
José L. Bolívar’s The Caribbean Front in World War II offers the most complete examination to date of the Nazi submarine campaign in the Caribbean and its effect on the various societies of the region. Based on archival sources in the United States and Puerto Rico, an extensive reading of English and Spanish language newspapers, and a robust survey of secondary sources (including the volumes that Bolívar coauthored and coedited with Jorge Rodriguez Beruff and Cesá r J. Ayala), the book provides a synthetic analysis of this understudied aspect of World War II through six chronological chapters. While Puerto Rico and the Vichy-French controlled islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe are his primary focus, Bolívar also emphasizes other areas, including Aruba, Curacao, Trinidad, Jamaica, and British Guiana. In doing so, he makes the persuasive argument that not only was the Caribbean a major battleground in the early part of World War II, but that the war had an instrumental and lasting impact on social, political, and economic developments in the region as well. The book also demonstrates that the colonial context of the Caribbean was a major factor in making this a global war nearly two years before the bombing of Pearl Harbor; as the Nazi army moved across Europe during 1940 and 1941, control of the Dutch and French West Indies was at stake.

While specialists on certain areas of the region will be familiar with some parts of the story, general readers will learn with interest about the centrality of the Caribbean to the flow of natural resources such as oil and bauxite to the United States. Indeed, Bolívar tells us, nearly all of the oil production needed on the East Coast came from the Dutch Royal Shell and Standard Oil refineries in Curacao and Aruba, respectively. The German U-boat commander Admiral Karl Doenitz, who unleashed his forces on the Caribbean in January 1942, surmised that the Nazi war effort depended on his ability to “curtail the flow of oil and bauxite which the United States and Great Britain imported from the Caribbean” (p. 7). For much of the next year and a half, German submarines operated without restraint, as U.S. military leaders were unprepared for their attacks and, without radar or a coordinated convoy system in place, unable to detect or evade the lethal underwater boats.

The lopsided U-boat campaign, which sank 336 cargo ships in 1942 alone (totaling over 1.5 million tons of cargo), had dire consequences for the people of the region. Decreased shipping meant a reduction of exports of sugar, coffee, and fruits as well as a severe limitation of vital imports of oil and resultant reductions of electric power. Even more devastating were the widespread food
shortages that affected Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Haiti, and the British and French West Indies, along with other areas of the circum-Caribbean such as Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama. Ironically, even as daily nutritional intakes declined, many people in the area were left in the dark about the cause, thanks to a U.S. military blackout of news regarding the deadly submarine war. (Bolívar tells us that information was limited and contradictory even within the U.S. Army and Navy.)

As might be expected, based on his earlier work on military expenditures in Puerto Rico, Bolívar also details the U.S. military buildup. Through a combination of private contracts, New Deal agencies, and international agreements, the Roosevelt administration constructed military bases and air fields across the region. United States strategy was almost entirely devoted to protecting the Panama Canal from air attack, and securing the canal would remain a major focus of military construction projects. The new bases would also be critical to ending the submarine campaign in 1943 and ensuring U.S. control of the Atlantic, preconditions for staking out and supplying Allied lines in the European theater of the war. Defense of the Caribbean, in other words, was vital to the defeat of Nazi Germany. Bolívar closes this section with an analysis of how diverse populations responded to the war, ranging from Puerto Ricans concerned about the appropriation of privately-owned lands and the imposition of Jim Crow policies to Martiniquans reacting against the Vichy-aligned colonial government.

Throughout the book, Bolívar demonstrates his skillful reading of sources and eye for detail in articles from the daily press, including the New York Times, Washington Post, El Mundo, and others. The result, told in an engaging narrative style, is a must-read for anyone working on the twentieth-century Caribbean.

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