

ALMA DURÁN-MERK*

Nur deutsche Elite für Yucatan? Neue Ergebnisse zur Migrationsforschung während des Zweiten mexikanischen Kaiserreiches.

Only "Selected" German Immigrants in Yucatán? Recent Findings about the Colonization Policy of the Second Mexican Empire,

Paper presented at the 11th Deutschsprachige Mesoamerikanisten Tagung in Hildesheim, Germany (26th, 27th, January, 2008).

Zusammenfassung: Die bisherige Forschung ist davon ausgegangen, dass nur deutsche "Elite" nach Mexiko einwanderte. Dieser Bericht präsentiert einige der wichtigsten Erkenntnisse über zwei erstmals untersuchte deutsche Agrarkolonien, die Kaiser Maximilian in den Mayadörfern Santa Elena und Pustunich 1865 gründen ließ.

Abstract: Until now it was assumed that only members of the German elite migrated into México. This communication presents some of the most important findings obtained regarding two until now not studied German agricultural colonies established by Emperor Maximilian in the Mayan villages of Santa Elena and Pustunich, in Yucatán, during the Second Mexican Empire.

1. Introduction

I would like to start my presentation by recalling an event that took place in the Mexican port of Sisal, Yucatán, on October 25th 1865, when under the merciless midday heat 224 exhausted German-speaking people of all ages disembarked from the Hamburger ship "San Luis". According to an until now overlooked report from the German naturalist and ethnologist Arthur Schott—who witness their arrival—the local "women and children hugged the amazed newcomers, who could not

* *Alma Durán-Merk studied European Ethnology, Spanish Literature and Mass Communication in México, the United States and Germany. Contact: alma.duran@phil.uni-augsburg.de; alma.duran@gmx.de*

understand why they were received in such a friendly manner", adding that the people of Sisal offer them food, shelter and company.¹

This was the first of two groups of colonists taken into México by Emperor Maximilian of Habsburg (1832-1867) as part of his immigration policy. The objective was to, I quote, "populate, educate and save the country". Another 219 settlers arrived to that same port on July 15th 1866, adding up to a total of 443. They established farming colonies in the Maya villages of Santa Elena and Pustunich, settlements which together were referred to in official correspondence as "Villa Carlota."



Figur 1: German Settlements in Yucatán, México

But only two years after the celebrated arrival of the first group, in August 1867, an open letter in the newspaper "La Razón del Pueblo" presented a contrasting, terrifying scene: By that time, after the fall of the Second Empire, these immigrants were unwanted and considered by the Republicans as collaborators of

¹¹Arthur Schott (1866): Deutsche Auswanderer in Yucatán. In: *Das Ausland* 39:473.

the "enemy". According to the businessmen and writer Emilio McKinney, the former colonists were left stranded in the Yucatecan port of Sisal "in terrible conditions. They (were) starving, sick, exhausted, and barely wearing rags: everything [seemed] to be against them", to the extreme that some of them just died in the streets. What happened there? Why Germans in Yucatán? And how come we know almost nothing about it?

When it comes to German migration into México, two assertions have until now dominated in social-historical research. First, that organized German colonization from the time of México's Independence (1821) until the beginning of the Porfiriato (1877) was just a list of failed attempts which remained just on paper. And second: It has been stated that the German migration was almost exclusively an elite migration —the so called *Handelskonquistadoren*². That is, middle to upper class businessmen, bankers, entrepreneurial and professionals.

In my master's thesis³ I explored a theme that had been long ignored by scholars: The proletarian, underprivileged, German migration into México during Maximilian's regime, concentrating on the Yucatecan colonization program that was carried out from 1864 until 1867. The amount of existing bibliographical sources was rather meager and not necessarily unbiased; therefore, I chose to incorporate primary sources, which I consulted in a total of 11 institutional archives in Austria, Germany, México and the United States of America.

Given that I decided to approach this theme from an intercultural perspective, my ethno-historical analysis at the *mezzo* level covered three main aspects:

- 1 México's colonization policy, from 1821 until the end of the Second Empire
- 2 A socio-economical portrait of the colonists of Villa Carlota
- 3 German colonies in Yucatán

Considering the time assigned to this presentation, I will concentrate on the last point. I will provide a sketch of the immigration and colonization policy of the

² Term introduced by Walther L. Bernecker (1988): *Die Handelskonquistadoren. Europäische Interessen und mexikanischer Staat im 19. Jahrhundert*. Stuttgart: Stiner.

³ *Identifying Villa Carlota: German Settlements in Yucatán, México, During the Second Mexican Empire (1864-1867)*, Universität Augsburg, 2007. Several copies are available for consultation in university libraries and archives in México, the United States, Germany and Austria. A book in Spanish is planned for 2009.

Second Empire, to then move on to present a brief portrait of the life and fall of colonies. At the end, I will summarize some of the main contributions of this study.

2. Immigration and Colonization policy of the Second Mexican Empire

First, let's review quickly the events leading to the establishment of the Second Mexican Empire.

As it is well known, after a national polarization around the 1857's Constitution, the subsequent *coup d'état*, and the following Guerra de Reforma, the Republican government of México was bankrupt and suspended payments of debts to all foreign powers in 1861. French troops occupied the country forcing President Benito Juárez to abandon México City. By May 31st of that same year, the French Interventionist troops had installed a Junta Superior. In July 1862 the Junta Superior proclaimed a Catholic Empire in México, offering the crown and title of Emperor to Archduke Maximilian (1832-1867), younger brother of Franz Joseph, the Emperor of Austria. In 1863 began The Regency, which prepared the establishment of the Second Mexican Empire.

The Second Mexican Empire considered foreign migration as one of the pillars upon which it should build its existence: The so-called "regeneration" of México. France's policy set the goal of attracting 600,000 European immigrants of Latin descent in five years⁴, new population which "shall absorb the old one, for there is nothing to be done with the existing [Mexican] elements"⁵, as per Empress Charlotte's own writings. To achieve that ambitious goal the Second Empire followed four strategies which, as I have proved in my thesis, were reasonably well organized:

- 1st. Promoting individual migration
- 2nd. Granting concessions to particulars
- 3rd. Facilitating group migration
- 4th. Organizing State-financed colonies

⁴ Alfred Jackson HANNA and Kathryn Abbey (1947): The Immigration Movement of the Intervention and Empire as Seen through the Mexican Press. In: *HAHR* (27), pp. 220-246, here p. 227. For a bibliography about this policy, see *Ibidem*, p. 221, 6n.

⁵ Charlotte to Eugénie, Chapultepec, Feb. 3, 1865, printed in full by Egon Caesar CORTI, 1928 [1924], *Maximilian and Charlotte of Mexico*, vol. 2. New York: Knopf. Here p. 879.

The "German Colonies in Yucatán" program, that is, Villa Carlota, follows in this last classification.

But: Why specifically German settlers and how so into Yucatán?

1st: Maximilian had envisioned turning Yucatán into the gravitational center of his so-planned "Central-American Empire".

2nd: As early as 1863 Yucatán declared its support to the Monarchy.

3rd: According to the overly optimistic point of view of the local elite, the peninsula was extraordinarily wealthy in resources ready to be exploited. Given that Yucatán was then so isolated and unknown to the central government, this idea was taken at face value.

4th: It was believed that the presence of the colonists would help to end the still ongoing Caste War, which, based on the argumentation of the Yucatecan elite, was the only reason why the peninsula was in bankruptcy.

5th: A "civilizational", modernizing and educational mission was assigned to the German settlers, who had a reputation of being hard workers and excellent farmers.

6th: Maximilian wanted to promote the development of a middle class. This aspect of the program created great animosity amongst many Yucatecan "terratenientes", who, as many documents show, boycotted the colonization program.

Keeping this context in mind, we can move on to look more specifically at the German colonies in Yucatán

3. The German Colonies in Yucatán

In July 1864, the then *Ministro de Fomento* (Secretary of Development) José Salazar Ilarregui discussed with Emperor Maximilian the project to colonize Yucatán with German farmers, estimating that every year 600 new families could be settled in that region. By the end of September the program was up and running: Salazar Ilarregui was named Imperial Commissioner for Yucatán, given specific instructions, a group of specialists, and a generous budget to proceed to colonize the peninsula. A team headed by the already mentioned Arthur Schott and the Yucatecan engineer of

German descend Joaquín Hübbe was appointed to survey, test and recommend the most promising locations for the settlements.

Almost at the same time Moritz von Hippel, a native of Silesia (Schlessien), was named Director of the German Colonies in Yucatán. He traveled to Prussia in order to recruit colonists offering them an apparently generous, although ambiguous, contract. Against all odds —such as bans and warnings against the project which were issued by several associations, governments and newspapers— von Hippel was able to enroll a total of 443 colonists.

Most of the would-be Villa Carlottans were impoverished farmers, displaced artisans and unemployed workers. They traveled as families and many were Protestant.

The first group of settlers, which as we had seen arrived in 1865, did not have an easy start: It was difficult to find land to assign to them because of the Caste War being still fought in Yucatán, and because of the boycott that part of the Yucatecan elite launched against this colonization project. In a somewhat precipitated manner, the German colonists were conducted to Santa Elena, which was in those days a remote, under populated, poor, Mayan village that still had not recovered from the damages it suffered during the Caste War.

Although during several months the colonists had to stay in temporary shelters, the régime was able to complete construction of the necessary 77 houses by the beginning of 1866. Domingo Bureau, reported to Empress Charlotte: "The German colony Villa Carlota has nice, wide, streets; the houses are simple and well built [...] the community prospers notably "⁶. Should we believe that? Considering other documents, that appears to have been indeed the case: An administrative team formed by the already mentioned von Hippel and the German-Brazilian Carlos Young Waldemann, who functioned as a translator, worked together with Desiderio Lizárraga, the *Juez de Paz* (Mayor) of Santa Elena. Together these three men were responsible for Villa Carlota's daily operations. Although there were cases of conflict

⁶ Domingo Bureau to Charlotte, Mérida, May 23, 1866, ÖSt, KMM, K. 49. Part of this letter can also be found— unfortunately incomplete in regards to Villa Carlota—in: Luis WECKMANN (1989): *Carlota de Bélgica. Correspondencia y escritos sobre México en los archivos europeos, 1861-1868*. México: Porrúa, pp. 360-361.

or mistrust—even of violence— these were minimal. Based on documental evidence, it is reasonable to characterize the interactions between the inhabitants of Santa Elena and the Villa Carlota as cooperative and even friendly.

Key in making possible such a rapid adaptation was the clergyman Juan Ortigón who paid regular weekly visits to Villa Carlota, although based in Ticul. As a mediator and priest Ortigón was able to serve the colonists, including those who were Protestant. He and his assistant, Miguel Garma, handled the conversion of several of them into the Catholic religion. In 1866 in Santa Elena there were 32 baptisms, or conversions, of Germans registered: In these ceremonies most of the *padrinos* o *madrinas* (godfathers or godmothers) were members of the local elite, which speaks for a process of social integration.

The second group of colonists faced more challenges than the first one. Given that Maximilian's Empire was already deteriorating, the economical funding for the colonization program was just not there anymore. While some newcomers integrated themselves into the life of Santa Elena, a good number of them were conducted to Pustunich, a Maya village with barely 200 inhabitants, located 16 km. away from Santa Elena. This second settlement in reality never fully materialized as such. In the absence of housing, the settlers had to stay at the local church; given that among them there were some Protestants a conflict with the local Catholic population emerged. Other immigrants were assigned to work for ranches or businesses in other locations of the peninsula and quite a few, seeing no possibility of success, ran away.

By the fall of 1866 a good number of the colonists from both groups had given up on the project. This loss of heart was not only caused by the Second Empire's already visible lack of stability, but was influenced by the fact that, by then, it was clear that the first harvest was going to be a failure. On August 12th 1866, 36 heads of family directed a letter to the Imperial Commissioner. On it they requested to be relocated or be sent back to Germany. They argued that during the past months they had seen all their efforts to cultivate cotton, tobacco and henequen fail: The area was too hot and dry; there was no surface water; the soil, although fertile, was to be found only in a thin layer and in small pockets; the abundant limestone impeded the use of a plow. They considered it unfeasible for a German colony to subsist, needless to speak about succeeding, in Yucatán.

The régime attempted to improve the living conditions of the Villa Carlota, but all efforts were in vain. In less than two years the direct expenses of the colonies amounted to more than 78,000 dollars —and there were no signs that they even near to becoming self-sufficient.

The Second Empire fell into its final crisis in the following months: The Republicans were winning terrain, there were frequent attacks of the *sublevados* (rebels) of the Caste War, and the armed fighting was eating up the already scanty Imperial budget.

At the end of January 1867, 40 settlers were drafted into the Imperialist army, forming the "Fuerza Alemana" (German Force), military unit which under the command of Pablo Tommassek fought for the Empire until the fall of Mérida on June 12th 1867. As part of his capitulation Salazar Ilarregui obtained a guarantee of life and freedom for the Imperialists soldiers, as well as passports for them. Among the ones benefited by this negotiation were some of the members of the Fuerza Alemana, who left with their families for the United States in the following days. But others stayed behind in Villa Carlota. By the time they tried to flee, the Republicans were in power again and México became an inhospitable and dangerous land for all of those who had sympathized or worked with the Second Empire, as the report from Emilio McKinney showed.

However, even some of those who were left stranded were able to get to New Orleans, as the Prussian Consul Kruttschnitt reported on September 5th, 1867, to the General Prussian Consul in the United States, Friedrich Joseph Karl Freiherr von Gerolt (1797-1879)⁷.

Nevertheless, not all of them left México: A few German women who had married Locals in Santa Elena remained there; other families moved to Mérida or to other close by cities. The fact is, that until our days it is still possible to find a few blond children with blue eyes in those two villages, as well as people who keep old photos and belongings from their ancestors: the descendents from the so-called "hombres rojos y grandes"—that is, the Germans.

⁷ Kruttschnitt, Königlicher Preußischer Konsul in New Orleans, to Baron von Gerolt, New Orleans, Sept. 5, 1867, GStPK, Hauptabteilung III, 2.4.1, I, no. 7917, fol. 247 sv.

4. Contributions

Now, I will summarize some of the main contributions of this empirical study.

By recurring to primary sources it was possible to reconstruct a good part of the background and history of the German settlements in Yucatán during the Second Mexican Empire. The results brought about by this study are especially interesting for four reasons:

1. Villa Carlota is the first documented case of fully State-finance migration.
2. Its findings correct the assumption that there was no German proletarian group migration into México.
3. It challenges the until our days prevalent conception of the Second Mexican Empire as a régime without a concrete migration and colonization policy.
4. Given the location of the colonies within already existing Maya villages, Villa Carlota provides a unique opportunity to study processes of acculturation following early contact.

I thank you all for your attention