The Colonial History of Paraguay

The Revolt of the Comuneros, 1721-1735

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The Colonial History of Paraguay
To
Papi y Mami,
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José y Gordon
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Asunción, la muy noble y muy ilustre, 
la ciudad comunera de las Indias, 
madre de la segunda Buenos Aires 
y cuna de la libertad de América. 
Prolongación americana en tiempo 
de las villas florales de Castilla, 
en las que floreció la democracia 
de que se enorgullece nuestro siglo. 
En pleno absolutismo de Fernandos, 
en tus calles libróse la primera 
batalla por la libertad; el grande 
y trunco movimiento comunero 
te tuvo por teatro; el verbo libre 
de Mompó anticipó la voz vibrante 
del cálido Moreno; el Sol de Mayo 
salio por Antequera.

Eloy Fariña Nuñez
Canto Secular
Paraguay, Tucumán, and the Río de la Plata at the Beginning of the Seventeenth Century
Paraguay and the Río de la Plata at the beginning of the Eighteenth Century
This is the story of a colonial revolt. It is the story of men, now long forgotten, who, having grown accustomed to having things their own way, chose to disobey the representatives of their king when those representatives refused to give in to their demands.

It all began during a rainy winter in 1720 when some of the notables of the city of Asunción in the poor province of Paraguay decided that their governor could no longer be tolerated. Don Diego de los Reyes y Balmaseda was not an evil man, and as governor he had done his best to administer the unruly province. But he had been too friendly to the Jesuits, and in Paraquay the Jesuits were not popular. Furthermore, he had attempted to govern without consulting those provincials who felt they ought to be consulted.

The men who succeeded in forcing Governor Reyes from his post had counted on an untroubled victory; yet, for fifteen years, there was turmoil in their land. Men quarreled and wrote angry letters; armies were gathered and battles were fought; people suffered and died. Twice during that period, the Jesuits were expelled from their college in Asunción, and once their missions were invaded. A governor was killed and two of the rebels brutally executed in the main plaza of faraway Lima in the midst of a popular riot precipitated by Franciscans who foolishly sought to save them. In the Jesuit missions there was hunger and disease.

The story of the comuneros, as the rebels came to be known, is long and complicated; hard to piece together, harder still to explain. It cannot be understood without some familiarity with the almost two centuries that preceded it, for the revolt was squarely within the Paraguayan tradition of political autonomy, a tradition whose evolution began in the second quarter of the sixteenth century when Europeans, driven by dreams of gold and silver, conquered and settled the land which a member of a later generation was to describe as a “natural
paradise." In the seventeenth century the descendants of these early settlers clashed with the Fathers of the Society of Jesus, and the sources and nature of that conflict have to be examined if any sense is to be made of the comunero revolt, which in more than one way was directed against the Jesuits. I have therefore, devoted the first two parts of this work to an account of the politics, economics and society of Paraguay during the two hundred years preceding that winter of 1720 when the men of Asunción made their move against Reyes.

The pieces of the story of the comuneros were found in Widener Library in Cambridge, the national archives of Asunción and Buenos Aires, and the Archive of the Indies in Seville. Travel to and research at these institutions were made possible by a generous grant from Harvard University for which I am deeply grateful. I am equally grateful to the officials of all the libraries and archives I visited for their courtesy and valuable assistance, and to my friend Gordon Wheeler who translated for me the German material used in this study.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my debt to Professor J. H. Parry, who has been my teacher and friend since I first became interested in the history of colonial Spanish America; to Professor Charles Freedeman who read and criticized the original manuscript; and to Professor John Womack, whose book on Emiliano Zapata ought to teach our generation how good history should be written. For whatever is good and useful in this work I thank them; for whatever is bad I apologize to them.
Part 1

The

Settlers
There was great suffering in Buenos Aires that winter of 1536. The Indian tribes of the grassy plains that stretched beyond the new settlement had declared war on the white intruders, and thousands of their warriors now lay siege to the town. Inside, a few friars and a handful of Spanish women prayed to the heavens for succor while an army of fifteen hundred proud Spaniards complained and waited and starved. Their supplies were gone and neither rats, mice nor snakes were sufficient to still their hunger. Three Spaniards killed a horse and ate it, and, when their crime was discovered, they were tried and hanged. The night after the execution, three other Spaniards stole out to the gallows, hacked off the thighs and other pieces of flesh from the three hanging corpses, and ate them in the silence of their tent. Don Pedro de Mendoza, scion of one of the most powerful and illustrious noble families of Spain, was in command; and he too suffered. Like his mistress María Dávila, who had accompanied him from Spain and shared his bed during those tragic days, he was ill with syphilis. Although the situation was not of his making, he was widely hated by those whom he had brought to this living hell. One morning the lieutenant whom he had graciously allowed to use his bed was found knifed to death.¹

Buenos Aires was but a few months old at that time. Located at the entrance of the great Río de la Plata, it had been founded as the future port city of a region whose interior was believed to be immensely rich
in gold and silver. The river had been discovered two decades earlier by the Spanish navigator Juan Díaz de Solís and explored in 1527 by Sebastian Cabot, who sailed northwards into the Paraná and Paraguay rivers. By the time Cabot returned to Spain, the belief was spreading that the lands to the west of the rivers he explored hid a kingdom rich in precious metals. The persistence of this belief and growing Portuguese interest in the Río de la Plata region brought about the great expedition of Pedro de Mendoza.

Mendoza agreed to finance the expedition out of his pocket. In return for his investment he received the titles of adelantado, governor, captain-general, and justicia mayor of a territory that stretched from the border of the Portuguese colony of Brazil in the east to the eastern lowlands of the Andes in the west, and from the equator in the north to the Straits of Magellan in the south. In this huge territory Mendoza was to be commander-in-chief of all military forces, chief justice, and chief administrator, with the power to distribute lands, found towns, and coin money if necessary.

Mendoza's expedition, consisting of eleven large ships with over 1,500 people aboard, sailed into the Río de la Plata in early 1536. On the southern bank of the river, near the sea, the adelantado founded the city of Nuestra Señora de Buenos Aires. The neighboring Indian tribes were friendly at first and even shared with the white intruders some of their meager rations. As the weeks passed, however, they became tired of the arrogance and increasing demands of the Spaniards and retreated into the plains near the town. By May, rations in Buenos Aires were running short and Mendoza was sending expeditions into the interior to take by force what the Indians would no longer give freely. Clashes between whites and Indians became more and more frequent. By the middle of June the Indians had decided to rid themselves of the Spaniards and thousands of their warriors lay siege to Buenos Aires. By the end of the month the hunger and the dying had begun. Within weeks close to a thousand persons died of starvation and disease in the settlement. It was not till the end of August that the Indians gave up the siege and disappeared into the plains. Once again the Spaniards were able to forage the countryside for game and edible roots.

Mendoza was too ill with syphilis to undertake the exploration of the Paraná and Paraguay rivers or the search for the gold and silver that all believed was to be found between the Paraquay and the Andes. He entrusted that task to the second-in-command of the expedition, Juan
de Ayolas, who left Buenos Aires in October 1536 with 170 men. Ayolas’ chief lieutenant was a thirty-one year old Basque named Domingo de Irala who, in the second quarter of the sixteenth century, was to be the leading personality in Paraguay.

In January 1537, having received no news from Ayolas about his whereabouts, Mendoza sent another of his lieutenants, Juan Salazar de Espinosa, in search of his second-in-command. Ill, tired, and disappointed, the adelantado waited for more than three months without news from either Ayolas or Salazar. In April he finally decided to give up the enterprise in which he had invested so much of his fortune, his time, and his health. In an official document he named Ayolas his successor as commander of all the men in the province of the Rio de la Plata and appointed Francisco Ruiz Galán to take charge of Buenos Aires until Ayolas should return. On April 22, still accompanied by his faithful mistress María Dávila, Mendoza boarded the ship Magdalena and sailed from Buenos Aires. He was terribly ill, unable to move his hands and feet, and was not to make it back to Spain alive. “When he was come nearly halfway,” wrote the German chronicler Ulrich Schmidt, “the hand of the Almighty so smote him that he died miserably. May God be merciful to him.”

During the months that Mendoza had waited in Buenos Aires, Ayolas and his expedition had sailed northwards following Cabot’s route into the river Paraguay. The sails were up and the crews at the oars, but the going was slow. It was the rainy season and the rivers were high. Wide even during the dry summer months, the waters of the winding Paraná and Paraguay had now risen over their banks and flooded the verdant countryside for miles around. The currents were strong and the navigating dangerous, for numerous islands and large rocks dotted both rivers under whose muddy waters lay unseen sandbanks. Worried, Ayolas and his men made their way through the maze of shifting channels as they kept an eye out for shallows and avoided the huge trunks of dead trees which the waters of the two mighty rivers carried from as far away as their sources in the interior of Brazil. Under the cloudy skies, few birds were to be seen.

By the end of January, Ayolas had sailed far north along the Paraguay. On February 2, he founded the port of Candelaria and, accompanied by 130 men, set out on his march into the interior in search of precious metals. Behind, at Candelaria, he left his three small ships and thirty-three men under the command of Irala whom he officially named his lieutenant and successor in command and who was to wait there for his return.
When Irala began his long wait for Ayolas at Candelaria, Salazar was sailing up the Paraná and into the Paraguay with a force of seventy men. In April he sailed into the Bay of Caracará on the eastern bank of the Paraguay, where he was met with gestures of peace and friendship by the Indians of the region. These Indians who sheltered and fed Salazar and his troops were members of the Guaraní linguistic group, which occupied a large area extending from the Atlantic coast of Brazil westward to the Paraguay river. They were a handsome people who ordinarily went about naked, were polygamous, were proud of the eloquence of their language, and lived in small villages dispersed among the lovely forests and valleys of the region. They were agriculturalists who grew a variety of crops, among which manioc and maize were the most important.\footnote{Salazar liked the area around the Bay of Caracará and, just before he set out to continue his search for Ayolas, he promised the Guaraní chiefs of the region that he would return there to found a settlement. On June 23, 1537, the same day that the syphilitic Mendoza was dying in mid-ocean, Salazar and Irala came upon each other near Candelaria. Together they went into the interior in search of Ayolas but found no trace of him. They returned to Candelaria, and, while Irala remained there to continue his vigil for his commander, Salazar and his men sailed down river to keep the promise he had made to the Indians of the Bay of Caracará. There, on August 15, 1537, he officially founded the settlement of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, future capital of Paraguay and center of the great comunero revolt.}

Salazar made a good choice in the location of the new settlement. The banks of the bay were high enough to protect the area against flooding in the rainy season, the local Indians were friendly, and the land was fertile and pleasant to the eye. The bay was surrounded by low hills gently sloping to meet the waters of the river. Beyond, to the east, stretched an undulating low plateau crisscrossed with rivers, dotted with lakes, and adorned with park-like forests and small stands of scrub palm growing out of an often startling red soil. The hills of the plateau were green and low; the valleys fertile and covered with grass; the climate mild and the rainfall moderate. The French naturalist Bonpland was to call this region the “garden of South America;” the American geographer Preston James would later describe it as “a natural paradise.”\footnote{Across the river from the new settlement and beyond the lush vegetation that adorned its western bank, stretched the Gran Chaco, an}
alluvial plain rising gradually from east to west, broken here and there by small rises and low hills. There was little vegetation, mostly thickets and thorny scrub trees. It was an inhospitable region, dry and hot; a lonely region, "a plain with the soul of a mountain, motionless and hard as a rock." But men lived there, nomadic tribes of hardy warriors, sure of their ways and jealous of their independence. Neither Salazar nor the other Spaniards busy on the Bay of Caracará could imagine then the suffering and hardships these nomadic tribes would bring upon them and their descendants.

Salazar remained in Asunción a few weeks supervising the construction of buildings in the settlement, consolidating the growing alliance with the Guaranís, and arranging for the planting of crops. In early September he left the town and sailed downstream to Buenos Aires to report to Mendoza what he had done and to let him know that not all Indians were bad Indians. He was disappointed when he learned of the departure of the adelantado and irritated by the pretentions of Galán who, in the absence of Ayolas, thought of himself as the commander of the Spaniards in Candelaria, Asunción, and Buenos Aires. By early February 1538 Salazar was back in Asunción. There he was joined by Irala who had grown tired of waiting for Ayolas and was in need of supplies. Several weeks later Irala returned to Candelaria to wait once again for Ayolas' return or for news of his whereabouts.

In the meantime trouble was brewing in Buenos Aires. Galán, who considered himself the undisputed commander of the place, did not see eye to eye with the treasury officials Felipe Cáceres and García Venegas, both of whom had come to the Río de la Plata with Mendoza to look after the king's interests and who considered themselves of enough consequence to be consulted by Galán in the affairs of government. For months the quarrel went on, each side inventing or discovering issues with which to discredit the other. The quarrel was still on in November when two ships arrived from Spain with 160 men, plenty of supplies, and instructions from the king.

The newcomers were commanded by Alonso Cabrera, a treasury official as proud and as arrogant as his colleagues Cáceres and Venegas. Among the documents he brought with him was a royal cédula signed at Valladolid by Charles V on September 12, 1537. Charles had learned of Mendoza's death but did not know whether or not the adelantado had named a successor. If, stated the cédula, a successor had been named and was still alive he was to be the legitimate governor of the province of the Río de la Plata. If, on the other hand, Mendoza's
successor was dead or a successor had not been named at all by the adelantado, the survivors of the expedition were to gather peacefully and freely elect, in the name of the king, a governor for the province.\textsuperscript{16}

The cédula of 1537, which one historian has called the Magna Carta of colonial Paraguay, is unique in the history of the Spanish American colonies. No other part of Spain's empire in America received the privilege of popular elections. It is strange that a monarch who was so busy centralizing power in Spain and destroying the autonomy that the municipalities and other institutions had enjoyed in medieval times should grant such a privilege to the conquerors of a region still believed to be rich in precious metals. Also strange is the fact that the cédula did not place a limit on the number of times governors could be elected. During the next two centuries the people of Paraguay were to make use of the cédula not only to elect new governors when the post was vacant but, to the chagrin of the Spanish Crown, also to dispose unpopular ones.\textsuperscript{17}

In May 1539 Galán and the treasury officials traveled to Asunción to find out whether Ayolas had returned from his trip to the interior and if not, to consult with Irala and the other commanders in the north. When they arrived in the settlement they found Irala there repairing his ships, gathering supplies, and enjoying the embraces of Indian girls. He was popular among his men and soon was able to gain the support of the treasury officials, whom he was careful to treat with deference. In July, a majority of the Spaniards in Asunción decided that until Ayolas's return, Irala and not Galán was to be in command. Perhaps afraid for his own safety, Galán accepted the decision and quietly left Asunción never again to play a role in the affairs of the province.\textsuperscript{18}

Three months after the departure of Galán, Irala sailed from Asunción and returned to Candelaria to learn from the neighboring Indians that Ayolas and his men had been wiped out by hostile Indian tribes in the interior. With Ayolas dead, Irala was now the undisputed commander of all the Spaniards still in the Río de la Plata. He evacuated Candelaria, returned to Asunción, and, after consulting with the treasury officials, issued orders that Buenos Aires was also to be evacuated and that all Spaniards were to concentrate in Asunción. Centuries later admirers and detractors of Irala were to debate the motivations for this decision. Historians who saw Irala as an ambitious schemer argued that his decision to make Asunción rather than Buenos Aires the main center of Spanish activity in the province of the Río de la Plata was
motivated by a desire to increase the distance between himself and his monarch and to forestall any opposition to his rule that might develop among those still in Buenos Aires. Irala’s defenders, however, accepted the reasons Irala himself gave for his decision: that Asunción was closer to the gold and silver that he hoped to find in the interior, that the local Indians were friendly, and that Buenos Aires was on the verge of collapse.¹⁹

Irala sailed to Buenos Aires and in June supervised its evacuation. In September he was back in Asunción, now the only settlement of the some 400 Spaniards still in the province of the Río de la Plata. Ten days after his return, after consulting with the treasury officials, Irala took the momentous step of establishing the cabildo, or town council, of Asunción, which was to develop into one of the most independent political institutions in Paraguay and was to remain so till its abolition by the dictator Francia in December 1814. Charles V, who had no love for municipal institutions, had given Mendoza the task of founding towns but not the power to establish town councils. Irala’s action, then, was manifestly illegal. Whether he realized that or not would have probably made little difference to him anyway. The treasury officials had approved the move, Asunción was in need of municipal government, and, in any event, Charles was far away and too busy with the affairs of Europe.

The act of September 16, 1541 established a cabildo of five regidores or councilmen, two alcaldes, and an alguacil mayor or chief constable whose job was to preserve the peace and arrest violators of the law. From the beginning of its existence, the cabildo of Asunción had its escribano whose main task was to keep the minutes of the sessions of the council, and a pregonero or town crier. In years to come other officers were added to the cabildo: the fiel ejecutor who was charged with the general enforcement of municipal ordinances dealing with trade and business in the city; the alférez real or royal standard bearer; the alcalde de la hermandad who was subordinate to the alguacil mayor and enforced the law in the rural areas within the jurisdiction of the municipality; and the procurador, whose main function was to ascertain the needs and grievances of the citizens of the city and to convey them to the cabildo with recommendations for their alleviation.²⁰ Although the original eight members of the cabildo of Asunción were appointed by Irala himself, the document establishing the council provided that in the future the alcaldes, the alguacil mayor, and other municipal officials were to be named at the beginning of the year
by the regidores who were in turn to be chosen indirectly by the citizens (vecinos) of the municipality.21

In the months following the creation of the cabildo of Asunción, Irala busied himself issuing ordinances for the defense of the city, supervising the construction of new buildings and the planting of crops, and keeping an eye on the neighboring Guaranis, who were becoming increasingly unhappy with their Spanish guests. Irala was still in Asunción when news arrived that a large expedition commanded by the new adelantado of the Río de la Plata was on its way.

Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, of North American fame, had returned to Spain in the late 1530s after his long trek from Florida to Central Mexico. Hoping, perhaps, to find in South America the power and fortune that had eluded him in Florida and the Southwest, he offered Charles V his services for the colonization of the Río de la Plata. Charles listened, for he was eager to consolidate Spanish control of that area, and because Cabeza de Vaca had not only the personal qualities and prestige which the exploration and settlement of the Río de la Plata required but was also possessed of a small fortune which he was ready to invest in an expedition there. On March 18, 1540, the two men finally signed an agreement which first recorded the death of Mendoza and the disappearance of Ayolas and then gave Cabeza de Vaca, should Ayolas prove to be dead upon his arrival in the Río de la Plata, the same powers and responsibilities that had been given to Mendoza five years earlier.22 When he left Spain in December 1540, Cabeza de Vaca was accompanied by some 400 soldiers among whom were Ruy Díaz Melgarejo, Martín Suárez de Toledo, and Francisco Ortiz de Vergara, all destined to play a central role in events in Paraguay during the next few decades.

There was no joy among the men of Asunción when Cabeza de Vaca arrived in the city on March 11, 1542, after a long and difficult voyage. The presence of the newcomers meant that, when the silver and gold of which they all dreamed was finally discovered, it would have to be divided among too many. The removal of Irala as head of the province was not welcomed either, for Irala, who in recent months had allowed the Spaniards great freedom over the Indians and had established an easy relationship with his men, was very popular in Asunción. Also popular was Martín de Orue, a close friend of Irala, who was replaced as escribano by the adelantado's personal secretary Pero Hernández.23

As the weeks went by, the resentment against Cabeza de Vaca became greater. He was proud and vain and committed to the belief
that he was the king's representative and was to be obeyed. Also, he
felt more comfortable with those who had come with him from Spain
and tried to favor them in all possible ways. But what eventually turned
resentment into plotting were the restrictions the adelantado placed
on the relations between Spaniards and Indians.

Cabeza de Vaca liked Indians; he preferred Indians who submitted
and were peaceful, but he liked them nevertheless. Indians had been
good to him in the past. During his long walk across the wilderness
from Florida to Mexico, he survived because the Indians along the way,
impoverished as they were, had shared with him their food, huts, and
women. He had returned to Spain with some understanding of, and
sympathy for, the Indians of the New World, and, although there are
no texts to prove it, all the probabilities of circumstance and character
indicate that while at court in Spain he met and chatted with Bartolomé
de las Casas, the great defender of the American Indians who was then
making himself heard in Spain.24

Cabeza de Vaca was infuriated over the way the Spaniards were
treating the local Indians when he arrived in Asunción. The Guaraniš
had welcomed the Spaniards and had provided them with food, labor,
and women. But they had thought of the Spaniards as allies and equals,
whereas the Spaniards considered themselves the natural superiors of
a backward, copper-skinned people. They became more and more
demanding of the local tribes and, in the months preceding the arrival
of the new adelantado, they were going into Indian villages and grab-
bibg food as well as concubines without permission from the chiefs.
Most upsetting to Cabeza de Vaca was the common practice among the
Spaniards of keeping within one household sisters and even daughters
and mothers as concubines.25

Irala had tolerated this situation; Cabeza de Vaca would not. On
April 5, 1542, little more than three weeks after his arrival, the adelan-
tado issued a set of ordinances designed to put an end to these abuses.
Indians were to be treated as human beings. They were not to be
cheated in trade, and were not to be forced to work for the settlers
without permission from the adelantado. Spaniards were forbidden to
go into Indian villages without permission or to have within their
households women who were related by family ties.26 A few days after
the issuing of the ordinances, a soldier who had violated an Indian
woman was punished with a hundred lashes merely on the complaint
of the indignant husband.27

If before the ordinances the adelantado was merely disliked, now he
was hated. And there were those who were ambitious and angry enough to channel the hatred into conspiracy. Among these were the treasury officials who had grown accustomed to being consulted by Irala in major matters but who upon the arrival of Cabeza de Vaca found themselves ignored and relegated to their sole legitimate function, that of making sure that the King's revenues were collected. In the conspiracy that slowly took shape against the adelantado, Cabrera, Venegas, and Cáceres were joined by the members of the cabildo who, like them, were ignored by Cabeza de Vaca in matters affecting the administration of the city. For his part, Irala maintained a modicum of good relations with his superior, kept in good terms with his men, and waited to see what would happen.

In spite of the growing resentment against the adelantado, almost two years passed before the enemies of Cabeza de Vaca took steps to get rid of him. During that period he stepped up his efforts to assert his authority, to prevent the Spaniards from abusing the Indians and to find the precious metals which he, like his predecessor Mendoza, believed were to be found in the lands west of the Paraguay. The expedition which he led there in the first months of 1543 was an unmitigated disaster. By March the adelantado was back in Asunción, ill and blamed by those who accompanied him into the west for their suffering and for the deaths of those who had perished in the course of the expedition. He was too sick to assume vigorous control of the government in the capital. Instead, he retired to his bed and lay there shivering and sweating. Outside in the streets men went about declaring that they had had enough of the high-handed rule of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca.

The coup against the adelantado took place on the evening of April 25, 1544 while he was still in bed recovering from his illness. Led by Cabrera, Cáceres and Venegas, a dozen armed men burst into the residence of Cabeza de Vaca while some 200 more waited outside. The adelantado was declared under arrest and violently dragged from his bed to the home of Venegas where he was chained in a dark room. In the meantime, groups of rebels ran through the streets of Asunción, shouting "Libertad! Libertad! Long live the king!" The majority of the men in Asunción openly supported the overthrow of Cabeza de Vaca and even men who had come to Paraguay with him and had enjoyed his trust joined in the celebrations. The few who refused to back the coup, like Salazar, the founder of Asunción, were arrested and eventually forced to leave the province.28
The province of the Río de la Plata was now without a governor. A new one had to be found, and all eyes turned to Irala, whose role in the revolt was so obscure that it was to be debated for generations. On the morning of April 26, the treasury officials, followed by a large crowd, met Irala at the door of his residence and read a series of accusations against Cabeza de Vaca, who was described as a traitor, an usurper and a tyrant. The cédula of 1537 was mentioned but there was no pretense of a formal election. By acclamation Irala was chosen the new governor of the province until His Majesty should order otherwise. Irala, like Caesar, at first refused the post, but in the end he bowed to the popular will.29

The deposed adelantado, always in chain and under guard, remained a prisoner in the home of Venegas for almost eleven months. By March 1545 Irala and the treasury officials had decided to send Cabeza de Vaca back to Spain and had drawn up a document which was signed by 130 Spaniards and which accused the adelantado of, among other things, behaving like a tyrant and having called himself the king of the lands of the Río de la Plata. By that time, too, it had been agreed that Cabrera and Venegas would take the prisoner back to Spain. On March 7, Cabeza de Vaca was dragged from his dark cell and hurried to the ship that took him back to Spain.30

The revolt against Cabeza de Vaca was one of the earliest against a royal governor in the Spanish American colonies. It was also the first in which the term comunero was used on the lands of the Río de la Plata. Several historians, most of them Paraguayans, have tried to establish a direct relationship between the conflict between Cabeza de Vaca and those who overthrew him and the revolt of the comuneros of Castile against Charles V in 1520-1521.31 It is quite true that Cabeza de Vaca had fought on the side of the king against the Castilian towns. But to argue, as some have, that in Paraguay Cabeza de Vaca and his enemies revived the old Castilian conflict is a terrible distortion. The men of Asunción rebelled against the adelantado because he had tried to govern with a strong hand and had placed too many restrictions on their dealings with the Indians. And, if in their writings Cabeza de Vaca and his secretary Pero Hernández referred to the rebels as comuneros they did so solely to discredit them in the eyes of the king.32 There is no evidence whatever to suggest that those who took part in the revolt referred to themselves by that name. Neither is there any evidence to support the claim that the ship which carried the imprisoned adelantado back to Spain was baptised Los Comuneros.33 It would have been
simply incredible for intelligent men such as Irala and the treasury officials, who were anxious to justify the overthrow of the adelantado to a king to whom they were in fact loyal, to refer to themselves or their ship by a name which had come to signify treason to the Crown and which was anathema to Charles V.

During the twelve years that followed the overthrow of Cabeza de Vaca, Irala was the guiding spirit of the settlement of Asunción. During that period he seemed scarcely to pause in his efforts to extend the territory over which he governed, to build up Asunción, and to put the colony on a self-sustaining basis. A cathedral was built, municipal buildings were improved and expanded, and Spanish control over the Guarani consolidated. In 1547 he led an expedition of several hundred men into the wilderness northwest of Asunción and, after months of hunger and warfare with hostile tribes, came upon the Andes only to discover that Spaniards from Peru were already in the region. Hoping to find the gold and silver that had eluded him in the west, Irala turned his attention to Guairá, the name the Spaniards had given to the region east of Asunción between the Alto Paraná river and the Atlantic coast. He led an expedition there in 1553 and was so impressed by the beauty of the land and the abundance of Guarani Indians that he immediately took steps to establish control of the area. In 1554 one of his lieutenants, García Rodríguez de Vergara, left Asunción with 60 men and founded the town of Ontiveros on the banks of the Alto Paraná. Three years later another expedition, led by Ruy Díaz Melgarejo, proceeded to Ontiveros, decided that the place was not adequate for a town and abandoned it. A few weeks later Melgarejo founded the settlement of Ciudad Real further up the Alto Paraná.34

The exploration and settlement of Guairá was still under way when, in 1556, a ship arrived in Asunción carrying a royal decree officially naming Irala governor and captain-general of the Río de la Plata.35 The decree was delivered to Irala by his friend Martín de Orue who had traveled to Spain after the overthrow of Cabeza de Vaca to request supplies and more men and to sing his friend’s praises in the court of Charles V. Accompanying Orue on his arrival in Asunción were several hundred Spaniards and the Franciscan Fray Pedro Fernando de la Torre, the first bishop of the Río de la Plata.

Irala must have been pleased with and proud of his new appointment. But his joy did not last long. On October 3, 1556, six months after the arrival of Orue, he died. He left behind the record of a long
and exciting career and a city that he had not founded, but that in many ways owed its survival to him. There were some 1,500 Spaniards in Asunción when the governor died. The city was still small, but it had grown under his rule. It stretched along the eastern bank of the river for a few miles and eastwards for almost a mile. There was a governor's residence, a building for the cabildo and the jail, a cathedral, several small churches, and Franciscan and Mercedarian monasteries.36

In his will Irala named as his successor his close friend and son-in-law Gonzalo de Mendoza. Both the cabildo and the Spaniards of Asunción honored Irala's last wishes and recognized Mendoza as the legitimate governor of the province. Mendoza, however, did not live long after he took over the governorship, and two years after the death of Irala, the town crier was walking the streets of Asunción quoting from the cédula of 1537 calling the men of the city to gather in the cathedral to elect a new governor. Three hundred and fifty-nine men voted in the elections of 1558. Each voter placed the name of his choice on a piece of paper and placed it in a jar. Under the careful supervision of Bishop de la Torre, the ballots were counted and registered by the members of the cabildo. The winner was Francisco Ortiz de Vergara.37

Vergara remained governor until 1567 when the Viceroy of Peru, concerned about the growing independence of the men of Asunción, named Juan Ortiz de Zárate, an affluent minor of Potosí, to replace him.38 It was agreed, however, that Zárate was to travel to Spain to obtain royal confirmation of his appointment. In the meantime he could appoint someone to be his lieutenant-governor in Asunción during his absence. The man Zárate chose for this post was the scheming royal treasurer Felipe Cáceres who had traveled to Peru three years earlier. While Zárate made preparations to travel to Spain, Cáceres returned to Asunción by re-crossing the inhospitable wilderness between Upper Peru and the Paraguayan capital.39 It was the last time in the colonial period that this overland route was used.

Cáceres had always been arrogant and domineering; in power, he became almost dictatorial. In Asunción he quickly made many enemies, among whom the most outspoken was Bishop de la Torre. The enmity between Cáceres and the bishop had begun before, when Vergara was still governor. De la Torre had tried to collect the ecclesiastical tithe himself; but the collection of that tax was a prerogative of the Crown in the Spanish American colonies, and Cáceres, who was responsible for collecting the king's revenues in the Río de la Plata, had rebuffed the bishop's pretensions.40 Cáceres had been right, but that
did not matter to a man such as de la Torre who was neither humble nor quiet and forgiving. In the years that followed their initial quarrel, the bishop did all in his power to discredit the man who had humiliated him. By 1569 anonymous tracts critical of the lieutenant-governor were being circulated in Asunción and insulting slogans adorned the walls of public buildings. A year later a conspiracy to overthrow Cáceres had taken shape.

Cáceres learned of the conspiracy and acted quickly and decisively. Pedro Esquivel, one of the conspirators, was arrested, tried for treason, and publicly executed as an example. Others were thrown into the public jail, and many more, including the bishop, were placed under house arrest. The bishop’s salary, which came out of the royal treasury, was suspended and the citizens of Asunción forbidden to have any contacts with him. During the next two years Cáceres ruled as arbitrarily and as arrogantly as in the past. As the months passed his enemies became more numerous and even some of his former friends turned against him. Bishop de la Torre, although still under surveillance, was once again the center of a conspiracy to overthrow the lieutenant-governor. Trusting no one and increasingly afraid of assassination, Cáceres seldom went anywhere without the company of a favored and well-paid bodyguard of armed soldiers.41

On Monday morning, early in August 1572, Bishop de la Torre and his supporters, who were hidden in a house next to the cathedral, finally rid themselves of Cáceres. On that morning Cáceres entered the cathedral with his bodyguard and knelt to hear mass. Suddenly the bishop made his appearance in full episcopal dress, waved his staff at the lieutenant-governor, and shouting “Long live the Faith of Christ and His Holy Church!” admonished his followers to arrest Cáceres. In the minutes that followed there was pandemonium in the cathedral. Outnumbered, Cáceres’ bodyguard deserted him. Only the lieutenant-governor and his close friend Gonzalo Altamirano stood their ground. Altamirano was cut down and killed; Cáceres was eventually brought to the ground, bound, and dragged out of the cathedral to a cell which the bishop had already prepared for him. On the way there he suffered the same insults and indignities to which, twenty-eight years before, he and his followers had subjected the unfortunate Cabeza de Vaca. Four days after the coup, the cabildo and citizens of Asunción met in assembly and elected as governor of the province, till Zárate should arrive, Martín Suárez de Toledo.42

The revolt against Cáceres was important not only in that it
strengthened the tradition of political autonomy which had been slowly evolving in the colony, but also in that, for the first time in the history of Paraguay, the mestizos played a leading political role. Up to that time economic wealth and political conflict had been the monopoly of the Spaniards. Now the children of those Spaniards and their Indian concubines came into their own.

The process of *mestizaje* in Paraguay had begun the very moment a Spaniard took to bed an Indian woman. And during the sixteenth century there was a lot of that in Paraguay. Few white women had accompanied the men who conquered and settled the Río de la Plata and few white women migrated to the colony in later years. The Spaniards turned by necessity to the Guaraní women of Paraguay who were attractive, willing, and, in the early years of the colony, plentiful. The Guaraní woman soon became an integral part of the Spanish household in Asunción. She was mistress, worker, mother, companion, and slave. And rare was the Spaniard who was content with just one Indian concubine. In 1545 Father Francisco González Paniagua wrote Charles that in Asunción some Spaniards had seventy women and that “one is poor who has only five or six, most having fifteen, twenty, thirty, and forty.”

Some of the figures which Paniagua and other critics gave were undoubtedly the exaggerations of writers who were scandalized by what they considered the immorality of the men of Paraguay and who were anxious to impress their king with the enormity of their crimes. Yet, their comments mirrored the social reality of Paraguay in those years, a reality which earned the province the title of “Mohammed’s Paradise.”

By 1545 there were some 500 to 600 mestizos in Asunción. In 1575 there were several thousands. By that time the mestizos of the province far outnumbered the Spaniards. In his letter to the king in 1575, Martín González wrote that there were in Paraguay no more than 280 Spaniards, 100 of them crippled and the rest already very old. As the years passed the Indian side of Paraguayan society became more and more marked. Indian foods, Indian beliefs, and Indian ways became more prevalent, and, by the end of the sixteenth century, Guaraní, not Castilian, was the common language of Paraguay. Most of the inhabitants of the province spoke and understood some Castilian, but, in everyday social relations, almost all spoke Guaraní.

By the second half of the sixteenth century mestizos in Paraguay had achieved a considerable measure of equality before the law with Spaniards, and, apparently, considerable power as well. Already in the reign
of Charles V, the Castilian Crown had declared that the sons of Spaniards in Paraguay were to be permitted to hold *encomiendas*, canonships, and royal offices. When the revolt against Cáreres took place, mestizos were taking over positions and roles previously monopolized by the Spanish settlers. Many mestizos had inherited encomiendas from their Spanish fathers, many of them owned land in the vicinity of Asunción, and, in Ciudad Real in Guairá, mestizos sat in the cabildo. Cáceres, who saw little difference between Indians and mestizos and disliked them both, had tried hard to curtail the activities of the latter at a time when they were demanding a greater political role in the province. As a consequence, the mestizos rallied behind Bishop de la Torre and made possible the overthrow of the lieutenant-governor.

Cáceres remained in prison for almost a year. It was a quiet year. The bishop busied himself with his religious duties and looked after his captive while Suárez de Toledo administered the province and waited for the coming of Zárate from whom no news had arrived in Asunción since his departure from Peru to Spain. In the meantime, Juan de Garay, a close friend of Zárate who had accompanied Cáceres to Asunción in 1568, made preparations to carry out Zárate’s instructions that he found a new town somewhere between Asunción and the old site of Buenos Aires. On April 14, 1573 the ship *Buenaventura* sailed for Spain with Cáceres and his captor Bishop de la Torre aboard. On that same day Garay, in command of nine Spaniards and seventy-five mestizos, also sailed from Asunción. In the middle of November, while Spaniards from Peru were founding the city of Córdoba de Tucumán, Garay officially founded the new town of Santa Fé on a high bluff on the western bank of the Paraná almost 600 miles south of Asunción. A few weeks later news arrived that Zárate had sailed into the Río de la Plata.

Zárate, who, during the more than three years he spent in Spain, had managed to obtain from the Crown the title of adelantado, arrived in the Río de la Plata with 450 men and fifty-eight women. He was met by Garay off the coast of modern Uruguay, and together they sailed up river to Asunción. There, on February 11, 1574, he was officially recognized by the cabildo of the city as governor and captain-general of all the lands of the Río de la Plata.

The two years Zárate spent in Paraguay were uneventful. In 1575 he became ill of dysentery and, by the end of the year, he was restricted to his bed. On January 26, 1576 a few hours before his death, he signed
a will which named his mestiza daughter, Juana de Zárate, his universal heir and whoever she should marry his successor as adelantado of the Río de la Plata. Juan de Garay was named executor of the will and immediately after Zárate’s death went to Upper Peru to inform Juana of her father’s last wishes. He sailed down river to Santa Fé and from there traveled northwest by land to upper Peru. This was the route that was to be used by travelers and merchandise moving between Peru and Paraguay during the next two centuries and a half. Zárate’s nephew, Diego de Mendieta, remained behind in Asunción to govern the Río de la Plata province.\textsuperscript{53}

By this time the settlers of Asunción had grown accustomed to ridding themselves of unpopular governors. And Mendieta, a handsome and unruly youth of twenty-three who was more interested in fun and games than in the burden of administration, soon became very unpopular. He liked women, and, if he had limited himself to unattached Indian girls, perhaps there would have been no trouble. But he was a man of many tastes and was soon forcing himself on the daughters and wives of mestizos and Spaniards. By the end of 1576 the city had had enough of the man and talk of rebellion was once again heard in the streets of Asunción. Afraid of arrest or assassination Mendieta left the city, sailed to Santa Fé, was rejected by the settlers there and forced to leave the Río de la Plata area altogether.\textsuperscript{54} In Asunción the cabildo took over the administration of the city.

While Mendieta had been making himself unpopular in Asunción, Juan de Garay had traveled to Upper Peru and announced to Juana de Zárate her father’s death and last wishes. When the news spread that whoever married the sixteen year old mestiza was to be adelantado of the Río de la Plata, suiters appeared everywhere. Of these the one who won the young girl’s heart was Juan Torres de Vera y Aragón, a handsome, brave, and intelligent native of Spain who at that time was the youngest member of the prestigious Audiencia of Charcas. Since royal ordinances forbade members of audiencias to marry within their districts, the marriage ceremony which Garay arranged for Juana and Vera y Aragón was held in secret. Nevertheless, news of the ceremony leaked out and reached the ears of the viceroy of Peru who ordered Vera y Aragón to report to Lima at once. Before obeying the viceroy’s orders, the new adelantado, whose title was secure since his marriage to Juana could not be dissolved, named Garay his lieutenant-governor and ordered him to found a town where Buenos Aires had once stood.\textsuperscript{55}
Garay arrived in Asunción in 1578 and immediately began preparations for the refounding of Buenos Aires. There were many delays, however, and not till the beginning of 1580 was he able to sail down river from Asunción. Accompanying him were the families of 60 settlers, mostly mestizos, who had been convinced by the lieutenant-governor that near the sea they would have better lives than in Asunción. On June 11, 1580, Garay refounded Buenos Aires. As in the times of Mendoza almost half a century earlier, the Indians of the plains made war upon the settlers and supplies ran short. In Mendoza’s time, however, there had been no Santa Fé and no Asunción. From these two towns Garay received help, and Buenos Aires survived.

Garay died in 1583 while on a trip from Buenos Aires to Santa Fé. By orders of Vera y Aragón, who was still in Lima, he was succeeded as lieutenant-governor by Juan Torres Navarrete “a man of insatiable avarice and little fear of God.” Navarrete governed arbitrarily and was widely hated in Asunción. But in spite of the growing opposition to his rule and conspiracies to overthrow him, he managed to rout his enemies whenever they came together to plot against him.

It was near the end of 1587 when Vera y Aragón arrived in Asunción. His wife Juana had died in the previous year, and he had been given permission by the viceroy of Peru to leave Lima. The first months in Paraguay he spent sending small expeditions north and east in search of gold and silver. They found none. Early in 1588 he left Asunción accompanied by 190 men and women, and, on April 3, founded the town of Corrientes not far south of where the waters of the Alto Paraná and the Paraguay rivers come together. The new town was designed to serve as a link between Asunción and the southern cities of Santa Fé and Buenos Aires. A few days after founding Corrientes, Vera y Aragón sailed to Buenos Aires where he remained till 1591 when he at last decided to leave for Spain. He was the last adelantado of the Río de la Plata. Like those before him he had spent a lot of his time and money in an enterprise which he had hoped would make him rich and famous. But once again the land had proved too stingy in its rewards.

Before his departure Vera y Aragón left the government of the province of the Río de la Plata in the hands of his nephew Alonso de Vera y Aragón, a man so ugly and mean that he was popularly known as cara de perro (“dog’s face”). In power “dog’s face” was as arbitrary as Navarrete had been; but he did not have the latter’s ability to instill fear in his enemies. In mid-1592 the settlers of Asunción rose against him and threw him out of the city. Once again the men of the Paraguay-
an capital invoked the cédula of 1537 and met in the cathedral to elect a new governor. Their choice was Hernandarias de Saavedra, the first native of Paraguay to hold that post. 59

Hernandarias ranks with Irala as one of the greatest governors of the Río de la Plata in colonial times. Dashing and thoroughly honest, very much in love with the land of his birth yet totally loyal to his king, he was born in Asunción and grew up there. He knew the ways of the Guaraní and spoke their language as well as they. He was with Garay when the latter founded Santa Fé and Buenos Aires and with Vera y Aragón when Corrientes was established. Although his commitment to the welfare of the Indians earned him the dislike of many, he was popular among the majority of the settlers of Paraguay who had chosen him governor in 1592. From then until his death in Santa Fé in 1634 he was one of the most respected and influential individuals in the province of the Río de la Plata, holding the post of governor several times between 1592 and 1618. When he died his portrait was hung in the Casa de la Contratación in Seville, among those of other Spanish heroes. This was an uncommon tribute to a creole. 60

During the many years he governed, Hernandarias worked hard to make Asunción a better place to live in. He launched the construction of a new cathedral, supervised repairs to the building of the cabildo and the jail, organized the first archive of the city, and founded the first public schools. In the south he worked just as hard on behalf of Buenos Aires. It was also as a result of his efforts that the two cities became the capitals of separate provinces. By the last quarter of the sixteenth century it was becoming increasingly difficult for one governor to administer and provide for the defense of all the towns of the province of the Río de la Plata. By the beginning of the seventeenth century it had become almost impossible. Already by that time the regions which today constitute western and northwestern Argentina had been detached from the gigantic province and turned into a separate province known as Tucumán. The rest of the province of the Río de la Plata, however, continued to constitute one administrative unit whose official capital remained Asunción. Yet, by this time, Buenos Aires, already a busy port, had become more important than Asunción and the governors were spending more of their time there than in the official capital. Even Hernandarias had established his official residence in Buenos Aires. And Buenos Aires was from from Asunción; further still from the isolated towns of Guairá.

When Hernandarias became governor, there were two Spanish set-
tlements in Guairá: Ciudad Real and Villa Rica. The latter, which had been founded by Melgarejo in 1577 north of Ciudad Real, was the more important of the two, and, by the end of the sixteenth century, was being threatened by Portuguese expansion from southern Brazil. Hernandarias, a conscientious administrator and an indefatigable traveler, had wanted to visit the region but never found the time to do so. In 1607 he proposed to the king that Guairá be turned into a separate province with a governor of its own.61

The council of the Indies in Spain examined the governor's proposal and decided to get the opinion of the viceroy of Peru. Two years later the viceroy replied. Yes, he approved of Hernandaria's project, but added the suggestion that Asunción be added to the proposed new province. The council agreed and sent its recommendations to the king. By virtue of a royal cédula signed on December 16, 1617, the gigantic province of the Río de la Plata was further divided into two: one was to have Buenos Aires as its capital and was to include the cities of Santa Fé and Corrientes; the other, originally baptized Guairá but always to be known as Paraguay, was to have Asunción as its capital and to include the towns of Ciudad Real and Villa Rica.62 Geographically, the dividing line between the two provinces was the Alto Paraná. Three years later, in 1620, Buenos Aires became an independant bishopric.63

Eighty-two years had passed between the time Pedro de Mendoza founded the original Buenos Aires and the time the gigantic province of the Río de la Plata was divided in two. During those years men explored the land and founded new cities, and thousands of Indians were brought under control and converted to the white man's religion. Men grew old and died; children were born and took their place. Through the years there evolved in Paraguay a new society, part European, part Indian; a society which became increasingly isolated from the mainstream of western civilization. The men of that society grew accustomed to removing from their midst governors whose rule they did not like. No other part of the Spanish American empire developed as strong a tradition of autonomy as did Paraguay. And that tradition survived throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
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