“Displaced by Revolution: Loyalists in Limbo within the Spanish Empire”

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Images of boat people fleeing revolutionary Cuba periodically appear in the media. Less familiar are loyalists who fled Caribbean and South American revolutions two centuries earlier *toward* Cuba, a cosmopolitan locale in the Spanish empire. Just as the categorization of Cuban migrants under US immigration law has shifted from refugees to parolees to entrants, this earlier generation of boat people found themselves in limbo as Spanish subjects internally displaced within the empire. Although some migrants wrote of taking refuge, refugee (*refugiado*) as a noun was rarely used. Officials called them *emigrados* (akin to émigrés or emigrants), emphasizing their departure from another part of the empire for political reasons.

Aid awarded to displaced Spanish loyalists varied but most lamented the lack of support after abandoning their homelands. Their British counterparts had expressed similar sentiments, but Parliament took pride in the unprecedented scale of compensation paid out by the Claims Commission.[1] Unlike British loyalists, who helped settle expanding territories, Spanish *emigrados* competed for scarce financial assistance within a contracting empire, particularly after 1825. Rather than facilitating integration into the larger empire, their treatment created new identities of difference.

The first major wave of loyalist *emigrados* fled Santo Domingo as the Haitian revolution spread toward eastern Hispaniola. When Spain ceded its territory to France in 1795, the king offered to relocate Spanish subjects to Cuba, promising them lands equivalent to those they would lose. Planters with numerous enslaved laborers, anticipating the French would proclaim abolition, were quick to depart. Toussaint Louverture’s imposition of French authority in 1801 triggered a second, larger, migration to Puerto Rico and Venezuela as well as Cuba.[2]

In Havana, a commission awarded each Spanish *emigrado* a subsistence allowance, calibrated according to status and race, along with a rental subsidy for heads of households. Looking to reduce expenses, the commissioners soon ceased payments to adult male artisans and laborers.

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Higher-status *emigrados* and widows were not cut off, but the little land available for distribution rarely met expectations owing to lack of fertility or distance from ports. When funds still ran short, officials resorted to issuing partial payments and credits. Although a royal order extended allowances to *emigrados* residing in Spanish territory beyond Cuba, these often went unpaid.[3]

When Spain reconquered Santo Domingo in 1809, the king ordered *emigrados* back, but the promise to continue paying stipends for one year while returnees got reestablished was not always fulfilled.[4] Some then fled a second time in 1821 when a movement to declare independence from Spain resulted in annexation by Haiti. Back in Cuba and Puerto Rico, Dominicans bemoaned their multiple expatriations even as they encountered others fleeing revolutions on the mainland.

During the independence revolutions in South America (1810-1825), there were no formal evacuations of civilians nor promises of financial assistance from the metropole. In theory, the cases were distinct because the king never ceded his sovereignty over colonies in rebellion. In practice, the state lacked funds. Facing fiscal shortfalls, the king even prohibited new aid to widows and seldom allowed widows to collect in Puerto Rico or Cuba pensions previously awarded on the mainland.[5] Similarly, metropolitan officials rarely honored credits issued by colonial officials during the war maintaining that those were debts of provincial treasuries no longer in Spanish hands.

As the requests piled up, in 1825 the king prohibited payments pending a new policy on public debts contracted in the American colonies.[6] In contrast to the British Claims Commission, the Spanish commission established in 1827 left few traces in the archives.[7] Except for titled nobility and others with excellent connections at court, few displaced civilians received either financial aid, compensation for property seized by revolutionaries, or even payment of IOUs issued by royal officials during the independence wars.

Although rarely reimbursed for wages unpaid in wartime, colonial administrators fared better than civilians. In 1811, confident Spain could suppress the rebellions, parliament promised displaced bureaucrats two-thirds of their salary until they could return to their posts, as many did in 1815. The king honored pensions for those dislocated again in the 1820s. As the years passed and hopes for mainland reconquest faded, some successfully applied for new positions on full salaries that saved the royal treasury from paying them not to work.[8] But this preferential treatment sparked resentment from local bureaucrats stalled in their careers, as when the head of the Cuban revenue department objected, “the placement and subsistence of these merely transient *emigrados* are not the responsibility of this province and it is not fair that they should be put ahead of those who are serving productively here.”[9]

As they migrated within the shrinking empire, *emigrados* retained their status as Spanish vassals but their claims to the public purse generally remained dead letters on the ledgers of provincial treasuries. In less-populated Puerto Rico, however, a few found not only asylum but also aid. Reasoning that the cost of supporting the émigrés should fall to the territory from which they had fled, the intendant governor imposed in 1814 a tariff on products imported to Puerto Rico from Venezuela. This dedicated fund supported not only the pensions for displaced administrators but also deserving civilians “owing to their proven patriotism, persecutions, and sacrifices and who

are known to depend on charity in order to survive."[10] The governor undoubtedly saw the fund as a temporarily measure, and many *emigrados* did return to the mainland after royalist troops regained territory in 1815.

In the 1820s, Captain General Miguel de la Torre, who had dispatched civilians to refuge in Puerto Rico when he was commanding troops in Venezuela, renewed awards from the fund to displaced men and women. This aid program, unique within the empire, triggered decades-long transatlantic policy debates. By the 1830s, the fund was in deficit. Nevertheless, beneficiaries protested each attempt to eliminate or even reduce the stipends, and local authorities, especially those who had served on the continent during the wars, acted as their protectors. As late as the 1870s, about thirty *emigradas* (by then all women) continued to receive small payments.[11]

Civilians who fled to Puerto Rico did not fit easily into either category of passive refugee or political émigré. Although both men and women received modest aid, key to maintaining the program was highlighting the plight of vulnerable widows and orphans. From this perspective, they appeared like refugees, worthy of assistance as innocent victims of war. Nevertheless, to qualify for stipends, *emigrados* had to prove they had actively defended the king's cause. They may have been needy victims in Puerto Rico, but women like men proudly recounted their deeds in defense of empire in the homelands they had to abandon.

Throughout the Age of Revolutions, displaced loyalists applied for aid based upon their status as fellow Spanish subjects, yet their petitions indexed dissonance. Cuba and Puerto Rico were not foreign (*extranjero*) destinations, but the displaced often characterized them as strange and unfamiliar countries (*paises extraños*) where they lacked property and the personal connections that might lead to employment or charity. The feeling that *emigrados* did not belong was often mutual. Some local residents and authorities in Cuba and Puerto Rico regarded them, if not quite as "foreigners," as "*forasteros*" or "transients," Spaniards with permission for temporary residence who should return to the places from where they emigrated once order was restored.[12]

Thus, the movement of *emigrados* around the empire triggered encounters that highlighted differences among Spanish subjects. Many displaced by revolution lamented their sense of not belonging but the feeling was especially intense for those born and raised in the Americas, who had abandoned their homeland (*patria*) and felt unwelcomed in what they envisioned as the larger *Madre Patria*.

Further Readings:

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Endnotes:

[1] Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011).
[2] Carlos Esteban Deive, *Las emigraciones dominicanas a Cuba (1795-1808)* (Santo Domingo: Fundación Cultural Dominicana, 1989).
[3] Sources on the Santo Domingo *emigrados* can be found in Archivo General de Indias, Sevilla (AGI), Audiencia de Santo Domingo 1040, and Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid (AHN), Estado, Leg. 6367.
[4] AGI, Santo Domingo 1040, receipt of report dated October 21, 1809 in Sevilla.
[5] 1817 order cited in the case of María del Pilar Velilla in AGI, Ultramar, Leg. 446.
[6] Cited in AGI, Ultramar Leg. 159, Num. 16; although this case made an exception.
[7] Unfortunately, there is scant documentation from the commission indexed in Spanish archives and no historical study of its activities. On its establishment, see Lorenzo Arrazola, *Enciclopedia española de derecho y administración: Nuevo Teatro Universal de la Legislación de España e Indias* (Madrid: Imprenta de la Revista de Legislación y Jurisprudencia, 1858), Vol. 10, 525-526.
[8] Sarah C. Chambers, "Rewarding Loyalty after the Wars of Independence in Spanish America," in *War, Demobilization and Memory: The Legacy of War in the Era of Atlantic Revolutions* edited by Alan Forrest, Karen Hagemann, and Michael Rowe (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 238-253.
[9] AHN, Ultramar, Leg. 2939, Arreglo de la administración y resguardo de Rentas de Matanzas y nombramientos de sus empleados (1825).
[10] *Diario Económico de Puerto Rico 1814-1815,* vol. 1, fol. 53.
[11] Sources on the aid to *emigrados* in Puerto Rico can be found in Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Fondo Gobernadores Españoles, Caja 54, and AHN Ultramar, Leg. 1070 and 1111. See also Raquel Rosario Rivera, *Los emigrantes llegados a Puerto Rico procedentes de Venezuela entre, 1810–1848* (Hato Rey, Puerto Rico, 1992), and Alejandro Cardozo Uzcátegui, "El *Ramo del cacao*: Exilio, pobreza y lealtad de los inmigrantes venezolanos en Puerto Rico, 1813-1873," *Revista de Indias*, 81, n. 282 (2021): 473-501.
[12] In early modern Spain, foreigners were classified as either integrated residents (*"extranjeros avecindados y arraigados*") or transients (*transeuntes*), but these were fellow Spanish subjects; see Tamar Herzog, *Defining Nations: Immigrants and Citizens in Early Modern Spain and Spanish America* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2003), 82-86.