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## Spain's Enterprise of Evil

Charlotte M. Gradie

*Sacred Heart University*, [gradiec@sacredheart.edu](mailto:gradiec@sacredheart.edu)

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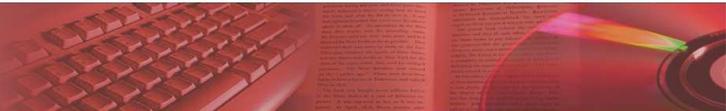
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**Jose Rabasa.** *Writing Violence on the Northern Frontier: The Historiography of Sixteenth-Century New Mexico and Florida and the Legacy of Conquest.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2000. 359 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-2567-3.

**Reviewed by** Charlotte M. Gradie (Department of History and Political Science, Sacred Heart University)  
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## Spain's Enterprise of Evil

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For Jose Rabasa, Professor of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of California, Berkeley, there were no “good guys” on New Spain’s northern frontier. The author has written six essays, which examine a variety of post-conquest Spanish texts. These include legal and government texts such as the New Laws of 1542, The Ordenanzas of 1573, the Requerimiento and the Relaciones geograficas; a number of histories and relaciones such as Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca’s Naufragios and Comentarios, Gonzalo Fernandes de Oviedo’s Historia general y natural de las Indias, La Florida del Inca by Garcilasco de la Vega, Bartolome Barrientos’ Vida y hechos de Pero Menendez de Aviles, including an epic poem, the Historia de la Nueva Mexico by Gaspar de Villagra, the Relacam verdadeira by the Gentleman of Elvas; and commentaries, including Bartolome de las Casas’ Bravisima Relacion and Juan Gines de Sepulveda’s Democrates Alter. These last two were important texts in the “Spanish struggle for justice” concerning the Indians, although Rabasa shows that other writers, such as Oviedo, also addressed this subject.

In his consideration of these texts, Rabasa’s point is that whether or not the authors critiqued Spanish institutions of conquest, as did las Casas of the Encomienda, or military tactics, as did Oviedo of DeSoto, none ever questioned their essential violence. In fact, Rabasa, argues, it was in this way that their writings contributed to the violence of the conquest. Rabasa shows this to be true even of las Casas, who never acknowledged that the effort to Christianize American natives would necessarily lead to the destruction of native culture, and Bernardino de Sahagun, who studied Nahuatl culture in order to destroy it. Although Oviedo criticized DeSoto’s excesses, this was only for his failure to comply with royal law codes

designed to regulate conquest expeditions and the treatment of natives. These laws, such as the New Laws of 1542 or the Ordenanzas of 1573, promulgated to ensure that the conquest would be “peaceful”, also come under Rabasa’s scrutiny. All, he argues, contributed to the essential violence of Spanish imperialism by “writing violence” into the way in which the Spanish, and to some extent, modern historians, interpreted the conquest of America.

Rabasa expands his thesis to include the argument that the Spanish colonization of the Americas “rehearsed, three centuries later, the imperialist categories that Britain and other northern European powers came to deploy in India, Africa and the Middle East at the end of the eighteenth century” (p. 16). He argues that although categories such as “colonialism” and “racism” have been shown by scholars of colonialism to derive their meaning from eighteenth and nineteenth-century capitalist expansionism, this does not mean that the sixteenth century did not have a similar “civilizing” mission. For the Spanish this mission was religious, not secular.

It is hard to see how anyone who has been paying attention to the historiography of the Spanish northern frontier for the last century could have missed this point. Herbert E. Bolton’s 1917 article, “The Mission as a Frontier Institution in the Spanish-American Colonies” (not mentioned in the book’s very ample bibliography), comes to mind.[1] Several generations of historians of the Spanish missions since Bolton have shown how Spain’s colonizing enterprise was predicated on the (not necessarily non-violent) conversion and civilizing of natives through the actions of frontier missionaries.

This is not to say that Rabasa does not have anything new to add. His reading of a broad array of colonial texts cautions us to avoid easy conclusions

and categorizations. He shows us that we risk gross misunderstanding of the Spanish colonial project if we take common sixteenth and seventeenth-century terms as “defender of the Indians” or “peaceful conquest” at face value, and he challenges us to think of how violence may be written into the texts of modern imperialism, including those written by scholars of colonialism and the colonized themselves.

His book will inform and intrigue both historians of colonialism and scholars of colonial literature.

Notes

[1]. Herbert E. Bolton, “The Mission as a Frontier Institution in the Spanish-American Colonies,” *American Historical Review*, 23, (1917), pp. 42-61.

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