

**A "GREAT ROADS" APPROACH TO TEACHING  
MODERN WORLD HISTORY AND  
LATIN AMERICAN REGIONAL SURVEY COURSES:  
A VERACRUZ TO MEXICO CITY CASE STUDY**

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In January of 2000, the authors of this article made a ten-day field trip along Mexico's Veracruz to Mexico City corridor, with notebooks, detailed maps, and digital camera in hand. This was all in support of their recent experience in teaching history survey courses on their respective campuses. Jim Brown of Samford University has been developing interactive three-dimensional topography models as a basis for his sophomore modern world history course. Doug Sullivan-González, Latin American historian at the University of Mississippi, has been fine-tuning his introductory regional history courses in the Croft International Program there. We have both gravitated towards use of a "great roads" approach. Twenty years of discussion between us, including recent visits to each other's campuses and incorporation of some of the other's approaches, led up to this joint field trip. In this article we first outline an innovative "great roads" way of teaching "World History Since 1500" as it has evolved at Samford in recent years. Then at more length we develop the "Veracruz to Mexico City corridor" case study approach to the modern history of Latin America as we both now use it in our survey courses.

Teaching history survey courses requires paring and teaching by microcosm. The size and complexity of the subject matter make it hard to integrate this course without reducing the vast historic drama to vague general formulas on the one hand or unconnected vignettes on the other. Suppose a teacher presented as the great theme of the last five hundred years the following two-part process. First, unparalleled new power was generated by European and Europeanized countries through new kinds of social mobilization and technology, enabling them to explore and eventually conquer most of the world. Second, the rest of the world then fought to regain its independence, in part by borrowing crucial ideas from those same new powers, particularly those social catalysts of nationalism and socialism. This two-step process in world history can then be illumined by studying a sample country or countries from each of the world's major non-European regions—we have chosen Japan from East Asia, Indonesia from Southeast Asia, India from South Asia, South Africa from Africa, Israel/Palestine from the Middle East, and Mexico from Latin America. Each country's experiences, in turn, are sampled by using a "great roads" approach. This further limits and focuses the history, yet at the same time gives it a human scale filled with personal detail.

For some of these countries a single road works well. Japan's Tokaido or "East Sea Road" that runs from the old imperial capital of Kyoto to the newer frontier capital of Tokyo, for example, is a single dominant road that can be used to organize almost all important developments in Japanese history since 1500. The Grand Trunk Road in the British Raj that ran from Calcutta in today's India to Lahore in today's Pakistan, with an important spur on to Peshawar and the Khyber Pass, was based on the ancient key road connecting the Ganges basin with the Punjabi tributaries of the Indus. The part of it in India today is still of key importance and familiarly known to Indians as "the GT Road." Most important aspects of modern Indonesian history can be linked to the single Javanese road from Jakarta (the Dutch colonial capital Batavia) to the ancient cultural capital of Yogyakarta. It passes up through the hill country resort of Bogor, through the volcanic highlands university city of Bandung, and after Yogyakarta by extension on to the key industrial city of Surabaya. In other countries or regions where there is no clear single most important road, we specify a simple network of roads that achieves almost the same effect. With South Africa, for example, we concentrate on that elongated triangle of roads from Capetown inland through Kimberly to Johannesburg, thence to Durban on the Kwa Zulu-Natal coast, and from Durban down the coast through Port Elizabeth and again to Capetown. We outline a more complicated network of roads in Israel/Palestine, caused by the constraints that topography has placed on traveling from the Nile delta to Damascus or Amman. The Via Maris along the Mediterranean coast and the King's Road along the Jordanian escarpment each have their obstacles, and various intermediate compromises connect these two extremes. Last, and the real substance of this article, comes the Mexican "great road." There may not be a single Mexican road as important as the Tokaido is to Japan, but there is a single clearly dominant corridor—that Veracruz to Mexico City network of roads that has been key to Mexican history ever since Cortés.

As we lecture on the development of European power and its impact on specific cultures and polities in the non-European world, students in small groups are working toward class presentations on one of these countries. They are asked to connect their presentations whenever possible with the key roads or networks of roads specified above. We have found that if students can visualize the ups and downs of a key road, including some of the texture of the land in terms of soils, plants, animals, and human communities, they are much quicker to engage the history of the country as it played out along that road.

The topography is simple enough to do, using two-dimensional or better yet three-dimensional maps featuring the area of the crucial "great roads." The texture of the land can be layered in a process familiar from many humanities and social sciences disciplines. Several academic fields in the past century have "invented" the same general model of telescoping time. They begin by looking at geology and climate, then turn to the botany and zoology that these supported, then the anthropology or

prehistory based in turn on those, then the history proper. The last step is finally to study political issues, in a study now informed by all the foregoing. Take, as examples, geographer Carl Sauer's *The Early Spanish Main*, landscape architect Ian McHarg's *Design With Nature*, and not least historian Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. All three deal with the vivacious interplay between humanity and the regional environment in this "telescoping time" way, beginning with soils and climate and ending with (informed) politics.<sup>1</sup>

In this light, consider the history of Mexico since 1500. It is quite a complex problem, and in such a survey course a teacher might have only a week—three one-hour MWF classes, perhaps—to spend with this sole example of Latin American history. Even in a more detailed regional study of Latin America, Mexico might get only a fraction of the course. Our proposed solution: Take the Veracruz to Mexico City corridor, an east–west rectangle roughly two hundred miles long that covers maybe three percent of Mexican territory but is crucial to much of its modern history, and use it as a microcosm to limit and focus the whole. In this way we can still approach Mexican history in time-honored chronological fashion, coaching students in researching and reporting on the conquest and early colonial structures, late colonial patterns and independence, nineteenth-century interventions, and finally the twentieth-century revolution and modern civic myth. First, though, we claim the opening half-hour to present that interdisciplinary view of the lay and texture of the land.

With maps, pictures, and even tourist guidebooks, we walk American students imaginatively along this corridor. We take them from dry and thinly vegetated dune lands, and then on up the complicated 8500-foot slope, most of it green year round and striated by altitude into cooler and cooler climates, up to the cloud forests on the volcanic ridge above. Whitewater rivers drain this eastern slope of the Sierra Madre Oriental and have cut deep, steep-sided gorges, or *barrancas*, into the natural terraces of the slope. Sugar cane, pasture, and forest dominate the lowlands at the bottom of the slope, and coffee *fincas* shaded by bananas and semi-tropical forest alternate with pasturelands in the more broken country further up. Bird life, just to hint at zoology, is rich in both these zones, including at least two dozen species of hummingbirds, half a dozen kinds of trogons, the whole range of neo-tropical parrots from macaws down to parakeets, and occasional isolated trees full of the suspended woven nests of some brilliant oriole relative. Mornings on the eastern slope are typically crystal clear and chilly, and noon even in winter usually warms up to short-sleeve shirt weather, with increasing humidity gradually reducing the long-range views with haze. By late

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<sup>1</sup>Carl O. Sauer, *The Early Spanish Main* (Berkeley: University of California, 1992); Ian L. McHarg, *Design With Nature* (New York: Natural History Press, 1969); and Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

afternoons the warm wet air from the Gulf has often risen to meet the colder drier air of the altiplano, causing a condition somewhere between fog and drizzle so common here that the locals have come up with a special name for it, *chipi-chipi*.

Even halfway up the eastern slope of this Sierra Madre Oriental, travelers become aware of former volcanic action: an occasional miniature but perfect volcanic cone rises up, extinct now and green with tropical vegetation. At the top of the slope stands a massive forty-mile-long volcanic ridge, both ends rising well above the tree line. On the southern end of the ridge, at 18,400 feet, the snow-capped Pico de Orizaba stands as the highest point in Mexico and one of the highest in all North America. On clear days it can be seen from the whole slope and even out to sea, as symmetrical and beautiful as Mt. Fuji and half again taller. It claims ten lives a year on average: inexperienced climbers apparently assume that its tropical location minimizes the danger. Yet it is very hazardous: it is part of Mexico's Frozen Land (Tierra Helada), the fourth and highest zone (after the Tierra Caliente of the lowlands, the Tierra Templada of the slopes, and the Tierra Fría of the high plains). The old name for Orizaba Peak in the Nahuatl, the Aztec *lingua franca* of central Mexico, is more poetic—Citlaltépetl, Mountain of the Star. The northern end of this volcanic ridge is dominated by the Cofre de Perote, a great rounded mountain with what looks like an absurd little pillbox hat on its top. The first Spanish to see it thought the square volcanic extrusion looked like the box a church in Spain would use for storing holy relics, a *cofre*, kin to the English word coffer. The brash Cortés crossed the sway-backed ridge between Cofre and Orizaba, which does not dip below 10,000 feet at its lowest point, while savvy later travelers bypassed it. Since Cortés's day, the two main roads from the port city of Veracruz to Mexico City have swung either northwards of the ridge through the towns of Xalapa and Perote or south of it through the towns of Córdoba and Orizaba.<sup>2</sup>

When travelers round either shoulder of that volcanic ridge with its lush pine forests and come out behind the ridge onto the altiplano, or high plains, they experience the quickest and most dramatic change of scenery on the whole road to Mexico City. The rain shadow west of the volcanic ridge translates into immediate semi-desert. Rows and fields of the giant aloe or century plant called maguey give some symmetry to the arid landscape. The maguey provided fiber, needles, and a sugary sap to make a kind of beer called pulque (and with later distillation, the whiskey-strong mescal and tequila). If there is a single plant that gives visual character to the altiplano, it has to be the maguey, although it sometimes grows in the lowlands as well.

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<sup>2</sup>Most people in today's rather conservative state of Puebla spell the name of the town Xalapa in the next-door state of Veracruz with a J (Jalapa) instead of with an X. The X comes from the Nahuatl, and so hints at identification with the pre-Conquest world, while the J spelling subtly champions the Spanish heritage. In the state of Veracruz, the spelling "Xalapa" is required by law!

The altiplano itself begins at about 8500-foot altitude at the western base of the Pico de Orizaba-Cofre de Perote ridge and slopes imperceptibly down the next hundred miles to Mexico City's 7500-foot altitude. One way we get students to imagine the landscape is to have them picture a flat gray volcanic sand lake bed, as perfectly flat as the salt lake beds in the American west like the Bonneville flats. Then add to that perfect flatness a pile of gray boulders here and there, catapulted out of the earth by some past volcanic eruption. To these add volcanic extrusions ranging from a few feet tall to a hundred feet tall to 1,000 feet tall, and finally huge world-class volcanic cones that rise fully 10,000 feet above the plains, and that often have enormous ridges and slopes around them made by lava flow or ash accumulation. La Malinche, a great snaggle-toothed rust-red volcano about fifty miles west of the Pico de Orizaba, divides the easternmost valley of the altiplano from the next valley west, the Tlaxcala-Puebla valley. On the far side of that valley, only forty miles west of Malinche, comes the great volcanic ridge called the Sierra de Tlálloc. It is anchored on the south by two peaks over 17,000 feet tall: the still active volcano Popocatepetl, "Smoking Mountain" in the Nahuatl, and next to it Ixtaccíhuatl, "Sleeping Woman," named for its long snow-covered ridgeline. A little further north in the line comes the slightly lower peak of Tlálloc itself, named after the old Aztec rain god. Over this great ridge lies the central valley of the altiplano, mostly taken up by today's Mexico City, ringed by mountains on the south and west as well as the Sierra de Tlálloc on its east, and with smaller volcanic ridges almost closing it off in the north. The high plains are dry and brown in the winter, spinning up pretty little dust devils daily and an occasional massive dust storm that can blanket the capital, but much of it is greener and agriculturally productive in the summer. Up on the altiplano no compass is needed for navigation (except when it is immersed in Mexico City's smog, often trapped in its mountain bowl) because five or six tall volcanoes, each unique and recognizable at a glance, stand like giant road signs. This whole plateau is often simply called the *Mesa Central*, that "tableland" so central to the culture, although geologists' general term for it carries much more punch and movement—the *Zona Neovolcanica*.

Most of the old colonial churches of Mexico City, even the great cathedral on the main plaza or *Zócalo*, have great cracks in their masonry or sit at drunken angles because they have settled further into the sand of the old lake bed with each vibration in the earth. Earthquakes are so frequent and devastating here as to make California seem a stable place by comparison: a minimum of 10,000 people died in the 1985 Mexico City quake, and probably at least double that number. Recently the lava has risen so high in Popocatepetl that orange light has been seen reflected off clouds hanging over it. And the world's most populated city lies thirty to forty miles away from it, 22,000,000 strong at last count. Life there is not dull and apparently never has been: this *Zona Neovolcanica* housed Mexico's densest population 500 years ago, too.

As vivid as we try to present this interdisciplinary introduction in words, it seems to compute better with most students when explained in association with a three-

dimensional map. The authors use a layered contour map they have developed, each layer representing a 500-foot vertical increment of this Veracruz to Mexico City slice of Mexico. The surprising average elevation of the altiplano valleys—one and a half times the altitude of Denver—becomes visually clear, along with the even more surprising altitude of the tallest volcanoes and the neat division of the altiplano into separate valleys.

In using this “great roads” approach, we needed one manageable paperback for the whole class to read for one detailed snapshot of the history along this corridor. We chose to have students read Bernal Díaz’s *The Conquest of New Spain*, taking three daily readings from it that capture most of Cortés’s journey from Veracruz (the island of San Juan de Ulúa, technically) to Cempoala, Xalapa, Tlaxcala, and Cholula to Tenochtitlán and back.<sup>3</sup> We have tried to focus our students’ search for crucial moments in Mexican history and help them unfold the story of each in the context of this stunning geographical stage. In those three class days while Díaz’s eyewitness account is read and discussed, we have four students or small groups of students who have researched Mexican history report to the class on four key “moments” of that history: 1) The Conquest; 2) Independence; 3) The Interventions; and 4) The Revolution. We ask student researchers of Mexico to begin with the overview of Mexican history since 1500 offered by the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and then move on to two excellent survey textbooks. *The Course of Mexican History*, a classic for university courses but accessible to advanced secondary students as well, focuses heavily on the politics of change among the principal actors in Mexico City from the conquest to the present. MacLachlan and Beezley’s *El Gran Pueblo* emphasizes cultural and social change and also provides invaluable timelines with each chapter. Beyond these, we expect students to delve into more specific monographs and articles dealing with their assigned “moments,” whenever possible tying their history to the Veracruz to Mexico City road network.<sup>4</sup>

1. THE CONQUEST. We require students assigned to this first “moment” to rough out the Olmec-Aztec heritage that dominated this Veracruz to Mexico City corridor prior to the conquest, as a setting for the conquest itself. The *pochteca* class of long-distance Aztec traders who used the pre-hispanic roads were not only privileged but perhaps the advance guard of possible future Aztec conquest. Their roads to the coast apparently went south of Pico de Orizaba and then angled across the Sierra Madre Oriental slopes to Cempoala and the vicinity of today’s Veracruz,

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<sup>3</sup>Bernal Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, translated by J. M. Cohen (New York: Viking Penguin, 1963).

<sup>4</sup>Michael C. Meyer, William L. Sherman, and Susan M. Deeds, *The Course of Mexican History*, sixth edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Colin M. MacLachlan and William H. Beezley, *El Gran Pueblo: A History of Greater Mexico*, second edition (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1999).

blocked from more northern routes around the sierra by the independent Tlaxcalan state.

Students can detail the conquest of the Aztec state by a handful of Spanish conquistadors led by Hernando Cortés, along with their Cempoalan guides from the coastal lowlands and their later Tlaxcalan allies from the altiplano. Student researchers can begin with the survivor testimony *Broken Spears* with its portrayal of indigenous futility and frustration in the fall of Tenochtitlan.<sup>5</sup> Taken together with Díaz, this reading recreates for students the expectations of the Spanish in the search for El Dorado and the historic resentment among the conquered Mexicans. We have students compare Díaz's account with Cortés's letters and Prescott's timeless 1843 *Conquest of Mexico*, trying to work out on the map the initial trip to Tenochtitlán, the path of the retreat, and the trip back to build ships to take the Aztec capital by way of the lake.<sup>6</sup> Cortés, perhaps on the advice of friendly Indians, obviously avoided the major Aztec roads through the Sierra Madre Oriental and later the Sierra de Tlálloc. Students in charge of this unit can lead other students in tracing the path on which historians conjecture the conquistadors traveled.

Finally, these students are asked to rough in the first centuries of colonial-style rule. They might examine the Hapsburg crown's reliance on religious institutions in the settlement of Mexico, within this corridor, beginning at an early date. Franciscans established the first convent in the country in Tlaxcala in 1524. The grounds of this first convent served as experimental botanical gardens for what European and South American plants might be grown in Mexico and what taste for Mexican foodstuffs European people might acquire. In 1531 the Spanish founded Puebla, the future "city of churches" that would quickly become the dominant city between the capital and Veracruz. Also in 1531 came recognition of the miraculous appearance of the dark-skinned Virgin of Guadalupe just outside Mexico City. Commercial and governmental patterns can also be seen clearly on this corridor. With Mexico City as the capital and Veracruz exercising a legal monopoly on all imports and exports for the whole east coast, this corridor became instantly the vital traffic artery, even more important than the road south from Mexico City to the Pacific coast port of Acapulco. Virtually all other Spanish colonial capitals were on or near the coast, but here in their attempt to replace the Aztecs in a well-developed trade and tribute system, they inherited the inland Aztec capital as well. The lifeline from Mexico City to the mother country ran along the royal road(s) to Veracruz. For a more detailed focus on the road in these early colonial times, we suggest that our English-speaking students read Thomas

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<sup>5</sup>*The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, edited and translated by Miguel Leon-Portilla (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

<sup>6</sup>William H. Prescott, *The Conquest of Mexico and History of the Conquest of Peru* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1999).

Gage's *Travels in the New World* for its vivid travelogue of the Veracruz–Xalapa–Tlaxcala–Puebla–Mexico City route in 1625.<sup>7</sup> Even important Mexican developments not occurring on this main road leave their trace on the road by goods carried up and down it. No silver mining, for example, was done anywhere on the length of this corridor, but cinnabar (for mercury, important in the extraction of silver from ore) was a key import from mid-sixteenth century on, and the bullion itself came the other way in heavily guarded convoys, headed for the yearly fleet assembling at Veracruz for the trip back to Spain. During most of the 1700s, goods from the altiplano of Mexico and even from Asia via Acapulco converged at Xalapa's royal trade fairs with commercial products from Spain.

2. INDEPENDENCE. We require students to examine how international events hastened change in eighteenth-century New Spain. The "Bourbon Reforms" of the last colonial decades brought freer trade, strengthening the Veracruz–Xalapa–Perote liberal merchants at the expense of businessmen of the southern road cities of Orizaba and Córdoba who had hitched their wagons to the great commercial concerns of Mexico City. The Bourbon crown replaced reliance on religious institutions with reliance on the military, and a more efficient regional administration in the form of French-style "intendancies" was created. With hindsight, it is clear that these reforms played a role in the upcoming insurgencies. Growing anti-clerical sentiment hints at an eventual attack on the formidable colonial Church. One accessible eyewitness account comes from Alexander von Humboldt, the wide-ranging Prussian scholar who wangled a rare outsider's invitation from the Spanish crown to travel in New Spain. He spent the year 1803–04 in Mexico, entering at Acapulco and leaving by the Mexico City–Xalapa–Veracruz route. His *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* runs in unedited versions to eight volumes.<sup>8</sup> In his chapter on vegetable productions, Humboldt waxes eloquent about everything from the preparation of pulque ("the plantations of the maguey de pulque extend as far as the Aztec language") to the cultivation of vanilla around Veracruz and the Jalap medicinal root in a narrow altitudinal band from Xalapa to Orizaba. In other chapters he is equally informative on commerce and roads, ethnicity and education.

Events of the radical social revolution that began in 1810 with Hidalgo and Morelos ought to be central to this "moment." It did not begin on the Veracruz to Mexico City corridor, though the somewhat conservative independent government that resulted by 1821 owed a good deal to the political and economic power of that corridor. Ruined stretches of the Camino Real from Veracruz up through Xalapa and

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<sup>7</sup>Thomas Gage, *Thomas Gage's Travels in the New World* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985).

<sup>8</sup>Alexander von Humboldt, *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985).



Perote, ten meters wide and magnificently graded and clearly once beautifully surfaced and curbed, still survive from these Bourbon and early Independence decades. The huge old Puente Nacional (before Independence the Puente del Rey) halfway on the road from Veracruz to Xalapa, finished in 1811, still carries heavy traffic today on its ten-meter-wide roadbed supported by seven massive Roman arches.

3. THE INTERVENTIONS. All over the country, but especially in Veracruz and Mexico City, Mexicans have lumped a century's worth of galling foreign invasions together into rooms and whole museums of the *Intervenciones*. Students researching this "moment" ought to reflect on the major foreign intrusions into Mexico from 1823 to 1914. The Spanish bombarded Veracruz proper from the sixteenth-century offshore fort of San Juan de Ulúa off and on from 1823 to 1825, after the mainland declared its independence. We ask our students to look also at the French "pastry war" of 1838, the U.S. invasion under Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott, the French invasion during the American Civil War, and possibly the 1914 American bombardment and occupation of Veracruz. A mural on the ceiling of a two-story room in the castle of Chapultepec recounts one U.S. intervention in an "in-your-face" way. One of the niños heroes (young cadets defending Chapultepec who jumped to their death rather than surrender to U.S. soldiers) plunges straight down toward the viewer with the Mexican flag wrapped around his leading fist and body while a radiant golden Mexican eagle hovers over him in the central background. Out on the rim of this vision, gaunt and evil horsemen fly the U.S. flag. "Is this most Mexicans' view of us," we encourage our U.S. students working on this moment to ask their fellow students, "or just how the muralist wants them to think?"

U.S. students researching this "moment" and trying when possible to link important historical developments with the Veracruz to Mexico City corridor should probably focus their research on either the U.S.-Mexican War or the French invasion culminating in Maximilian's rule. For the first, independence witnessed the rise of José Antonio López de Santa Anna, born in Xalapa, the son of a mortgage banker in Veracruz. Santa Anna's major estate just downhill from Xalapa—"El Lencero"—straddled the northern road that was primary in his many turns at power through 1855. Starting with a reputation as a frontier Indian killer, at the height of his power he owned almost everything between Veracruz and Xalapa, and also owned huge haciendas on the southern road through Córdoba. Most Mexicans today would rather forget him: "El Lencero" has been beautifully refurbished and made into a museum, but as a museum of nineteenth-century furniture, not of Santa Anna. Although hardly anyone in Mexico mentions Santa Anna, his person makes it easy to talk about Texas and the U.S.-Mexican War and still keep one foot, so to speak, on the Veracruz to Mexico City roads.

The Battle of Cerro Gordo took place in April of 1847 some twenty miles downhill from El Lencero on wonderfully defensible ground. Twin *barrancas*, half a mile apart, defend a commanding "telegraph hill" on the north and three high ridges

on the south, and the main road from Veracruz to Xalapa approaches right up the middle. Santa Anna had fought over and around that land for years, and nobody knew it better; his army outnumbered Scott's; his shoulder arms and artillery were all better. How could he have lost? The Library of Congress has a workmanlike chart of the battlefield prepared by a young officer named McClellan, the first of a "Who's Who" of upcoming American Civil War officers. Another young officer named Lee found a way up the northern *barranca* to flank Santa Anna's position—that same Lee who later reconnoitered the pedregal (a broken lava field or *malpais*) near Mexico City where the university stands today. The American capture of Veracruz, Cerro Gordo, and then the altiplano battles of the convent of Churubusco and the castle of Chapultepec, all fit nicely on the Veracruz–Xalapa–Mexico City road. For American students, then, the U.S.–Mexican War is one obvious point of focus. Many accounts in English offer good maps and excellent color plates that reproduce contemporary U.S. military artists' pictures of the major battles, from Veracruz and Cerro Gordo to those in the Valley of Mexico proper. Carol and Thomas Christensen's *The U.S.–Mexican War* produced as part of the PBS series offers a remarkable source for the enterprising student.<sup>9</sup>

An alternative focus might be the French invasion fifteen years later that came along the southern road through Córdoba and Orizaba, probably because the first stretch of railroad from the coast to the capital had been laid towards those cities, from Veracruz as far as the Paso del Macho. The Mexicans celebrate one of their great modern holidays, the anniversary of the 1862 battle on Cinco de Mayo when they drove the French away from Puebla as their first major victory over an invading great power. The French were marked by the war, too. In an 1863 skirmish, four French legionnaires, out of ammunition, in a suicidal gasp, leveled bayonets and charged an overwhelming number of Mexican troops. They survived by the grace of the Mexican commander who was moved by the soldiers' bravery and ordered their capture. The legionnaires' heroic defeat in 1863 at this Battle of Camerone, not far uphill from Veracruz on the road to Orizaba, became a watchword and day of yearly celebration for the entire French Foreign Legion.

As emperor, Maximilian favored the southern route from capital to coast. He even settled Confederate refugees from the U.S. Civil War along and near that road in 1865. The queen of American colonies (named "Carlota" after Maximilian's wife) was situated right beside the railroad, and the Hotel Confederate in the city of Córdoba a few miles away was the main social gathering point of these last diehard rebels. Maximilian's own body, after his 1867 execution by the Juaristas, came down through Xalapa on the northern road, resting awhile in the cathedral he had helped build there

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<sup>9</sup>See also Carol Christensen's companion volume, *The U.S.–Mexican War* (San Francisco: Bay Books, 1998).

in 1864. One advantage of this point of focus is that it requires a student to spend time on Maximilian's important nemesis, Benito Juárez. Not much of Juárez's career was spent on our chosen corridor; he was from Oaxaca in the South and most of his stubborn nationalist resistance to Maximilian took place in the North. The 1864 cathedral in Xalapa, however, can serve as a good link to the conflict between Maximilian's pro-Catholic policies and Juárez's classically Liberal anti-clerical ones. This conflict split Mexican society into warring factions, and from 1867 to his death in 1872 the victor Juárez instituted thorough and lasting anti-church restrictions. His equally Liberal insistence that communal lands become private eventually alienated many Indians who thus lost their communal land holdings and whose grievances would finally emerge with a vengeance in the Mexican Revolution.

Another interesting entry into this period, happening almost exclusively along our chosen corridor, was early railroad construction. One of the few policies shared by the French occupation force, Maximilian, and Juárez was focus on the completion of the first real railroad in Mexico, the Veracruz to Mexico City line (Ferrocarril Mexicano) that got up to the altiplano and Mexico City via Orizaba and Apizaco. Finally opened in 1872, the year of Juárez's death, it was achieved by almost total reliance on foreign (mainly British) capital and expertise. The result was magnificent, but seeds of anti-foreign sentiment were sown by the differential treatment of locals and internationals, and by the heavy foreign debt burden assumed by the government. These seeds would bear fruit in the next "moment."

4. THE REVOLUTION. The Mexican Revolution of the early twentieth century produced the Mexican nation that we know today. We suggest to students focusing on this "moment" that they begin with the nascent middle-class frustration with the Porfiriato dictatorship in Mexico City that unleashed surprisingly powerful social forces in 1910. After the revolutionary winds died down, a single party emerged heralding agrarian reform, nationalization of natural resources, and a secular control over religion. Today's PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), which emerged post-revolution as the dominant political power, has only in recent years initiated cultural and economic privatization of many of these revolutionary gains and cultivated a rapprochement with the Catholic Church in a bid to stave off new political challenges. The strength of socialism and even Marxism in twentieth-century Mexico, however, deserves serious study by American students, who are likely to be surprised by it. Peasant land hunger and the ferment among industrial workers in Mexico have some remarkable parallels with events in contemporary Russia: no wonder Trotsky, exiled from Russia, spent his last years in Mexico.

In terms of getting at twentieth-century Mexican history by looking at the Mexico City-Veracruz corridor, although Mexico City remained the key city of the land, Veracruz declined somewhat in national importance. By World War I Tampico's oil provided much more of Mexico's income than exports from Veracruz, and Tampico outgrew Veracruz and attracted its share of new roads and railroads. There are still

important ways to use the original corridor, however, for this "moment." The U.S. occupation of Veracruz in 1914 proved crucial in the revolutionary overthrow of the Huerta regime and the consolidation of Carranza's power. It was the governor of the state of Veracruz who sent Diego Rivera, just a young art student of promise, to Europe to study, and he came back with a vision of murals and political education through art that became world-famous. The conservative Catholic Cristeros who led a bloody revolt against the anti-clericism of the Revolution in the 1920s were especially strong around Puebla and Tlaxcala. Puebla itself, perhaps the key city on the whole Veracruz to Mexico City corridor other than the capital itself, has been the subject of a growing body of regional studies on the Revolution, most recently Timothy J. Henderson's *The Worm in the Wheat: Rosalie Evans and Agrarian Struggle in the Puebla-Tlaxcala Valley of Mexico, 1906-1927*.<sup>10</sup>

Rosalie Evans provides a nice lens through which U.S. students can first view the Revolution at some understandable human scale. She was an American woman raised in Galveston whose father moved to Puebla in 1896, taking his well-educated daughters with him. Rosalie soon married the son of a British railroad executive there and in 1906 they invested their life savings in a hacienda on one of the main roads from Puebla to Mexico City. It was bad timing; four years later the Revolution broke out, and its agrarian land reform dimension eventually took their estate. Rosalie's husband Harry died in 1917, partly from the strain of trying to reclaim the estate. After his death she continued those efforts, but was herself murdered in 1924 as a direct result of her activities. Her vivid letters to her sister in English include her rhapsodies on the plains and the volcanoes, but also her contempt for the common farmers ("Indians" being her disdainful description). In stark contrast to Evans's privileged life, Henderson pictures the overcrowded and land-poor villages nearby, created around 1600 when the original founders of the great haciendas first herded them into these rural ghettos. Once these peasant villagers and their counterparts all over Mexico were drawn into the Revolution, no government that neglected serious land reform was liable to survive. And so even though agrarian violence was much more serious in other parts of Mexico, the city and environs of Puebla make a good local example. Emiliano Zapata—emerging as the most famous revolutionary leader from the firestorm of peasant violence in the South and its brutal sugar plantations with their voracious appetite for peasant land and labor—himself circled up onto the altiplano near Puebla during the Revolution. More importantly for our chosen corridor, lesser homegrown "Zapatistas" from in and around Puebla itself staged their own revolutionary struggle from guerrilla bases on the slopes of Malinche and Popocatepetl.

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<sup>10</sup>Timothy J. Henderson, *The Worm in the Wheat: Rosalie Evans and Agrarian Struggle in the Puebla-Tlaxcala Valley of Mexico, 1906-1927* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 1998).

Finally, after four thirty-minute student reports to the class on these "moments," we take the last thirty minutes of these three one-hour classes to lead the class in a discussion of the nature of modern Mexican society and its political identity. With all the obvious divisions in Mexican society—from *patria chica* loyalties at the expense of loyalties to Mexico generally, to anti-cleric vs. pious Catholic, Revolutionary vs. Liberal vs. Conservative, criollo vs. mestizo vs. Indio—how can anyone speak of a unified Mexico? Except for a few special occasions (the U.S. occupation of Veracruz in 1914, the nationalization of Mexican oil in 1938, major soccer victories in World Cup or Olympic games are almost all that come to mind) does evidence suggest enough Mexican *fraternité* to make this oil-rich, populous state a major player in world politics? Or is Mexico fated to be forever weakened by internal conflicts? Every country, of course, has its civic mythology. Witness the current civic myth in Mexico made popular with these affirmations: "We are not Spanish or even Aztec but Mexica." "We are not true Catholics but 'Guadalupanos,' creators and believers of a hybrid European-American religion unique in the world." "If we had not lost California and all its gold today Mexico would be the dominant country of the western hemisphere." After a week of map work and reading, and reports from research concluded by small groups in the class, current U.S.-Mexican problems will appear in a new light to your students.

So this is our "great roads" geology-to-political history model. A one-week streamlined version of this serves as introduction to all of modern Latin American history in Jim Brown's world history survey class at Samford; a several-weeks-long beefed-up version serves as introduction to Mexico in Doug Sullivan-González's Latin American regional survey class at Ole Miss. The Samford course has been taught for three semesters now. Student evaluations of this "great roads" approach to the Modern World History survey class with its interdisciplinary geology-to-the-present introductions and interactive 3-D topography models suggest favorable results. The students deposited the anonymous evaluations in the appropriate administrator's office, to be read by the instructor only after grades had been turned in. In a class frankly billed as "experimental" and taken by twenty-three students, the evaluations ranged in general from fairly positive to very positive: "Map incredible. Great tools in this class." "I enjoyed the whole road/map thing; however, I don't think roads could apply to every country (some were a stretch). The Grand Trunk Road and the Japanese Tokaido were definitely essential." "I think I gained just as much appreciation for the topography and its effect on history on maps that I didn't make as on the one I did." Only one student made a sweepingly negative comment to the effect of "ditching" the maps and going back to "real" history. Overall, however, the evaluations were positive enough and the whole process creative enough that we are enthusiastic about trying it again with more classes.

Using two- and three-dimensional maps enabled students to understand the changing patterns of the roads of this corridor. Examining what goods traversed this

road and reflecting on what people traveled it—from politicians and priests to artists and soldiers—gave us a genuinely satisfactory way of teaching some general historical themes of Latin American history while focusing on details at a very human scale.<sup>11</sup>

As a postscript to this article for those teachers interested enough to pursue this Veracruz to Mexico City corridor approach to history in microcosm, one key work answered most of the questions we had left after our initial research and subsequent field trip. This was Peter William Rees's 1971 dissertation, "Route inertia and route competition: an historical geography of transportation between Mexico City and Vera Cruz." Opening and closing chapters pursue geographic arguments that may strike most historians as abstruse, but the heart of the dissertation begins with this corridor's pre-hispanic routes and the exact route of the conquest, goes to the development of the colonial road network, the choice of routes taken by the railroads, and finally discusses the choice of route of the *autopista* that was being laid out as the author was finishing his dissertation. It details what moved up and down the roads and how it moved and who was affected. For one, it answered our question of why the first major Mexican railroad (not surprisingly, from Veracruz to Mexico City) took the slightly longer, higher, and more rugged Córdoba–Orizaba route up to the altiplano instead of the more gradual and traditional Xalapa–Perote route. The wealthy Mexico City businessman who in 1857 won the first substantive railroad contract, it turns out, just happened to have extensive estates in the Orizaba valley, a virtual box canyon, and there products of the altiplano were in closest proximity to products of the tropics and the forces of domestic trade therefore strongest. The dissertation also has excellent maps, from probable Aztec routes ca. 1500 to mid-twentieth century patterns of travel and transport, and the sources of these maps are footnoted as thoroughly as good historians footnote texts. The overall picture is of two general ways to get around the volcanic highlands of the Sierra Madre Oriental (either north of Cofre de Perote or south of Pico de Orizaba), and a couple of ways to get over the Sierra de Tlálloc into the Valley of Mexico (the high, hard, fast way over the Río Frío pass or the wide gentle swing to the northwest through the Llanos de Apan floodplain and then back southwest into the capital), and then a basic choice in the middle stretch of the altiplano (whether to go north or south of the volcano La Malinche with its outlying sierras). The slightly easier way for wheeled traffic, from about 1530 to the present, is the Veracruz–Xalapa–Perote way north of the Sierra Madre Oriental, then staying north of Malinche and squeezing between the Llanos de Apan and the northern end of the Sierra de Tlálloc. The advantages of this particular road have always been so slim, however, that other pulls and pushes were able to change some of the middle passages

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<sup>11</sup>Syllabi for our survey courses can be viewed at the following sites:  
<http://www.samford.edu/schools/artsci/history/faculty/jsbrown/hist200pbl.htm> and  
<http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/history/faculty/dsg.html>.

of the main road. Puebla, established in 1531 perhaps as an experiment by the mendicant fathers in trying to settle and civilize the remaining conquistadors, quickly became a haven of Spanish-style agriculture and culture in general for Spanish travelers. The growth of Puebla as a key altiplano city worked like a magnet to pull human traffic near it, although the export-oriented heavy traffic from Mexico City to Veracruz always went by easier roads north of La Malinche, by mule cart in the early centuries and the Mexican railroad later, which only dropped a spur down to Puebla from Apizaco. The building of the Puente Nacional over the Río Antigua by 1811 doomed the old port of La Antigua down by the left bank of the mouth of the river to insignificance, and determined the route of Scott's army from Veracruz to Cerro Gordo, for example. In a word, all the geography a historian is liable to need with this Veracruz to Mexico City corridor is here, along with much valuable history proper.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>See Peter William Rees, "Route inertia and route competition: an historical geography of transportation between Mexico City and Vera Cruz" (University of California at Berkeley: dissertation in the Department of Geography, 1971). Only available on interlibrary loan.