

<sup>42</sup> Under the confederation, the provinces built strong political bonds with their closest neighbors in order to ensure both protection and control over territory. Governors and their political parties vied for political leadership in the “region” (their province and its neighbors) and sought to subordinate any opposing provinces through a savvy combination of diplomacy, underhanded influence in campaigns and elections, and even declarations of war. This political *modus operandi* made regional relations a crucial item on the provincial political agenda. This logic persisted even after the declaration of the 1853 National Constitution and was a source of great controversy.

<sup>43</sup> As scholars have demonstrated, enlistment in the National Guard was one of the most honorable duties that a citizen could partake in. Using special uniforms, rituals and military training, national guardsmen reinforced their devotion to republic principles. However, to ensure citizens enrollment, military authorities replicated some local militias principles of organization: in some countries, for a considerable period of time, the National Guard kept battalions organized either by occupation or place of residence. Conditions for recruitment were flexible –all free adult male nationals had to enroll. Nevertheless, this broad social composition did not prevent the prevalence of internal hierarchies, differences, and exceptions. Such internal dynamics did not challenge the principle of equality on which the National Guard was founded: for instance, members of each body –without distinctions– selected the commanders by internal electoral processes and “any national guard could vote or be eligible. Cf. Flavia MACÍAS e Hilda SABATO, op cit.

...and when nothing more was to be expected, when all the springs of immorality and vice were seen to be put into practice, the only path that presented itself open to the passage of honest citizens who supported and were supported by the true forces of the people was that of the revolution proclaimed in the name of public health, of electoral law and of republican principles.<sup>44</sup>

In many cases, if a revolt triumphed, the deposed government usually signed a formal, irrevocable resignation and leaders of the rebellion established a provisional administration that reorganized the polity and called for elections to choose a new government. However, if the revolt failed, the rebels, in many cases, were subject to judgment; the exercise of a civil right would then become understood as a crime. Recent research has looked at both trials and parliamentary debates, especially those about citizen rights, the «act of sedition», and professional army politicization.<sup>45</sup> As has been noted for Argentina, the president and federal juries launched formal impeachment inquiries into both revolutionary leaders and their followers. As demonstrated in a recent work that I co-authored with María José Navajas, authorities generally amnestied the guards and allowed them to return to civilian life, noting that they were exercising a right. In turn, the president commonly imposed a «dishonorable discharge» on standing army officers and absolved the soldiers. In exceptional cases, those chiefs were punished with death.<sup>46</sup> The martial court proceedings and resolutions generated heated arguments in Congress and in forum of the public opinion around two crucial issues: amnesty

---

<sup>44</sup> Florencio DEL MÁRMOL: *Noticias y documentos*, Buenos Aires, Biedma, 1876, p. 9. At the beginning of the mentioned political conflict, Bartolomé Mitre had declared: «The worst legal election is worth more than the best revolution». *La Tribuna*, Buenos Aires, 19th April 1874. However, after the National Congress rejected his party's request to annul the "fraudulent" local elections of April 1874, he changed his tone, citing: «the revolution was a right, a duty and a necessity». See *Revolutionary Manifesto of Bartolomé Mitre*, cited in Hilda SABATO: *Historia de la Argentina (1852-1890)*, Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI, 2012, p. 230. A seminal discussion of the concept of revolution in Hilda SABATO: *Buenos Aires... From independence to the period of republican organization, Mexican political catechisms «insisted on the citizen's right to insurrection –under specific circumstances– considering it an extraordinary right of the citizens»*. Alicia HERNÁNDEZ CHÁVEZ, "La Guardia...", p. 58. In such circumstances, the so-called *pronunciamiento militar* (or "revolution") constituted a political measure under the umbrella of institutions. Indeed, scholars distinguish the 19th century Mexican and Spanish uprisings from the coups d'état that occurred in the twentieth century. Led by professional forces of the National Army, those coups d'état took place in a different historical, political, and conceptual framework from that of the nineteenth century.

<sup>45</sup> Scholars have also explored formal impeachment inquiries and trials against national guardsmen and professional soldiers involved in uprisings against federal or provincial authorities, specially at the end of the century. See Eduardo ZIMMERMANN: "En tiempos de rebelión. La justicia federal frente a los levantamientos provinciales, 1860-1880", in Beatriz BRAGONI and Eduardo MÍGUEZ (coords.), op. cit., pp. 245-275.

<sup>46</sup> «...in the 19th century, the pardon was the privileged means of moving from war to peace. In theory, it was an unconditional pardon; in practice, it was a variable mixture of both clemency and severity.» Carlos CACHO et al. (coords): *Paz en la república. Colombia, siglo XIX*, Bogotá, Universidad Externado de Colombia, p. 26.



and the role of civilian justice in cases of «sedition».<sup>47</sup> This was no minor point. In fact, since the revolution of 1874, arguments on the topic impacted the balance of power, the issue of defense, and politics. On the one hand, for those who argued that the «crime of sedition» was a matter for the ordinary courts, the participation of standing army officers constituted a political crime originating in a legitimate citizen's right: the right to bear arms. From that perspective, as Nicolás Sillitti noted, the status of the citizen came before any other, including that of a member of the professional forces. And while the army officers who challenged the government may have «made a mistake», it was up to the ordinary courts to prosecute them. On the other hand, however, other groups argued that any challenge to government led by members of the professional forces constituted a military crime. From this viewpoint, a professional army officer abandoned his previous status --that of a full citizen; in the case of a «crime of sedition», the military courts had to execute the trial.<sup>48</sup>

During the 1870s, in almost all Latin America, controversies about revolutions and punishment proliferated in line with the outcome and political repercussions of international war experiences across the region. This controversial scenario sparked strong political tensions and motivated heated debates on the organization of military forces, control of violence and the right to bear arms; indeed, it generated a significant turning point in the republican experiment with particular reference to the issue of defense. In this framework, regarding revolutions, Juan de la Cruz Benavente expressed through *El Mercurio de Tarapacá*:

When governments do not execute justice, people undertake it themselves through revolutions. Then, for every life, a thousand lives must pay the price, for every drop of blood a million drops are spilled... heaven forbid that the blood that flows

---

<sup>47</sup> In the frame of Argentinian national legislation, «sedition» referred to «crimes against internal security» and implied «the uprising against the national government with the purpose of destroying the constitution and changing the form of government, deposing the president, preventing the transfer of authorities, obstructing elections, dissolving Congress or hindering the functions of each of the branches of government».

<sup>48</sup> Nicolás SILLITI: *El levantamiento armado de 1905. Estado, Ejército y delito político en la Argentina de comienzos del siglo XX* (MA Thesis), Buenos Aires, UDeSA, 2014. Eduardo Zimmermann demonstrated that military laws were vague in this respect. The law of September 14, 1863 –which remained until the end of the century– generally stipulated the operation and jurisdiction of the Federal Courts and only pointed out that the criminal jurisdiction attributed to the national justice system «does not modify the military jurisdiction in cases in which, according to the existing laws, it must proceed by court-martial.» Cf. Eduardo ZIMMERMANN: op. cit. On punishment and amnesty between 1890 and 1893, see Carlos MALAMUD: “La restauración del orden. Represión y amnistía en las revoluciones argentinas de 1890 y 1893”, in Eduardo POSADA CARBÓ (ed.), *In search of a new order. Essays on the politics and society of 19<sup>th</sup> century Latin America*, London, ILAS, 1998, pp. 105-130. On the law reformulations at the end of the century and its implementation at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Nicolás SILLITI and Juan Pablo FASANO: “La espada y la balanza. Reflexiones a partir del juzgamiento de la revolución de 1905”, *POLHIS*, 11 (2013), pp. 82-93; Laura REALI: “Revolución y amnistía en Argentina. La definición de las esferas civil y militar en el levantamiento radical de febrero de 1905”, *Amnis*, 17 (2018), pp. 1-15.

from justice of the law should be washed and dried... with blood? for the justice of heaven.<sup>49</sup>

Taking this perception into account, the Bolivian President, Tomás Frías (1874-1876), responded to rebellions against his administration.<sup>50</sup> As Marta Irurozqui noted, the president launched formal impeachment inquiries into the rebels, including national guardsmen. The rebels accused president Frías of reaching power by fraud; Frías, however, judged the uprisings as illegitimate actions since “civil democracy” provided Bolivians with other legal means –such as the vote, the press, among others– to complain and to express disagreement against the government. The president restricted channels that had made it possible for citizens to exercise the «right to bear arms» and, as was the case in other Latin American countries, he promoted the professionalization of the standing army with the aim of distancing the military from politics. In Argentina, president Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1868-1874) led a similar process. Given the military and political effects of the Paraguayan War and several key events –the *revolución mitrista* of 1874, among them–, notions of political order associated with centralist defense principles –and the efforts of politicians and intellectuals to disseminate and impose them– became more evident. The president promoted a political program that would be based on two pillars: on the one hand, violence would be the exclusive power of the national executive branch; on the other, armed forces would be professionalized and depoliticized.<sup>51</sup> To begin, he led a project of disbanding the regional military unit regime –the aforementioned *circunscripciones militares*– and ending any practice that could be considered a threat to the central power, including the regional dynamic of inter-provincial relations. In addition, military academies were founded for the standing army and plans were made to establish its headquarters in the country’s capital. However, as I noted in my book *Armas y política*, in the mind of Sarmiento, none of these resolutions jeopardized the National Guard’s status as a civilian-military institution within the National Army. According to the president, the National Guard was the «modern and civilized» version of the old provincial militias and the institution that allowed individuals to fulfill their «sacred civic duty», that of enlistment. Therefore, belonging to this institution was not about «the right to petition and carry out revolutions that interrupt and destroy established authorities». Instead, it implied compliance with other types of citizen responsibilities. Sarmiento also discredited citizen's military uprisings in many presidential addresses before Congress. He described revolutions as a harmful mechanism of political intervention:

---

<sup>49</sup> November 16<sup>th</sup>, 1861, p4. Cited in Marta IRUROZQUI: *Ciudadano...*, pp, 221.

<sup>50</sup> Rebellions took place in La Paz, Cochabamba and El Litoral between September (1874) and March (1875).

<sup>51</sup> Technically, standing army officers could not lead political networks or “*clientelas*” inside their forces; in addition, active soldiers could not vote.

This system has the defect of costing a lot of money, destroying much of what has been created and drowning a lot of wealth and progress without improving the notions of law, since the revolution is an irregular event, it is corrupt and denies them<sup>52</sup>

The Guard's composition of citizens and voters also made the institution an effective electoral instrument. Even though in many cases governors claimed the politicization of the Guard, all political actors utilized the institution to play –if not control– elections.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the aim of distancing arms from politics in the 1870s also impacted the electoral field –in particular, the electoral role of the National Guard.

In some countries as México, Chile and Argentina enlistment in the National Guard became a requirement to execute fundamental rights, including the right to vote. In order to vote, citizens had to present enlistment documentation; electoral law established that enlistment registration became the official electoral census. Transferring militia enrollment into electoral registrations provided precise material knowledge about the active electoral population.<sup>54</sup> However, the system also impacted political practices, giving rise to manipulation and violence. Commanders of the Guard oversaw registration preparation and in practice, kept the enlistment documents of the men under their leadership in their control until election day. In this way, they turned into crucial political actors who negotiated their guards' electoral presence with both voters and candidates. Commanders also controlled the Guard's stock of weapons. Consequently, they held power of organization in the case of an eventual revolt. The high ranks of the National Guard became military stations with political power. This political dynamic also spurred heated debate.

In Argentina, this formal requirement was discussed on several occasions. Years before Buenos Aires became part of the Argentine national project, the provincial constitution of 1854 sanctioned that every citizen had to prove enrollment in the militia to qualify to vote. This resolution, taken after an grueling parliamentary debate, imposed a vision of citizenship in which armed service was understood as a primary and

---

<sup>52</sup> Domingo Faustino SARMIENTO: *Obras completas*, 31, Buenos Aires, Imprenta y Litografía Mariano Moreno, 1899.

<sup>53</sup> This topic is particularly studied by scholars focused on Spanish America (a recent general approach in Hilda Sabato: *Republics...*). Approaches to Brazil, in particular seminal works by Richard Graham paid special attention to the role of commanders in both regional elections and the construction of the central-monarchical power. Following this line, new approaches opened up comparative research proposals. See, for example, Leonardo CANCIANI and Miqueias MUGGE: “Estado, militarización y frontera. La Guardia Nacional en las provincias de Río Grande do Sul (Brasil) y Buenos Aires (Argentina)”, in Eliane DECKMANN FLECK and Andrea REGUERA (dir.): *Variaciones en la comparación. Procesos, instituciones y memorias en la historia de Brasil, Uruguay y Argentina (siglos XVIII-XXI)*, Tandil, UNCPBA, 2014, pp. 99-142.

<sup>54</sup> Flavia MACÍAS: “El deber de enrolarse y el derecho a votar. Reflexiones en torno a la ciudadanía armada y el sufragio en la Argentina, 1863-1877”, *Revista de Indias*, 266 (2016), pp. 233-258.

necessary condition for citizenship; fulfilling the duty of armed service enabled the individual to exercise political rights.<sup>55</sup> The register of enlistment became a credential of citizenship, «authorizing» subscription in the civic registry and, ultimately, providing a legitimate entryway into the “community of equals” with full exercise of the right to vote.

The National Guard of Buenos Aires had thus been institutionalized as a genuine manifestation of the community of citizens, serving as marker of the configuration and definition of a central actor of the republic: the citizen in arms.<sup>56</sup> The measure was reproduced and institutionalized throughout the national territory after the sanction of the national electoral law of 1863. A decade later, the requirement was -again- under question. In 1874, during a parliamentary debate on the national electoral law, some representatives expressed that the National Guard enrollment should be a requirement of citizenship that demonstrated virtue and entitled the citizen to the right to vote, others took the position that enlistment and voting were citizen commitments that should be separated -intellectuals in this camp as well as congressmen and politicians saw the tie as encouraging electoral «disorder», violence, and fraud. A new consensus was reached just in 1877, when the new reform act eliminated the controversial requirement.<sup>57</sup> As a consequence, in all Argentinian provinces, active National Guard members were prohibited from voting, a decision that put them on par with standing army troops during electoral periods. Some of the provincial administrations agreed with these criteria and, in order to effectively control the political participation of the National Guard and the standing forces, added specific articles to provincial legislation further limiting their scope of action during elections. At the same time, civil authorities and police departments (which were applying and expanding their own rules and regulations) were entrusted with enlistment and safety during elections.<sup>58</sup> Besides having an impact on what it meant to be a citizen, these decisions also contributed to the goal of orderly political activity, especially with regards to elections and potential revolutions.

<sup>55</sup> Regarding citizenship, this constitutional debate focused on several topics: voluntary enrollment vs. enrollment as a civic duty, the minimum age of enlistment (17 years old) and the early acquisition of the right to vote (formally established as from 18/21 years old) through enlistment in the militia. Flavia MACÍAS: “Entre l’après-guerre et l’imminence du conflit armé. La Garde Nationale et les citoyens de Buenos Aires, 1854”, in Véronique HEBRARD and Flavia MACÍAS, op. cit., pp.51-72.

<sup>56</sup> Flavia MACÍAS: “El deber...”

<sup>57</sup> Cf. María José NAVAJAS: “Las controversias por la reforma electoral argentina, 1873”, *Estudios de Historia Moderna y Contemporánea de México*, 48 (2014), pp. 39-67; Flavia MACÍAS: “El deber...”.

<sup>58</sup> Flavia MACÍAS: *Armas y política...*; Laura CUCCHI: *Antagonismo, legitimidad y poder político en Córdoba, 1877-1880*, Bahía Blanca, Ediuns, 2015, Leonardo Canciani: “Entre la ley y la práctica. La intervención de los comandantes de la Guardia Nacional en los procesos electorales (provincia de Buenos Aires, 1876-1900)”, *Trabajos y comunicaciones*, 49 (2019), e073; Luciano LITERAS: *Vecindarios en armas. Sociedad, Estado y milicias en las fronteras de Pampa y Norpatagonia (segunda mitad del siglo XIX)*, Rosario, Prohistoria, 2017.

## The militia system at the turn of the century

At the turn of the century, much of Latin America underwent the shift toward military professionalization, centralization and pacification of politics, traits associated with the prevalence of a notion of political order that, for certain sectors of the elite, implied the decline of the militia system. International large-scale war experiences in Latin America –as the Paraguayan War or the War of the Pacific– renovated arguments about the issue of defense and role of violence within politics.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, the aforementioned notions about “political order” associated with a centralized political authority that held a monopoly on force, strongly challenged those voices that still defended political dynamics of the early republic, which were often associated with agitation, instability and the acceptance of variable degrees of violence in political life.<sup>60</sup> The Porfirian decision to impose the standing army as the exclusive institution of national defense in Mexico (1876) or the professionalization of the Bolivian Army after the *Semana Magna de Cochabamba* (1875) illustrate a common trend in the region: a significant change regarding both the place of violence, the principle of citizens in arms and defensive criteria. However, what seemed to be an unstoppable tendency in the continent, had different rhythms and forms of materialization. These differences highlight nuances among the defensive experiences at the end of the century, as well as in the processes that triggered change in the twentieth century. In Colombia, the conclusion of the cycle of political violence in nineteenth-century was associated with the consequences of the *Guerra de los Mil Días* and the secession of Panama, rather than with a successful project of professionalization and centralization of the army. Indeed, scholars explain that although Rafael Reyes hired in 1907 a Chilean military mission that began a process of professionalization, the scope of the reforms was moderate.<sup>61</sup> In Argentina, Sarmiento’s

<sup>59</sup> See, Germán SOPRANO and Alejandro RABINOVICH (coords.): *Para una historia social de la guerra y los militares en Sudamérica*, Monográfico, POLHIS, 20 (2017); Carmen MC EVOY and Alejandro RABINOVICH: *Tiempo de Guerra. Estado, nación y conflicto armado en el Perú, siglos XVII-XIX*, Lima, IEP, 2018; Alejandro RABINOVICH: “El fenómeno de la guerra en Sudamérica: regiones, problemas y dinámicas”, in Natalia SOBREVILLA (ed.), *Repúblicas Sudamericanas en construcción. Hacia una historia en común*, Lima, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2021.

<sup>60</sup> See Hilda SABATO: “Hacer política en tiempos de república”, in Hilda SABATO and Marcela TERNASIO (coords), *Variaciones de la república. La política en la Argentina del siglo XIX*, Rosario, Prohistoria, 2020, pp. 19-38; Hilda SABATO: “Resistir la imposición. Revolución, ciudadanía y república en la Argentina de 1880” *Revista de Indias*, 246 (2009), pp. 159-182; and Íd.: “Milicias en Hispanoamérica...”

<sup>61</sup> Carlos CAMACHO et al.: *Paz...*, pp. 18-19 (in particular, the chapter by Brenda ESCOBAR GUZMÁN: “Tras la Guerra de los Mil Días: hacia una paz duradera”, pp. 271-309); Carlos CAMACHO: *El conflicto de Leticia (1932-1933) y los ejércitos de Perú y Colombia*, Bogotá, Universidad Externado de Colombia, 2016; Malcolm DEAS, *Las fuerzas del orden y once ensayos de historia de Colombia y las Américas*, Bogotá, Taurus, 2017; Héctor STROBER: op. cit.; Marta IRUROZQUI: “A resistir...”; Pol COLÀS: “Ciudadanía armada y construcción del Estado en la reforma militar boliviana de la década de 1840”, *HISTORIA*, 55:2 (2022), pp. 123-147.

efforts and the centralist arrangement reached during Julio A. Roca's administration (1880-1886) did not prevent the officers of the standing army from participating in politics; in fact, in the last decade of the century, after the «*roquista interregnum*», many professional soldiers and their officers actually increased their political participation through revolutions, in contrast with a subordinated National Guard.

Therefore, before drawing conclusions on the century-long republican defensive experiment –which underwent dramatic changes in the early twentieth– it may be worthwhile, once again, to review and bring nuance to episodes that took place at turn of the century. Consideration of recent research on the Argentine case provides a starting point. As I have explained in a recent article, in Argentina, the central government's ability to put down the 1880 revolution in the province of Buenos Aires brought an end to challenges to the nation by any province and marked the consolidation of a centralized nation-state.<sup>62</sup> What were the military implications of this centralization? The central government's power over the standing army coincided with the demobilization of the Buenos Aires National Guard, its transfer to national jurisdiction once Buenos Aires was declared the federal capital, and preliminary agreements between the future leaders of the central government and the provincial authorities to ensure orderly elections. With the triumph of the National Autonomist Party (*Partido Autonomista Nacional*, PAN) and Julio Argentino Roca's election as president, the ties between province and nation were reformulated and new ways of doing politics were incorporated. Specific limits were placed on revolution, the principle of citizens in arms, and the National Guard. In this context, the standing army –apparently under the control of the central power– was entrusted with the defense of national sovereignty and internal order, while the police departments of the provinces were responsible for security. What role did the National Guard have at this juncture? The debates surrounding the law passed on October 20, 1880 –a law whose text does not do justice to the rich arguments and intense controversies that preceded it– reveal that a norm designed to consolidate the national government's monopoly on violence led to a number of opinions. Legislators from both chambers of Congress quickly challenged the bill presented by the executive branch, which prohibited provincial authorities from founding military units “by any name.” Citing the Constitution, some objected on the grounds that the bill was unconstitutional. Others argued that the bill did not consider the nature of the national defense system, where the standing army had traditionally coexisted with the National Guard.

---

<sup>62</sup> These hypotheses are based on my research in progress. A preliminary analysis of findings can be found in Flavia MACÍAS: “Orden y violencia política. Argentina, 1870-1880”, *Pasado Abierto*, 7 (2018), pp. 227-240. For more about the revolution of 1880, Hilda SABATO: *Buenos Aires...*; and Ariel YABLON: “Disciplined Rebels: The Revolution of 1880 in Buenos Aires”, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 40:3 (2008), pp. 483-511.



The founding and institutionalization of Argentina's defense system had rested on this shared power between the nation and provinces. Congressmen defended the National Guard as the armed wing of the provincial authorities and assured that they could be disciplined, steered clear of elections, and extricated from extreme claims of provincial autonomy. This, however, did not hamper their role as the defense forces of the provinces, responsible for protecting territorial limits and quelling any attempt at revolution, especially now that the standing army was gradually being relocated to the federal capital. The central government accepted these terms and agreed that the controversial law would not apply to these provincial forces. This helped get the bill passed, though the letter of the law was not amended to reflect this agreement.

In order to maintain this balance, Roca was forced to negotiate with the provincial governments regularly; though he did so successfully, problems began appearing soon after the end of his presidency. The increasingly important role of political parties, the growing internal political divisions in the standing army, and the return of revolution as a means to participating in politics sparked both challenges and conflicts -while provinces and central power continued to argue over their right to use the armed forces to control and reestablish order. These differences led to rivalries, as seen in conflicting decisions made in response to specific events –like the 1893 revolutions– and to discussions that continued into the twentieth century and reignited an intense debate on the republican defense tradition. At the end of the century, in Argentina, the principle of “citizenry in arms” had exceeded the traditional framework of the National Guard – currently away from political confrontations and under the control of provincial authorities<sup>63</sup> and was now disputed by parties –such as the *Unión Cívica Radical*–, professional officers and citizens in terms of its own legitimate patrimony.<sup>64</sup> In parallel, as Rojkind and Hirsch have observed there was a growing conviction about the need to make electoral mechanisms transparent and guarantee the representation of the

---

<sup>63</sup> Education and the new military training associations played a key role in this regard. See, Lilia Ana BERTONI: *Patriotas, cosmopolitas y nacionalistas, La construcción de la nacionalidad argentina a fines del siglo XIX*, Buenos Aires, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2001, Bárbara REITER: “Ciudadanos y soldados. El Tiro Federal Concordia de la República Argentina, 1898-1923”, *Revista Universitaria de Historia Militar (RUHM)*, 5:9 (2016), pp. 33-51

<sup>64</sup> Marta Irurozqui observes a similar process in Bolivia in the 1870s, that is, prior to the implementation of the Army's professionalization plan. See, Marta IRUROZQUI, *Ciudadanos...* In Argentina, the *Unión Cívica Radical* understood the “revolution” as a means of political and moral reparation, a way of restoring the republican order corrupted by the conservative government. Paula ALONSO, op. cit., Francisco REYES: *Boinas blancas. Los orígenes de la identidad política del radicalism (1890-1916)*, Rosario, Prohistoria, 2022, Leonardo HIRSCH: *La consagración de los partidos. Política y representación en la provincia de Buenos Aires, 1870-1900*, Buenos Aires, Sb editorial, 2021. During Luis Sáenz Peña's administration (1892-1895), “radicales” led revolutions against the national government “to conclude the era of corruption” inaugurated by the president Juárez Celman, in 1890. Two pioneering works are those by Carlos MALAMUD, op. cit. and Ezequiel GALLO, *Colonos en armas. Las revoluciones radicales en la provincia de Santa fe (1893)*, Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI, 2007.



different parties so that dissent and opposition could be expressed through peaceful channels, without resorting to revolution as a way of doing politics». <sup>65</sup>

The parliamentary debate that preceded the enactment of the Compulsory Military Service Law of 1901 is still a matter of inquiry, since within it –unlike in other countries in the Latin American region– divergent voices that continued to claim the militia system as a legitimate form of defense of the modern nation-state were still politically active. <sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> Inés ROJKIND and Leonardo HIRSCH: “La república convulsionada” in Hilda SABATO and Marcela TERNAVASIO (coords.), op cit, p.187

<sup>66</sup> Flavia MACÍAS: “Orden republicano y violencia política: reflexiones en torno al fin de siglo en la Argentina”, *AHILA*, Paris, 24th and 25th August, 2021. See the works of Lilia Ana BERTONI: op cit, Luciano DE PRIVITELLIO: “El Ejército entre el cambio de siglo y 1930: burocratización y nuevos estilos políticos” in *La construcción de la nación...*, op. cit., pp. 203-216, Hernán CORNUT and Germán SOPRANO: *La profesionalización del Ejército Argentino en las décadas de 1900-1930*, *Investigaciones y Ensayos*, 69 (2020)