

Book Reviews

Apuntes 81 (2017). doi: <https://doi.org/10.21678/apuntes.81.810>

BABILONIA FERNÁNDEZ BACA, Renzo, 2016, *Guerra y fotografía: Perú, 1879-1929*, Lima, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú. 98 pp.

The war involving Peru, Bolivia, and Chile was a conflict that profoundly affected the three countries and marked a milestone in their economic, diplomatic, and historical development. For historians, photographs are documents that are increasingly used as more than mere illustrations that accompany a research study. It has to be understood that a photograph is the result of the point of view of the photographer. Thus an image can send us a message which may distort a reality. Situating ourselves in the historical period of the Guerra del Pacífico (War of the Pacific), we can see that photography plays a documentary, military, and propagandistic role, quite apart from its personal use. This is why the task of the historian is to analyze all historical elements related to photographs (apart from the aesthetic) in order to put this documentary resource into context.

The book reviewed here is the culmination and catalogue of the eponymous documentary exhibit of Peruvian and Chilean photographs held in 2014 at the Casa O'Higgins in Lima. Both are the result of a project undertaken at the Círculo de Investigaciones Militares del Perú of the Instituto Riva-Agüero. To better understand this work, we need to delve into the events that unite this war with photography, as well as the way that Peru and Chile have used and studied this technology. For its part, Chile had its own military photography policy during the war. One result was an exhibit of photographs taken by Carlos Díaz and Eduardo Spencer, held in Santiago in January 1881 as part of the victory celebration and the Chilean army's entry into Lima, and as a tool of military propaganda. Twentieth century Chilean publications on the subject include *Álbum gráfico militar de Chile. Campaña del Pacífico* by Antonio Bisama (1909), which contains photographs by the aforementioned photographers, and the *Historia ilustrada de la Guerra del Pacífico (1879-1884)*, by Hernán García Vidal (1979).

In Peru, from the arrival of the first daguerreotype in 1842, the photographic tradition progressed and recorded historic events such as the

Combate de 2 de Mayo and certain other occurrences in the war of 1879, photographed by Eugenio Courret. Although the first studies on photography in Peru did not appear until the 1970s with the research of Keith McElroy and Liliana Peñaherrera, it is also important to mention Guillermo Thorndike's *Autorretrato, Perú 1850-1900* (1979).

Renzo Babilonia presents this new contribution, which includes many of the subjects that interest him: photography, communication, and history. Research on Peruvian graphic history is scarce, and with this publication, his third on this subject, the author has positioned himself as one of the Peruvian specialists on the subject. Both his education as a communicator and his teaching experience allow him to connect events and periods of time with precise images that transport us to different eras, but always with the caveat that we only see what the photographer wanted to show us.

This publication presents material that can be used as a starting point for researchers on the war of 1879, but will also be of interest to anyone who is interested in the history of photography. It helps us to understand that this pursuit of the truth, though full of gaps, permits us to come to terms with our past. It is evident that the book seeks to use images to bring the drama of the war and the subsequent events concerning Tacna to the contemporary reader, as well as to make us rethink how we see spaces through the history that an image presents us.

While the photographs are properly presented and arranged, I think it would have been useful and more valuable to have their complete provenance. I think that the author could have presented them by mentioning the primary sources and stating which historical archives or collections they came from. This information would help us find references regarding the photographs and would give researchers access to more primary sources for new historical studies. I know that this criticism is somewhat methodical-documentary, but I think that these types of references would allow for a more conscientious use of photography as a documentary source, as well as giving us a better understanding of the relationship between context, archives, and photography.

Still, Babilonia clearly understands that the true protagonist in this book is the image, not the text. This is optimal, since it conveys the expository spirit that the 2014 exhibition must have had. For this reason, the book is very direct and takes us on a chronological journey through the events of the Guerra del Pacífico. Babilonia starts with a brief introduction on war photography, both internationally and in relation to the Guerra del Pacífico. The author describes the main episodes of the war, as well as the relationships between contemporaneous photographic studios and the invading army in

Lima. He then goes on to the post-war period, providing illustrations of the nitrate mines, the veterans, and allegorical images. Finally, he tackles an issue that has not often been featured in the historiography of the Guerra del Pacífico: the return of Tacna to Peru.

Dealing with the Guerra del Pacífico is a task that requires us to overcome our passions, and one that Babilonia has accomplished well (while considering the characteristics of photography). This book is a good starting point for future research that will help us understand the importance of documentation, the image, and how the visual message can serve as a really potent tool. Observing, for example, how the space of Lima is transformed through the image titled *Vista de Lima desde la fortaleza Piérola* (View of Lima from Piérola Fort); analyzing the backgrounds of calling cards; or elucidating, through the photographs, the labor conditions in which nitrate was mined. These are examples of some of the studies that could be inspired by this book.

The book has a very didactic quality and includes carefully chosen photographs that link the historical periods they illustrate: the war, the post-war period, and the return of Tacna to Peru. In conclusion, it is a very valuable contribution that lays the foundation for new research related to photography, the war, and the memory that this historical episode leaves in our hearts.

Enrique Napoleón Urteaga Araujo
Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Lima
enurteaga@pucp.edu.pe