CHAPTER 24

The First Return of the Jesuits to Paraguay

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Introduction

The Jesuits definitively returned to Paraguay only in 1927. This was 160 years after their expulsion from Spanish imperial territories (1767) and 113 years after the formal restoration of the Society of Jesus. It seems strange that it took so long for them to return to a territory so emblematic of the Jesuit presence in the Americas. The explanation for this should not only be sought in the motives of the Jesuits but also in the new social and political realities that transformed Paraguay after its independence from the Spanish empire in 1811.

There was an earlier attempt to return, but it lasted barely three years, from 1843 to 1846. In this article, we consider that experiment in order to understand the reasons for its failure. In this brief relation of the context and immediate events surrounding the attempted re-insertion of the Jesuits into Paraguay, we find that the best hopes and most sincere intentions could not overcome the suspicions and sensitivities born of the delicate politics of post-colonial sovereignty. For just as the Society of Jesus had represented an instrument of colonial expansion in early modern Spanish America, so, during the nineteenth century, the Jesuits were much closer to Rome than they were to Madrid, Buenos Aires, or Asunción.

Colonial Origins and Late-Colonial and Postcolonial Ruptures

The Jesuit province of Paraguay was created in 1607 within the borders of the province of Paraguay that corresponded to the viceroyalty of Peru. The Jesuits’ colegio was immediately founded in Asunción, and in 1609 the mission of San Ignacio to the Guaraní was established. 150 years later, on the eve of the San Ignacio feast day, 30 July 1767, the expulsion of the Jesuits from their colegio in Asunción began. Fearful of an indigenous revolt, and needing time to find new governing officials for the province, the Jesuits postponed removing the

1 The territory was divided in two in 1617, with the province of Paraguay and the province of Río de la Plata. But the name of the Jesuit province did not change.
missionaries from the indigenous mission pueblos until 1768. All Jesuit clergy and officials abandoned Paraguay after these developments except for Father Segismundo Aperger who died in the pueblo of Apóstoles in 1772. The expulsion of the Society of Jesus from the province of Paraguay initiated significant territorial and demographic change. The lands of the missions were redistributed to members of the Asunción elite, and half of the indigenous population of the Paraguayan missions left their pueblos to intermix with the surrounding poor peasantry of the province. The property of the colegio that was not sold off was used to found the seminary of San Carlos in Asunción two decades later.

From the expulsion of the Jesuits from Spanish territory until their restoration in 1814, many parts of the Americas underwent profound changes tied to the collapse of the Spanish colonial empire. In Paraguay, which was then a province pertaining to the viceroyalty of Buenos Aires, the process of independence began in 1811 and took a very different path to that of its provincial neighbors. Anticolonial agitators in Buenos Aires, in their push to separate from Spain, nonetheless sought to maintain dominion over subordinate provinces and thus the territorial integrity of the viceroyalty. Not all provinces accepted this premise and pushed for their own autonomy. Such was the case of Paraguay, which witnessed something of a bloodless coup. Independence from Spain as well as from Buenos Aires resulted in decades of isolation for Paraguay. This was largely because Buenos Aires cut off free navigation of the Plata river system, the only route to the exterior and the Atlantic for Paraguayan commerce. Until Buenos Aires formally recognized the independence of Paraguay in 1852, it was impossible for the country to sustain significant development, economic or otherwise. After a five-member ruling junta (1811–1813) and a consular government (1813–14), a dictatorship was established in Paraguay under José Gaspar Rodríguez Francia (known as Dr. Francia) who remained in power until his death in 1840.

The majority of the secular clergy and the religious orders supported independence, and one of the leading spokesmen for the governing junta was

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2 He was born on 26 October 1678 in Innsbruck. He arrived in Paraguay in 1717, already ordained as a priest. He lived from 1754 in the Indian pueblo of Apóstoles. See Hugo Storni, *Catálogo de los jesuitas de la Provincia del Paraguay* (Cuenca del Plata) 1585–1768 (Institutum Hisoricum S.I.: Rome, 1980).
