Chapter 6

Post-Jesuit Expulsion Population Trends

In 1767–1768, King Carlos III ordered the expulsion of the members of the Society of Jesus from all Spanish dominions. In the aftermath of the expulsion, thousands of Guaraní residents of the missions left, and the populations of the missions declined. Drops in population also resulted from epidemics, particularly of smallpox. The populations of the thirty Paraguay missions, thus dropped by more than half in the three decades following the Jesuit expulsion, from 88,796 in 1767 to 45,637 in 1801.¹ However, rates of decline and out-migration varied between individual missions.

In a recent article, Massimo Livi-Bacci and Ernesto J. Maeder hypothesized that the population decline of the missions resulted primarily from the Guaraní exodus from the missions, and secondarily from epidemics, including several in the 1770s. Furthermore, based on limited combined data for all thirty missions, the authors argued that death rates were higher following the expulsion than they had been under Jesuit direction, although it appears that they also skewed the results by including mortality rates from both epidemic and non-epidemic years.² In describing post-expulsion demographic trends in the missions, Livi-Bacci and Maeder relied on limited sources. They did not explore other records that might shed light on population change, such as detailed tribute censuses or mission accounts and inventories. These sources could provide clues to ecological crises such as drought or epidemics among mission livestock that would have caused famine and contributed to the spread of epidemics. Moreover, the authors do not consider how medical treatments and responses to epidemics or the rhythm of regional trade facilitated disease transmission.

This chapter evaluates the factors contributing to the post-expulsion population decline of the Paraguay’s missions, including the effects and treatment of epidemics – primarily smallpox – the impact of out-migration, shifts in

¹ Jackson, “Una mirada,” 162.
² Massimo Livi-Bacci and Ernesto J.A. Maeder, “The Missions of Paraguay: The Demography of an Experiment,” Journal of Interdisciplinary History 35:2 (2004), 220. Identifying out-migration as the primary cause for the post-expulsion decline in the mission populations represented a shift in Maeder’s previous interpretation of post-expulsion population dynamics. In earlier publications, Maeder identified increased mortality as the principal cause for the population decline. See, for example, Maeder, Una aproximación, 117–120.
royal policy, and regional conflict. In 1800, for example, royal officials imple-
mented a limited emancipation of Guaraní living in the former missions, and
regional conflict between Spain and Portugal involved the missions. In 1801,
a Portuguese militia force occupied the seven missions located east of the
Uruguay River and permanently incorporated this territory into Brazil. This
chapter also examines in more detail a case study of the mission of Los Santos
Mártires del Japón (located in Misiones Province, Argentina, on a hill a short
distance from Uruguay River) in order to outline the effects of disease and out-
migration, as well as evaluates the question of mortality before and following
the Jesuit expulsion. Epidemics as a factor contributing to demographic change
will be considered first.

Epidemic Mortality and Demographic Change

The limited evidence available suggests that although disease remained a
problem in the former missions, there were no major epidemics following the
Jesuit expulsion that claimed the lives of thousands of Guaraní as did the out-
breaks in the 1730s and 1760s. There is only one instance of mortality following
the expulsion of the Jesuits that paralleled the severe outbreaks of the 1730s
and 1760s. That was the 1771 smallpox outbreak at Yapeyú previously discussed
above.

Smallpox mortality in the 1770s, 1780s, and 1790s appears to have not been as
severe as in previous periods, although the contagion continued to be a serious
health problem. A 1777 census of Corpus Christi, for example, reported that 277
people died there from smallpox, an estimated crude death rate of 63.7 per
thousand population, which was low when compared to death rates during
previous epidemics.3 Aggressive intervention by royal officials in 1785 and 1786,
perhaps coupled with a relatively small number of potentially susceptible
hosts, limited mortality during a 1785–1786 smallpox outbreak. However, the
contagion claimed more lives at a number of the former missions in 1797 and
1798. For example, reportedly there were 777 deaths at Yapeyú in 1797, or a
crude death rate of 172.3 per thousand population.4 Yapeyú was still one of the
most populous of the Paraguay missions, and the estimated crude death rate

3 Jackson, “Demographic Patterns in the Jesuit Missions,” 15.
4 Santiago Samanla, et al., Yapeyú, 1 January 1798, Anuua Numeracion de los Yndividuos
existentes de todos sexos y edades en este Pueblo de la Real Corona nombrado Nuestra
Señora de los Reyes y Yapeyu en el presente año de 1798, AGN, Sala 9-18-6-5. Other censuses
in the same series reported the numbers of deaths from smallpox in 1797–1798.