

History of Puerto Rico

Recommended Citation:

González, Luis A. "History of Puerto Rico." *Handbook of Latin American Studies* 72 (2018): 209-13.

The state of historical research on the relations between Puerto Rico and the US continues to show strong signs of vitality, both thematically and methodologically. Through the lens of sport, particularly the Olympic movement, Sotomayor ([bi2017000205](#)) illuminates how Puerto Rican people have forged a distinct national identity in spite of the island's subordinate political status as a US territory. Athletic diplomacy has paradoxically enabled Puerto Rico to exercise sovereignty at the international level. The paradox does not end with this case. During the mid-20th century, Puerto Rican leaders successfully pursued a unilateral foreign policy in the hemisphere. Vélez Rodríguez examines this subject in her book ([bi2015003786](#)). Both studies shed new light on the complicated story of US colonialism in Puerto Rico.

A number of works provide important insights into Puerto Rico's political history, particularly of developments during the first decades of the 19th century. Espinosa Fernández ([bi2017000695](#)) scrutinizes the power struggles between the local propertied and merchant elite and the colonial government authorities. The observance of the bicentennial of the first liberal constitution in Spain enacted by the Cortes de Cádiz in 1812 prompted publications, conferences, and official acts of commemoration in both Spain and Puerto Rico. The late Caro Costas' volume documenting the political activities of Ramón Power y Giralt (1775-1813) has been re-issued ([bi2015002919](#)). Power y Giralt served as the first representative from Puerto Rico in the Spanish Cortes, or parliament. The revised and enlarged edition also marks the bicentennial of Power y Giralt's untimely passing in 1813. On this bicentennial, the mortal remains of the prominent leader were repatriated from Cádiz to San Juan. Altagracia ([bi2015003774](#)) examines the disciplinary and surveillance policies established by the Spanish governor Miguel de La Torre during the 1820 and 1830s. Personal correspondence and first-hand accounts of people who settled in Puerto Rico during this same period are compiled in Rigau Pérez's studies ([bi2017000882](#) and [bi2017000879](#)). The development of modern economic and political thought, highlighting the role of key intellectuals such as José Julián Acosta, Ramón Baldorioty de Castro, and Ramón Emeterio Betances, is addressed by Cortés Zavala ([bi2016001046](#)) in the case of the first two intellectuals, and by Alvarez-López in the case of the latter figure

([bi2015003236](#)). Also focusing on cultural and political elites, Zepeda Cortés ([bi2017000206](#)) traces the history of nationalist movements in Puerto Rico from the late 19th century through the early 1950s. A microhistory by Ramírez Rivera ([bi2015003813](#)) addresses with the conflicting factions within the Partido Unión de Puerto Rico in Utuado during the early 20th century.

The history of religion, and more specifically of the Catholic Church, has garnered the attention of scholars in recent years. García Leduc ([bi2015003246](#)) probes the influential economic roles of the clergy in the agrarian economy of the first half of the 19th century. Two volumes by Silva Gotay further expand his investigations on the political dimensions of the institutional Catholic Church under both Spanish and US rule in Puerto Rico ([bi2013005407](#) and [bi2017000209](#)). Hernández Aponte ([bi2016001041](#)) challenges some of Silva Gotay's contentions on the Americanization of the Catholic Church, providing new evidence of the Church's attempts at preserving its Hispanic American identity through pastoral mission initiatives. In another work, Hernández Aponte ([bi2016001052](#)) sketches the activities of the Siervas de María, a congregation of nuns, on the island since the late 19th century.

Important analyses of women's health and the impact of public welfare policies in modern Puerto Rican society are now available. Lugo-Ortiz ([bi2016001040](#)) addresses the effects of the printed media discourse about the controversial practice of tubal sterilization in Puerto Rico since the 1940s. In a study that straddles the 19th and early 20th centuries, Pérez Soto ([bi2016001047](#)) finds no noticeable evidence that public welfare programs helped poor and marginalized Puerto Ricans.

Studies on immigration, emigration, and exile are well represented in the selection of works included in this volume. Most of these studies deal with labor migration. The new, revised translation of *China* ([bi2015000893](#); see [HLAS 64: bi2006001708](#)) is a welcome contribution to the literature. The thrust of this work is the focus on the migration of free West Indian workers to Puerto Rico at a time when export-based agriculture was taking off. Significantly, one third of all free immigrants from the West Indies who relocated to the island to perform skilled and semiskilled jobs in the sugar economy were nonwhites. During the 20th century, contract migration of Puerto Ricans to the US affected the island's social fabric. Poblete ([bi2015001854](#)) compares the experiences of Puerto Rican and Filipino migrant laborers recruited to work on Hawaiian sugar plantations during the early 1900s. Findlay ([bi2015000567](#)) unearths "Operation Farmlift," a largely forgotten chapter in the history of government-led migration of male Puerto Rican laborers to the fields of Michigan in 1950. Both Poblete and Findlay cast their analyses against the larger backdrop of US colonial policies over these territories. International political events also triggered migratory movements to and from Puerto Rico in the 20th century. The ripples of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) spread across the Atlantic, reaching both Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican communities in the US. Ortiz Carrión and Torres Rivera ([bi2017000204](#)) trace the lifestories of Puerto Rican-born volunteers supporting Republican forces during the conflict. Naranjo Orovio, Luque and Albert Robatto ([bi2016001240](#)) coordinated a volume to study Spanish intellectuals and artists who went into exile in Puerto Rico in the aftermath of the war.

Significant contributions to the historical analysis of slavery, race, and race relations in 18th – and 19th –century Puerto Rico appear in Stark ([bi2015003808](#) and [bi2017000160](#)), Baerga

([bi2017000203](#)), and Rodríguez-Silva ([bi2014000455](#)). Applying family reconstitution methodology, Starks discovers stable family life among the enslaved population in Arecibo during the second half of the 18th century. Furthermore, the practice of *compadrazgo* enabled bonded people to create strong solidarity networks in a slave-holding society. In examining opposition to interracial marriage legal cases, Baerga sees race and racialization as a dynamic, fluid, and negotiated practice, not entirely determined by modern concepts of biology. In 19th-century Puerto Rican society, an established consensus on racial status did not exist. An individual's racial status was influenced by other factors including gender and sexual behavior. In the post-abolition era, Rodríguez-Silva argues that abolition commemorations served to reassert not only white power but also patriarchal authority in the southern town of Ponce.

A spate of works center on modern agrarian, economic, and labor history themes. Zanetti Lecuona ([bi2016001044](#)) produced a comparative history of development of the sugar industry in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba, with particular emphasis on the 20th century. Gallart ([bi2016001051](#)) writes on Salvador Gallart Alonso, a lesser-known tobacco-grower leader who led struggles against North American corporate interests. A history of the Confederación General de Trabajadores, the largest union federation founded in 1940, is a posthumous publication by the late Lugo del Toro ([bi2015003766](#)).

Online indexing tools and digitization initiatives continue to proliferate, enhancing the preservation of and access to invaluable research source materials relevant for the study of the history of Puerto Rico. All of the resources mentioned here are freely accessible on the internet.

Providing coverage of news content going back to 1990, the *Archivo Digital de El Nuevo Día* ([bi2017000162](#)) enables users to retrieve full-text articles, but no images. The *Archivo Digital Nacional de Puerto Rico (ADNPR)* ([bi2017000161](#)) is a fully searchable collection of digitized archival records, periodicals, plans and maps, and ephemera. Of varied provenance, these materials are drawn from both local public and private collections as well as from international institutions, principally from Spain. Runs of periodicals published in Puerto Rico and in the non-Hispanic Caribbean, some considered rare, are currently available online. Notable 20th-century titles are *Puerto Rico Ilustrado*, the cultural magazine published as an insert in the prominent *El Mundo* newspaper; *Heraldo de la Mujer*, a leading feminist review; and *Puerto Rico Herald* and *La Hora*, two political organs. From the neighboring Caribbean region, the *St. Thomas Tidende*, the government gazette, and the *St. Croix Avis* are excellent sources of news information on 19th-century trade and commerce in the region. Also notable is the extensive collection of plans and maps on Puerto Rico held in both the Archivo General de Puerto Rico and several military and naval repositories in Spain. Furthermore, the site provides access to the nearly complete set of *Boletín de la Academia Puertorriqueña de la Historia* (1968-2010), and to out-of-print publications and working papers issued by the Centro de Estudios de la Realidad Puertorriqueña (CEREP), the collective that transformed Puerto Rican Studies during the 1970s.

Another digital project of note to emerge recently is *Colección Puertorriqueña* ([bi2017000880](#)). Available on the ISSUU digital publishing platform, this project brings together a curated selection of materials from the eponymous cultural heritage library at the Universidad de Puerto Rico. Rare books, periodicals, cultural and literary reviews, and government publications form the core of digitized content covering the 19th and 20th centuries. Important content accessible in

this digital collection includes a set of books dealing with slavery and abolition in Puerto Rico. The runs of papers associated with the Universidad de Puerto Rico, particularly the official organ *La Torre* (1939-1947), the student-run *El Universitario* (1947-1952), and *Diálogo* (1986-present), provide excellent sources of information on the academic, cultural, and political activities of the university community. For better search functionality, researchers may use the Google Custom Search site available at <https://cse.google.com/cse/publicurl?cx=018270143698380143385:oe-xbopxogm>. This resource complements the *Biblioteca Digital Puertorriqueña* (see [HLAS 68: bi2012005783](#)).

Collaborative open-access digitization of historic newspapers containing relevant content on Puerto Rico continues to thrive on both sides of the Atlantic. Coordinated by Spain's Ministerio de Cultura, the *Biblioteca Virtual de Prensa Histórica* offers a fully searchable database of historic newspapers and periodicals published in Spain since the late 18th century ([bi2017000208](#)).

Collaboration with North American institutions has evolved into the creation of the *Florida and Puerto Rico Digital Newspaper Project* ([bi2017000881](#)). Through this partnership between the Colección Puertorriqueña at the Universidad de Puerto Rico and the University of Florida Libraries, digitization of *La Democracia*, the influential paper founded by Luis Muñoz Rivera in 1890 in support of the Partido Autonomista, has begun. Full-text for 1891-97 is currently available on the site.

Three additional specialized, small-scale digitization initiatives are also worthy of mention. The preeminent *Revista del Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña* has been completely digitized ([bi2017000164](#)). The multidisciplinary review is an excellent source of information on historical as well as contemporary topics related to the arts, culture, literature, and society in Puerto Rico. The *Biblioteca Virtual de la Academia Puertorriqueña de Jurisprudencia y Legislación* ([bi2017000207](#)) has developed a select collection of records related to the landmark Cádiz Cortes. Based at the Universidad Interamericana, the Centro de Investigación e Historia Oral ([bi2017000163](#)) website provides free access to audio files as well as transcriptions of oral interviews on topics related to religion, traditional medicine, and community organization projects in contemporary Puerto Rico.