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Centro Journal, Vol. XIII, Núm. 1, 2001, pp. 23-43

The City University of New York

Latinoamericanistas

Disponible en: <http://redalyc.uaemex.mx/src/inicio/ArtPdfRed.jsp?iCve=37711309002>



Centro Journal

ISSN (Versión impresa): 1538-6279

centro-journal@hunter.cuny.edu

The City University of New York

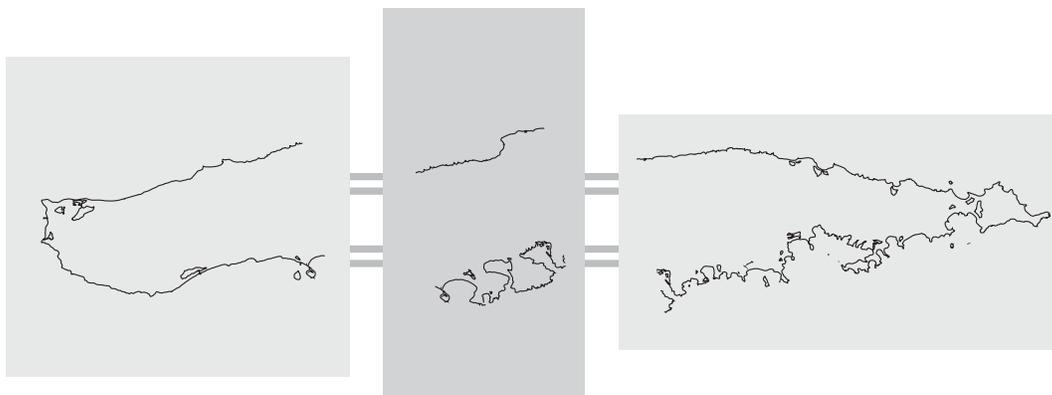
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From Sugar Plantations to Military Bases: The U.S. Navy's Expropriations in Vieques, Puerto Rico, 1940–45

CÉSAR J. AYALA

From Plantations to Military Bases

During World War II the U.S. Federal Government took over approximately 26,000 acres out of a total of 33,000 in the Puerto Rican island of Vieques, to build military installations. At present, the facilities in Vieques—Camp García in the east and a munitions depot in the West—are part of a larger military complex known as Roosevelt Roads, which spans eastern Puerto Rico and the island of Vieques. Roosevelt Roads is one of the largest U.S. Naval bases outside the continental United States. It was built during World War II, with the capacity to house the British Navy in case it became necessary to do so during the course of the war.¹ Since the 1940s, the western part of Vieques has been used as a munitions depot, while the eastern part serves as a target range for combined sea-air-ground maneuvers. The U.S. Navy rents the island of Vieques to the navies of other coun-

tries for target practice.² For six decades the civilian population has been constrained in the center of the island, surrounded by the ecological devastation produced by Navy bombardments.

There are multiple studies about the strategic importance of Vieques to the U.S. Navy, most in the context of the broader role played by U.S. military bases in Puerto Rico.³ However, there is no study yet on the social structure and the structure of property ownership in Vieques before the Navy expropriations, nor has there been a study about the social impact of the expropriations of the 1940s on the population of Vieques. The only study in existence about the expropriations of the 1940s lacks the social and economic indicators used in this paper. According to Maribel Veaz, “the analysis of the development and use of property and lands in Vieques is a fertile but uncultivated terrain for research,

and it would help clarify many aspects of the history of Vieques during this period.”⁴

For this study of the first round of Navy expropriations in Vieques, which took place in 1942–43, I examined the data for all properties located in Vieques in fiscal years 1940–41 and 1944–45.⁵ The profile of land ownership in Vieques allows us to set comparisons of social and economic conditions before and after the first round of expropriations. The records can be matched owner by owner, so that the data yield quantitative information on who suffered the expropriations, how much land they lost, and the location of each property.⁶

Comparing the data before and after the expropriations gives us a social profile of the expropriated population. The names of the owners are identifiable in both years, which allows the matching of records by property owner. The information suggests that there took place in Vieques not only quantitative changes, such as the disappearance of a number of property owners, but also qualitative changes. The number and the value of rural properties, and the changes registered in the commercial retail sector of the economy of Vieques, suggest a transition from a plantation economy, based on sugar *centrales* before the war, to an economy geared to providing services for the U.S. troops stationed on the island. One can also observe the proliferation of bars, restaurants, hostels, and their exact locations, and the closure of rural stores where *viequenses* had previously purchased their food.

The Vieques economy was not characterized by an egalitarian distribution of land before the expropriations of the U.S. Navy. On the contrary, Vieques was one of the Puerto Rican *municipios*, in which the sugar plantation economy had produced the highest degree of land concentration. In this respect it resembled the municipality of Santa Isabel, the prototype of the sugar latifundia owned by the Aguirre Sugar Company. The problem of land concentration in Puerto Rico, which was a heritage of the Spanish era, had created in Vieques since the end of the 19th century a society in which a few landowners owned most of the property while the bulk of the population was landless. According to the *Census of 1899*, in Vieques 85.9% of the families were landless.⁷ That is to say, from the end of the Spanish colonial period, Vieques was already a highly polarized monocultural plantation society with extreme land concentration and an advanced process of rural proletarianization.

In addition, there was a population of “cocolos” in Vieques—black workers from the eastern Caribbean—who formed a sugar proletariat in the plantations. In 1874, barely a year after the abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico, the English-speaking workers of Vieques rioted in response to maltreatment from the planters and the government. The Civil Guard killed a worker and wounded several others, initiating a period of burning of cane fields that lasted several weeks. Dozens of workers were jailed in the Count of Mirasol Fort in Vieques.⁸ Contrary to the widely held notion that the problem of land concentration emerged after the U.S. occupation of Puerto Rico, the situation in Vieques was one of extreme land concentration and of dispossession of the majority of the rural population since Spanish times.

In the first decade of the 20th century, the process of land concentration aggravated the rate of rural landlessness. Already in 1898, land in Vieques belonged to the chosen few. Nevertheless, between the Census of 1899 and that of 1910, the population of Vieques increased by 76% (from 5,927 to 10,425) as a result of the immigration of workers for the sugar industry, without any fundamental changes in the structure of land tenure. The effect of this increase in population was a rise in the percentage of the landless population. In 1910, 93.6% of the Vieques rural population owned no land. This figure remained stable until the expropriations of the 1940s. In 1920, 95% of the

rural population had no land, and in 1930 the figure dropped slightly to 92.9%. In 1935, according to the *Census of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration*, 94.9% of the rural population was landless.⁹

Vieques is among the *municipios* in which more than 90% of the population was landless. The municipalities of Ponce, Juana Díaz, Santa Isabel, and Salinas, which were part of the southern sugar corridor dominated by the Aguirre Sugar Company, also exhibited a sharp degree of rural landlessness and land concentration. The Aguirre Sugar Company owned the Cortada mill in Santa Isabel, the Machete mill in Guayama, and the Aguirre mill in Salinas. In the north, Dorado, Toa Baja, Cataño, and Río Piedras also had degrees of rural landlessness greater than 90%.

According to the Census of 1930, two owners of more than 1,000 acres controlled

TABLE I
Land Tenure in Vieques and Santa Isabel, 1930

| VIEQUES | | | | | | |
|--|--------------|-------------|-------------------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|--------------------|
| Farms, by size (in <i>cuerdas</i>) | No. of Farms | % Farms | Area of Farms (<i>cuerdas</i>) | % of Farm Area | Area of Improved Land | % Improved Land |
| less than 3 | 7 | 7.87 | 13 | 0.06 | 13 | 0.09 |
| 3 - 9 | 37 | 41.57 | 184 | 0.87 | 150 | 0.99 |
| 10 - 19 | 15 | 16.85 | 205 | 0.97 | 150 | 0.99 |
| 20 - 49 | 2 | 2.25 | 564 | 2.66 | 381 | 2.52 |
| 50 - 99 | 7 | 7.87 | 482 | 2.27 | 294 | 1.95 |
| 100 - 174 | 8 | 8.99 | 1,035 | 4.88 | 946 | 6.26 |
| 175 - 259 | 6 | 6.74 | 1,258 | 5.93 | 1,059 | 7.01 |
| 260 - 499 | 3 | 3.37 | 1,055 | 4.97 | 590 | 3.91 |
| 500 - 999 | 2 | 2.25 | 1,320 | 6.22 | 385 | 2.55 |
| 1000 or more | 2 | 2.25 | 15,093 | 71.16 | 11,137 | 73.73 |
| Total | 89 | 100% | 21,209 | 100% | 15,105 | 100% |

| SANTA ISABEL | | | | | | |
|--|--------------|------------|-------------------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Farms, by size (in <i>cuerdas</i>) | No. of Farms | % Farms | Area of Farms (<i>cuerdas</i>) | % of Farm Area | Area of Improved Land | % of Improved Land |
| less than 3 | 5 | 31.25 | 10 | 0.11 | 10 | 0.12 |
| 3 - 9 | 4 | 25.00 | 19 | 0.20 | 19 | 0.23 |
| 10 - 19 | 2 | 12.50 | 23 | 0.24 | 20 | 0.24 |
| 20 - 49 | 2 | 12.50 | 60 | 0.63 | 21 | 0.25 |
| 50 - 99 | | 0.00 | | 0.00 | | 0.00 |
| 100 - 174 | | 0.00 | | 0.00 | | 0.00 |
| 175 - 259 | 1 | 6.25 | 175 | 1.84 | 130 | 1.55 |
| 260 - 499 | | 0.00 | | 0.00 | | 0.00 |
| 500 - 999 | 1 | 6.25 | 876 | 9.21 | 776 | 9.24 |
| 1000 or more | 1 | 6.25 | 8,351 | 87.78 | 7426 | 88.38 |
| Total | 16 | 100 | 9514 | 1.0001 | 8402 | 100% |

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census,
Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930. Outlying Territories and Possessions
(Washington: Government Printing Office, 1932), 219.

71% of the farmland in the municipality of Vieques. Only in Santa Isabel, a municipality controlled by a U.S. corporation, the Aguirre Sugar Company, and in Guánica, a municipality controlled by the South Porto Rico Sugar Company, was there a structure

of land concentration more extreme than that of Vieques. One farm of over 1,000 acres represented 87% of the farmland in Santa Isabel. In Vieques, farms of over 100 acres occupied 93% of the area, while in Santa Isabel the corresponding figure was 98%. According to the *Census of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration*, in Vieques the average farm spanned 393 acres, while in all of Puerto Rico average farm size was 36 acres. The only two municipalities where land concentration produced average farm sizes greater than those of Vieques were Santa Isabel (1001 acres) and Guánica (459 acres).

In more than 70% of Puerto Rico's municipalities the average farm size was less than 50 acres, and there were only eight municipalities with average farm sizes larger than 100 acres.¹⁰ Vieques was the third most acute instance of land concentration in Puerto Rico, surpassed only by the *municipios* controlled by the South Puerto Rico Sugar Company (Guánica) and the Aguirre Sugar Company (Santa Isabel). There is no doubt that the problem of land concentration dominated the social and economic landscape of Vieques to a much greater degree than in the rest of the *municipios* of Puerto Rico. The structure of land tenure in Vieques was not that of the typical Puerto Rican *municipio*.

The overwhelming majority of *viequenses* did not have land titles at the time of the expropriations, and more than 80% of the land acquired by the Navy was purchased from two landowners: the Benítez family, who were the principal landowners in the Island; and the Eastern Sugar Associates, the second largest landowner. The existence of a plantation economy and society in Vieques had important repercussions during the expropriations. As in many other plantation regions, there was no geographic separation between workplace and residence. The workers lived on the land of the large landowners. This gives plantation life a kind of "total" character, which is different from the situation of most urban wage workers.¹¹ When the expropriation of the large landowners took place, workers lost in one single blow both their jobs and their houses. For an urban worker, this would be the equivalent of being fired from the job by the employer and evicted from their home by the landlord, on the same day.

The sugar latifundia were transformed and became military latifundia in the hands of the U.S. Navy, which was able to acquire its land in a few transactions with the large landowners. Would the process of expropriation have taken the same course had there been a numerous settled peasantry with property over the land? Would the removal of the families from the land, farm by farm, have been as easy? Perhaps a populous peasantry would have responded with a social movement of resistance. But the actual process took another course. Many of the workers who lived in the farms did not have titles, even to the parcels in which they built their houses, and this facilitated the process of expropriation. For example, the farm of "Carlota Benítez and others" located in the Punta Arenas *barrio*, spanned 3,082 acres. Among the improvements listed in 1940 were "62 houses." The farm of Francisco and J. Benítez Santiago in Punta Arenas, which spanned 558 acres, contained 60 houses. The Eastern Sugar Associates had 62 houses on one of its properties. Another farm owned by Carlota Benítez in Barrio Llave, spanning 54 acres, had a cockpit in addition to a number of houses.¹² The land and the houses were listed in the tax records as belonging to the landowners, who paid the corresponding taxes. The workers, having no titles, were removed without legal obstacles when the large landowners sold their properties. The ease of eviction was due, in large measure, to the degree of rural landlessness among a rural population whose only possession was, as they say in Vieques, "the day and the night."¹³

Even under these conditions of landlessness, rural workers typically had plots where they raised garden crops and so interacted with the tropical ecology in numerous ways.

Consequently, not all of the cost of reproduction of labor power depended on the wage. In other areas of Puerto Rico, the relation of these peasant/proletarian communities to the ecology has been amply documented.¹⁴ In Vieques, this aspect has yet to be studied, but it has undoubtedly conditioned the claims of the communities which, based on traditional rights of *agregó* relationships, understood that they had certain rights of possession and usufruct over the land. This explains the double reality—on the one hand, the lack of titles, and on the other hand, the widespread feeling of rural dispossession after the houses, built by the workers themselves, were leveled during the expropriations. The transition produced an increase of poverty and a deterioration of living conditions. The Rev. Justo Pastor Ruiz described the transition experienced by the dispossessed: “Those who had garden plots or lived happily on the landowner’s land surrounded by farmland and fruit trees, live today in overcrowded conditions and lack even air to breathe.”¹⁵

Land Concentration in Vieques

Surrounded by the beauty of the ocean and the green cane fields, a man starved to death. The ocean, rich in mysteries and hidden wealth, could not help him. The soft and whispering cane field was a sight to behold. But that was all.... the ocean and the cane-field have no heart.¹⁶

MAP I

Vieques, Approximate Location of Sugar Mills, ca. 1919



At the beginning of the 20th century Vieques had four sugar *centrales*: the Santa María; the Arcadia; the Esperanza, also known as Puerto Real; and the Playa Grande.¹⁷ When these are compared with the *centrales* of the great corporations that established themselves in Puerto Rico after the U.S. occupation, they appear as relatively modest enterprises. The Guánica mill, for instance, reached an output of over 100,000 tons of sugar yearly, and the Cambalache mill in Arecibo produced more than 40,000. In Vieques the largest *central* produced 13,000 tons yearly, which in the sugar world of the early 20th century was not an insignificant amount. Even so, it was not comparable to the output of Puerto Rico’s largest *centrales*. In 1910 none of the mills in Vieques

TABLE 2

Vieques Sugar Mills, 1907 and 1910

| NAME | OWNER | PRODUCTION IN 1907 (TONS) | PRODUCTION IN 1910 (TONS) |
|----------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Playa Grande | Benitez Sugar Co. | 2,984 | 4,366 |
| Esperanza | Víctor Mourraile | 2,056 | 4,280 |
| Santa María | Charles Le Brun | 1,130 | 1,746 |
| Arkadia | Arkadia Sugar Co. | 1,500 | 2,437 |
| TOTAL VIEQUES | | 7,670 | 12,829 |

Source: U.S. National Archives, Record Group 350, File 422, Records of the Bureau of Insular Affairs, “Government of Porto Rico, Treasury Department, Bureau of Property Taxes: Comparative Statistical Report of Sugar Manufactured in Porto Rico from the Crops of 1907, 1908, 1909, and 1901.”

produced more than 5,000 tons of sugar.

The Puerto Real sugar mill emerged out of a fusion between the sugar hacienda of Víctor Mourraille in Puerto Ferro and the Martineau in Barrio Mosquito. Jointly, they formed the Mourraille–Martineau Society and the Esperanza sugar mill, also known as Puerto Real. Upon the death of Martineau, Mourraille remained in charge. The *central* was then transferred from Víctor Mourraille to his son Gustave. After the sugar cane strike of 1915, which caused several deaths in violent clashes between the police and the strikers, Gustave Mourraille sold the Puerto Real mill to the heirs of Enrique Bird Arias, whose sugar interests were linked to the Fajardo Sugar Company. The incidents of 1915 were linked to Gustavo Mourraille, an employer in Vieques whose differences with the workers produced rioting during the 1915 strike.¹⁸

The heirs of Enrique Bird Arias who acquired the Puerto Real mill, were in turn foreclosed by the firm of L.W. P. Armstrong and Company, lawyers of the Fajardo Sugar Company, after the death of Enrique Bird Arias. But the Puerto Real mill did not end up in the hands of the Fajardo Sugar Company. It was instead sold to the United Porto Rico Sugar Company and then transferred to the Eastern Sugar Associates. It ground its last crop in 1927. After that date, the cane was ground at the Playa Grande mill.¹⁹

If the Armstrong firm represented the Fajardo Sugar Company, why did the Puerto Real end up in the hands of the United Puerto Rico company? L.W. Armstrong & Company were part of a complex web of New York sugar interests which controlled, through holding companies, the Fajardo, the Aguirre, and the United Porto Rico companies. They were in addition linked to the National Sugar Refining Company, the principal sugar refining interest represented in the board of directors of sugar enterprises in Puerto Rico.²⁰ James Howell Post, of the board of directors of the Fajardo and the Aguirre, was president of the National Sugar Refining Company and a member of the board of directors of City Bank, which controlled the United Porto Rico Company. The web of U.S. sugar interests was densely woven, and the frontiers between U.S. enterprises, which in the documents appeared as totally independent entities, withered away in the centers of financial power, which controlled sugar emporia spanning Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. (The Fajardo and the United Porto Rico belonged to a group of sugar barons in New York City centered at 29 Front Street, where the headquarters of the National Sugar and the Aguirre companies, among others, were located.)

The United Porto Rico Sugar Company closed the Puerto Real mill, also known as *Central Vieques* or *Esperanza*, in 1927, but the lands continued producing cane. The sugar cane was shipped from the port of Esperanza in Vieques towards Humacao, where it was ground in the *Pasto Viejo* mill, also owned by the United Porto Rico Sugar Company. This sugar corporation was founded in 1926. Unlike the three other large U.S. sugar enterprises—the South Porto Rico, the Aguirre, and the Fajardo companies—the United Porto Rico did not establish itself at the beginning of the century but in the 1920s, when a drop in sugar prices made things difficult for locally owned sugar mills. Instead of building mills, as was the case initially with the Aguirre, the Fajardo, and South Porto Rico, the United Porto Rico Sugar Company purchased already existing mills. The United Porto Rico produced large quantities of sugar in a number of mills of smaller size, unlike the other three U.S. companies, which owned large mills. At the beginning of the 1930s, the United Puerto Rico changed its name to Eastern Sugar Associates in a corporate reorganization, and the canes of what had once been the Puerto Real mill continued to be shipped to the *Pasto Viejo* central in Humacao. Both the lands of the Puerto Real as well as the *Pasto Viejo* mill were

transferred from the United Porto Rico to the Eastern Sugar Company.

The shipment of the cane from Vieques to Humacao was nothing extraordinary. The South Porto Rico Sugar Company, which had lands planted in La Romana in the Dominican Republic, also shipped its cane early in the century towards *Central Guánica* in Puerto Rico. The crossing of the Mona Passage—which is located between the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico—is much longer than the trip from Vieques to Humacao, which has a distance of merely six miles. Nevertheless, for the South Porto Rico Sugar Company the endeavor was profitable due to the duty-free entrance of all sugars from Puerto Rico into the U.S. market, a tariff advantage that gave sugar producers in Puerto Rico a significant edge over the competition in Cuba and the Dominican Republic. This tariff advantage also explains the immense interest of U.S. capital in enterprises of a relatively small size, such as the Puerto Real mill in Vieques, and it explains the profitability of the enterprise even after the shipping costs to Humacao from Vieques. Puerto Rico's incorporation into the U.S. tariff system further explains the proliferation of cane fields throughout the island, which became, relative to its size, the most specialized sugar producer of the Caribbean. Vieques, which already had a sugar economy in the 19th century, also suffered from the expansion of sugar monoculture in the 20th century. Property became even more concentrated, and the number of sugar mills decreased.

Central Arcadia produced sugar in the years 1907–1910, but we do not know exactly when it stopped grinding. *The Book of Porto Rico*, edited by Eugenio Fernández García, gives production figures for Puerto Rico's sugar mills between 1912 and 1922. The sugar output of the *centrales* Puerto Real, Playa Grande, and Santa María are listed in the municipality of Vieques, but not that of the Arcadia mill.²¹ Possibly, the Arcadia stopped grinding between 1910 and 1912. Bonnet Benítez mentions the Arcadia as one of the four sugar mills that operated in the 20th century.²² The Santa María mill is listed in Fernández García's book until 1923. Its outputs of sugar were small, and Bonnet Benítez states that it produced in its distillery a brand of rum, the Santa María. Nevertheless, in 1930 the Santa María mill does not appear in Gilmore's *Sugar Manual*, an indication that it had either stopped grinding or its sugar production was negligible. By 1930, the Playa Grande enjoyed “the distinction of being the surviving sugar factory on the island of Vieques.”²³

By 1940, the sugar industry of Vieques was in sharp decline. The number of *cuerdas* planted in cane had decreased from 7,621 in 1935 to 4,586 in 1940. Cane yields had dropped from 24 tons of cane per *cuerda* in 1924 to 22 tons in 1935 and 19 tons in 1940. Of the four sugar mills that existed in Vieques at the beginning of the century, only the Playa Grande survived into 1933–1934, the worst years for the sugar industry in terms of prices. Militant union struggles took place during the general strike of the sugar cane workers in Puerto Rico in 1934, following a general strike in Cuba that overthrew dictator Gerardo Machado in August 1933. The Puerto Rican strike started in December of 1933 and became an island-wide stoppage in January 1934.²⁴

During the 1930s the control of the great landowners over land resources reached its peak. The Eastern Sugar Associates owned 11,000 acres of land, of which 1,500 were planted in cane. The cane was shipped to Pasto Viejo.²⁵ Puerto Rican geographer Rafael Picó argued in 1950 that towards the end of the 1930s more than two-thirds of the land planted in cane in Vieques was in the hands of the Benítez Sugar Company—owner of the Playa Grande mill—and the Eastern Sugar Associates. Thus, according to Picó, “the evils of land concentration and absentee ownership, prevailing in most sugar cane lands in Puerto Rico, were deeply intensified in Vieques. The bulk of the

population was landless, a part of the 'peon' class."²⁶ The principal landowners in Vieques were the Eastern Sugar Associates, one of the four large U.S. sugar corporations operating in Puerto Rico in the 1930s.²⁷ Nevertheless, the Benítez interests, considered as a group (15,736 *cuerdas*), owned a larger extension of land than Eastern Sugar (10,343 *cuerdas*).

Out of a supposed total of 33,000 *cuerdas* in Vieques as a whole, two ownership groups controlled 26,079 *cuerdas*. This amount of land is equivalent to that acquired by the U.S. Navy after the expropriations.²⁸ Admiral Arthur M. Knoizen of the U.S. Navy summarized the process of expropriation as follows: "Another misconception is that the Navy acquired its land on Vieques illegally. The property was acquired in fee simple by the United States through a series of nine condemnation proceedings at a total purchase price of \$1.5 million. These actions took place during the period between 1941 and 1947, and resulted in the overall acquisition of over 25,000 acres. The purchase price varied from about \$50 to \$120 per acre, the prevailing real estate prices in effect at that time. Ten principal ownerships accounted for 92 percent of the land procured, with the remainder mainly from 200 small property owners."²⁹

The Playa Grande of the Benítez interests belonged originally to a Dane, Matías Hjärdemal, who sold it to José Benítez, who in turn consolidated it with his own sugar mill, the Resolución. Upon the death of Benítez the *central* was left to his children through the Benítez Sugar Company. This company was put under a trusteeship due to unpaid debts to the Bank of Nova Scotia in 1936, until Aurelio Tio acquired it in 1939. The Playa Grande Sugar Corporation, of which Aurelio Tio was president, purchased the equipment and machinery of the Playa Grande mill and operated it until 1942, when the U.S. Navy took over the land. The *central* mill properly speaking was not expropriated, but the navy took most of the cane lands that supplied the mill. Lacking in sufficient cane lands, the sugar mill had to close and the machinery was sold to a corporation from Mayagüez, Puerto Rico, headed by sugar-baron Miguel Angel García Méndez. The Mayagüez Corporation sold the machinery to the Okeelanta Sugar Company, in the vicinity of Belle Glade in the state of Florida. The Okeelanta mill went bankrupt, and the machinery was eventually sold to the Manatí Sugar Company in Cuba.³⁰

In the tax assessments of 1940–41, the Benítez family still appears as the principal owner of the lands, but the taxes charged were small compared to those paid by the Eastern Sugar Associates, probably on account of the state of bankruptcy of the Playa Grande corporation or perhaps on account of its doubtful legal standing, or perhaps due to litigation in court about the properties. Despite this, it must be stressed that in 1940 the members of the Benítez family were still listed as the principal landowners of Vieques, owning almost half of the land in the island-municipality of Vieques. Dolores Benítez, Carlota Benítez and others, Carmen Aurelia Benítez Bithorn, and María Bithorn Benítez each appear as the owner of 3,636 *cuerdas*, while Francisco and J. Benítez Santiago are listed as the owners of a tract of 1,191 *cuerdas*. In sum, the above-mentioned members of the Benítez family owned 15,735 *cuerdas* of land out of a total of 36,032 *cuerdas* assessed for taxation, that is, they owned 44% of the land of Vieques. These 15,375 *cuerdas* were assessed at \$47,410 for tax purposes in 1940, or \$3.01 per *cuerda*. In contrast to the situation of the Benítez, the 10,043 *cuerdas* of the Eastern Sugar were assessed in the same year at \$661,400, or \$63.95 per *cuerda*, twenty times more per *cuerda* than the lands of the Benítez.

There are therefore two outstanding features of the land situation in Vieques in 1940. First, two ownership groups controlled 71% of the land of the Island, which is the

TABLE 3
Principal Landowners of Vieques in 1940-41 and their Properties in 1944-45

| NAME | CUERDAS 1940 | NUMBER FARMS 1940 | CUERDAS 1945 | NUMBER FARMS 1945 | CUERDAS' DIFFERENCE ¹ | VALUE OF LAND 1940 | VALUE OF LAND 1945 | LAND VALUE DIFFERENCE | IMPROVEMENT VALUE 1940 | IMPROVEMENT VALUE 1945 | IMPROVEMENT VALUE DIFFERENCE |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|
| Eastern Sugar Associates | 10,343 | 15 | 1,825 | 1 | -8,518 | 682,210 | 121,010 | -541,200 | 77,720 | 0 | -77,720 |
| Benitez, Dolores | 3,636 | 2 | 0 | 0 | -3,636 | 2,720 | 0 | -2,720 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Benitez, Carlota y otros | 3,636 | 2 | 0 | 0 | -3,636 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 12,870 | 0 | -12,870 |
| Benitez Bithorn, Carmen Aurelia | 3,082 | 1 | 0 | 0 | -3,082 | 20,300 | 0 | -20,300 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Bithorn Benitez, Maria | 3,082 | 1 | 0 | 0 | -3,082 | 19,590 | 0 | -19,590 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Benitez, Santiago Francisco y J. | 1,191 | 2 | 0 | 0 | -1,191 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6,080 | 0 | -6,080 |
| Benitez Bithorn, Carmen Amelia | 554 | 1 | 0 | 0 | -554 | 3,800 | 0 | -3,800 | 10 | 0 | -10 |
| Bithorn Vda. Benitez, Maria | 554 | 1 | 0 | 0 | -554 | 3,720 | 0 | -3,720 | 10 | 0 | -10 |
| Simons, Miguel | 2,129 | 4 | 1,308 | 4 | -821 | 83,770 | 54,320 | -29,450 | 12,230 | 610 | -11,620 |
| Diaz Sabino, Esteban | 678 | 16 | 0 | 0 | -678 | 37,250 | 0 | -37,250 | 5,190 | 0 | -5,190 |
| Rieckeoff, Ana | 468 | 1 | 0 | 0 | -468 | 17,150 | 0 | -17,150 | 150 | 0 | -150 |
| Bermudez, Juan | 441 | 4 | 108 | 4 | -333 | 7,920 | 7,920 | 0 | 3,100 | 3,100 | 0 |
| Harrisory, Justine y M. | 347 | 1 | 0 | 0 | -347 | 34,740 | 0 | -34,740 | 2,150 | 0 | -2,150 |
| Diaz, Esteban | 333 | 4 | 0 | 0 | -333 | 10,740 | 0 | -10,740 | 10 | 0 | -10 |
| Quiñones Almódovar, Manuel | 293 | 3 | 105 | 1 | -188 | 7,950 | 3,150 | -4,800 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Rivera Such., Sinto A. | 243 | 1 | 243 | 1 | 0 | 19,600 | 19,600 | 0 | 50 | 50 | 0 |
| Rivera, Sixto A. | 242 | 3 | 243 | 3 | 1 | 13,740 | 13,740 | 0 | 100 | 100 | 0 |
| Ramirez, Tomás | 210 | 2 | 315 | 3 | 105 | 6,300 | 10,500 | 4,200 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| González Mercedes, Jovito | 190 | 2 | 0 | 0 | -190 | 9,110 | 0 | -9,110 | 300 | 0 | -300 |
| Quiñones Almódovar, Natividad/otros | 181 | 2 | 0 | 0 | -181 | 10,000 | 0 | -10,000 | 90 | 0 | -90 |
| Brignoni Vda. Pérez, Rosa | 180 | 8 | 182 | 9 | 2 | 12,240 | 12,350 | 110 | 140 | 140 | 0 |
| Brignoni Mercado, Juan | 167 | 1 | 0 | 0 | -167 | 11,620 | 0 | -11,620 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Cruz Vélez, Ujogio | 166 | 18 | 0 | 0 | -166 | 12,140 | 0 | -12,140 | 2,070 | 0 | -2,070 |
| Quiñones Such., Epigme | 146 | 2 | 0 | 0 | -146 | 3,112 | 0 | -3,112 | 530 | 0 | -530 |
| Diaz Esteban y, Belén Carcaño | 129 | 1 | 0 | 0 | -129 | 3,870 | 0 | -3,870 | 100 | 0 | -100 |
| Benites Castiano, Carlos | 124 | 1 | 0 | 0 | -124 | 6,430 | 0 | -6,430 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Emeric, José | 115 | 1 | 0 | 0 | -115 | 4,200 | 0 | -4,200 | 80 | 0 | -80 |
| Brignoni Mercado, Inés | 110 | 1 | 110 | 1 | 0 | 8,280 | 8,280 | 0 | 60 | 60 | 0 |
| Acevedo Guadalupe, Antolino | 108 | 1 | 0 | 0 | -108 | 1,250 | 0 | -1,250 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Brignoni Huertas, José | 108 | 1 | 0 | 0 | -108 | 1,260 | 0 | -1,260 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Fix Alais, A. | 105 | 1 | 0 | 0 | -105 | 3,150 | 0 | -3,150 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Picó Mora, Arturo | 105 | 1 | 6 | 1 | -99 | 4,200 | 600 | -3,600 | 1,450 | 1,400 | -50 |
| Fix, Margaret D. | 105 | 1 | 0 | 0 | -105 | 3,150 | 0 | -3,150 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Carle Dubois, Carlos | 103 | 2 | 24 | 1 | -79 | 9,110 | 2,400 | -6,710 | 1,070 | 1,330 | 260 |
| Jaspard, Carlos | 100 | 2 | 0 | 0 | -100 | 8,480 | 0 | -8,480 | 20 | 0 | -20 |
| Total | 33,705 | 110 | 4,469 | 29 | -29,236 | 1,063,102 | 253,870 | -809,232 | 125,580 | 6,790 | -86,670 |
| Familia Benitez | 15,736 | 10 | 0 | 0 | -15,736 | 50,130 | 0 | -50,130 | 18,970 | 0 | -18,970 |
| Familia Benitez (%) | 47% | 9% | 0% | 0% | 54% | 5% | 0% | 6% | 15% | 0% | 20% |
| Eastern Sugar (%) | 31% | 14% | 41% | 3% | 29% | 62% | 48% | 67% | 62% | 0% | 80% |

Source: A.G.P.R., Departamento de Hacienda, Registro de Taxis n Sobre la Propiedad, Vieques, 1940-41 and 1944-45; (1) the total for this column exceeds the total expropriated by the Navy because some landowners not included in this table actually acquired land between 1941-1945.

most extreme case of land concentration in Puerto Rico. This degree of land concentration existed only in Santa Isabel and Guánica, both practically company towns owned by the Aguirre and South Porto Rico sugar companies, respectively. Second, the principal ownership group (the Benítez family) was bankrupt, and its lands were valued far below those of the Eastern Sugar Corporation. The landowners, however, received compensation for their land. The workers, on the contrary, lost their houses and ended up without a roof to sleep under.³¹ (Some large landowners still pursue the dream of restoration of their haciendas. The heirs of María Bithorn Vda. de Benítez have tried to claim some land, unsuccessfully.³²)

The Expropriations

The *barrio* of Punta Arenas totally disappeared after the expropriations of the Navy.³³ Llave lost 95% of its land, Mosquito lost 91%, while 76% of the lands of Puerto Ferro were taken during the expropriations. Due to the high degree of land concentration, the largest *haciendas* spanned two or more *barrios*, and for this reason it is difficult to establish with precision what percentage of the large farms belonged to which *barrio*. For example, in 1940–41 the tax records list 5,856 *cuerdas* of land as belonging jointly to the *barrios* of Puerto Real and Puerto Ferro, without listing what part of the land belonged to which *barrio*. In 1945, as a result of the expropriation of the lands of Puerto Ferro, some of the land that had previously been listed jointly now appeared as belonging solely to Puerto Real. Due to this statistical effect, Puerto Real appears as having more land in 1945 than in 1940. In the entire island of Vieques, the Department of the Treasury of Puerto Rico assessed for taxation purposes 36,032 *cuerdas* of land in

TABLE 4
Civilian Ownership of Farms in Vieques, by *Barrio*, 1940 and 1945.

| BARRIO | NO. FARMS 1940 | CUERDAS 1940 | NO. FARMS 1945 | CUERDAS 1945 | CUERDAS, % CHANGE 1940-45 |
|------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|------------------------------|
| Unknown | 2 | 210 | 0 | 0 | -100 |
| Florida | 41 | 1,475 | 23 | 1,204 | -18 |
| Llave | 80 | 4,152 | 30 | 218 | -95 |
| Mosquito | 10 | 95 | 2 | 9 | -91 |
| Puerto Diablo | 24 | 7,539 | 23 | 3,921 | -48 |
| Puerto Ferro | 27 | 915 | 15 | 220 | -76 |
| Puerto Real | 193 | 2,418 | 164 | 4,239 | 75 |
| Punta Arenas | 7 | 13,369 | 0 | 0 | -100 |
| Florida & Pto. Ferro | 0 | 0 | 1 | 124 | n.a. |
| Florida-Puerto Real | 2 | 3 | 0 | 0 | -100 |
| Pto. Real & Pto. Ferro | 1 | 5,856 | 0 | 0 | -100 |
| GRAND TOTAL | 387 | 36,032 | 258 | 9,935 | -72% |

Source: A.G.P.R., *Departamento Hacienda, Registro de Tasación Sobre la Propiedad, Vieques, 1940-41 and 1944-45*.³⁵

1940–41, but only 9,935 in 1945. The difference of 26,097 *cuerdas* (72% of the land of Vieques) is greater than the figure cited by J. Pastor Ruiz of 22,000 *cuerdas* expropriated by the U.S. Navy during this period.³⁴

The population decline, however, was not as dramatic as the loss of land. The population of Vieques peaked in 1920, when the Census counted 11,651 persons living in the Island. During World War I, the price of sugar soared to unprecedented levels, and remained high until it dropped precipitously in October of 1920, ending the famous “Dance of the Millions,” which made the sugar mill owners of the Caribbean fabulously wealthy during the European armed conflict. During this sugar boom the population of Vieques increased, but with the drop of the price of sugar in the 1920s some

locally owned sugar mills in Puerto Rico (and in Vieques) began to experience difficulties. The population of Vieques remained stable at around 10,000 people for the next 20 years. The precise figures are 10,582 persons in 1930; 10,037 in 1935 and 10,362 in 1940. This means that even before the expropriations, Vieques could not support an increasing population. As a result, each year a number of *viequenses* emigrated, some to Puerto Rico, others to the neighboring island of St. Croix, located only a few miles to the northeast. In the mid-1940s the majority of Puerto Ricans living in St. Croix were from Vieques. To be exact, between 1930 and 1940, 26% of the population of Vieques emigrated (2,749 persons), most of them to St. Croix. In 1947, there were more than 3,000 Puerto Ricans living in St. Croix, most of them from Vieques. Despite the fact that the economy of St. Croix had been experiencing a protracted contraction and long-term population decline, from 26,681 persons in 1835 to 11,413 in 1930, the residents of Vieques migrated to St. Croix because the employment situation of Vieques was even worse than that of St. Croix. In his 1947 study, Clarence Senior pointed out that migrating to an island such as St. Croix seemed like “jumping out of the frying pan into the fire.”³⁶ Nevertheless, the residents of Vieques moved there due to lack of employment in the sugar industry of the Puerto Rican island.

The population, which had been stable since the 1920s, shrank by 11% during the 1940s as a result of the expropriations. Even though the expropriations reduced the civilian land area to less than 30% of its pre-war size, 89% of the population remained in the island. The population decline was not as dramatic as the loss of inhabitable land. Families were transferred to the central zone of Vieques, to lands acquired by the Navy for the purpose of relocation. After the dispossession of the 1940s, 89% of the population was settled on 27% of the land area of 1940. The increase in employment in construction and other sectors promoted by military contracts during the Second World War compensated for the decline of employment in the sugar industry. In addition, the new jobs paid better wages. Justo Pastor Ruiz refers to the years 1941–43 as the period of the “fat cows.” Between 1941 and 1943 in Vieques, according to Pastor Ruiz, “the town swam in gold for a couple of years.”³⁷ This explains why the decline in

TABLE 5
Vieques Population, by *Barrio*, 1899–1950

| BARRIO | POPULATION 1899(A) | POPULATION 1910 (A) | POPULATION 1920 (B) | POPULATION 1930 (B) | POPULATION 1935 (C) | POPULATION 1940 (D) | POPULATION 1950 (D) | % CHANGE 1940-1950 |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| Town (Isabel II) ¹ | 0 | 3,158 | 3,424 | 3,101 | 2,816 | 2,678 | 3,085 | 15.20 |
| Florida ² | 2,645 | 565 | 603 | 775 | 659 | 1,253 | 2,638 | 110.53 |
| Llave ² | 1,059 | 1,610 | 1,715 | 1,583 | 1,683 | 1,776 | 191 | -89.25 |
| Mosquitos ² | 0 | 748 | 847 | 818 | 785 | 851 | 20 | -97.65 |
| Puerto Diablo ² | 0 | 854 | 584 | 505 | 687 | 548 | 894 | 63.14 |
| Puerto Ferro ² | 879 | 638 | 1,041 | 839 | 776 | 570 | 723 | 26.84 |
| Punta Arenas ² | 0 | 922 | 1,102 | 833 | 884 | 901 | 0 | -100.00 |
| Puerto Real ² | 1,344 | 1,930 | 2,335 | 2,128 | 1,747 | 1,785 | 1,677 | -6.05 |
| VIEQUES, TOTAL | 5,927 | 10,425 | 11,651 | 10,582 | 10,037 | 10,362 | 9,228 | -10.94% |

(1) Not counted separately in 1899.

(2) Identified as Puerto Real Arriba and Puerto Real Abajo in 1899.

Sources: (a) U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States: Volume III, Population 1910, Reports by States, with Statistics for Counties, Cities and other Civil Divisions: Nebraska Wyoming, Alaska, Hawaii, and Porto Rico* (Washington: U.S. government Printing Office, 1913), 1190; (b) U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930. Outlying Territories and possessions* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1932), 131; (c) Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, *Census of Puerto Rico, 1935: Population and Agriculture* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1938), 12; (d) U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *1950 Population Census Report* (Washington: U.S.

population was not proportional to the decline in available land, in a society that had been fundamentally agrarian before the expropriations. The population of Florida, a central barrio of Vieques, doubled during the decade due to the settlement, in the vicinity of Isabel II, of the population expelled from Punta Arenas, Mosquito and Llave. In Punta Arenas the population declined by 100%; in Mosquito, it dropped 98%; and Llave lost 89% of its population during 1940–50. The barrios of Tapón, Mosquito, and Llave disappeared. All the neighbors and small owners disappeared and formed new barrios in Moscú and Montesanto.³⁸ Table 5 displays the population of Vieques by decade up to 1950.

Tables 6 and 7 show land properties by strata, from small farms to great *haciendas*. The percentage of land belonging to owners of more than 100 *cuerdas* decreased from 78% to 32% as a result of the expropriations. This seeming democratization of property was not due to the acquisition of land by small farmers, but rather to the loss of land

TABLE 6
Vieques, Civilian Land Ownership, 1940

| AREA IN CUERDAS | NO. OF OWNERS 1940 | % OWNERS | AREA IN 1940 | % OF AREA 1940 |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------|---------------|-------------------|
| < 5 | 86 | 37.72 | 166 | 0.46 |
| 5 - 9 | 42 | 18.42 | 284 | 0.79 |
| 10 - 19 | 32 | 14.04 | 464 | 1.29 |
| 20 - 49 | 26 | 11.40 | 913 | 2.53 |
| 50 - 99 | 8 | 3.51 | 485 | 1.35 |
| 100 - 174 | 14 | 6.14 | 1,690 | 4.69 |
| 175 - 499 | 11 | 4.82 | 3,129 | 8.68 |
| 500 - 999 | 1 | 0.44 | 694 | 1.93 |
| 1,000 or more | 7 | 3.07 | 28,208 | 78.28 |
| TOTAL | 228 | 100.00% | 36,033 | 100.00% |
| Owners \geq 100 <i>cuerdas</i> | 35 | 15.35 | 33,705 | 93.54 |
| Owners < 100 <i>cuerdas</i> | 198 | 86.84 | 2,328 | 6.46 |

* Multiple farm ownership aggregated to arrive at total land owned by individuals or corporations.

Source: A.G.P.R., *Departamento Hacienda, Registro de Tasación Sobre la Propiedad, Vieques, 1940-41 and 1944-45*.

TABLE 7
Vieques, Civilian Land Ownership, 1945

| AREA* IN CUERDAS | NO. OF OWNERS 1945 | % OWNERS 1945 | AREA IN CUERDAS 1945 | % OF AREA 1945 |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
| < 5 | 48 | 34 | 88 | 1 |
| 5 - 9 | 36 | 25 | 229 | 2 |
| 10 - 19 | 14 | 10 | 203 | 2 |
| 20 - 49 | 18 | 13 | 555 | 6 |
| 50 - 99 | 5 | 4 | 304 | 3 |
| 100 - 174 | 10 | 7 | 1,096 | 11 |
| 175 - 499 | 5 | 4 | 1,331 | 13 |
| 500 - 999 | 4 | 3 | 3,000 | 30 |
| 1,000 or more | 2 | 1 | 3,133 | 32 |
| TOTAL | 142 | 100% | 9,939** | 100% |
| Owners \geq 100 <i>cuerdas</i> | 21 | 15 | 8,560 | 86 |
| Owners < 100 <i>cuerdas</i> | 21 | 15 | 1,379 | 14 |

* Multiple farm ownership aggregated to arrive at total land owned by individuals or corporations.

Source: A.G.P.R., *Departamento Hacienda, Registro de Tasación Sobre la Propiedad, Vieques, 1940-41 and 1944-45*.

by the big landowners. The small farms represented a larger share in 1945 due to the decrease in the total amount of land. The expropriations affected the large *hacendados* most severely, but this sector was composed of only a handful of landowners.

The list of small commercial enterprises operating in Vieques reflects the large changes produced by the transition from an agrarian economy to one dependent on the U.S. Navy. The wealth assessed in Vieques was based on the value of the land, which decreased by 55% as a result of the expropriations, from \$1,248,512 in 1940 to \$560,998 in 1945. During the same period the value of improvements to the land decreased by 25%, from \$296,770 to \$220,041. The value of personal property—including vehicles and cattle—increased by 2%, from \$368,300 to \$375,780. The net effect of the expropriations was a decrease in the amount of capital available to generate income. Since the decrease in property value was more extreme than the decline in population, total assets per person decreased by 36%, from \$185 to \$118 per capita. This means that a population almost the same size as that of 1940 had to survive with far less assets to generate income.³⁹

Before the expropriations, there were rural stores in the Vieques neighborhoods known as *pulperías* and *colmados*, in addition to company stores in the sugar mills known as *tiendas de raya*. The sale of alcohol was not specialized, but instead took place together with the sale of foodstuffs and supplies. Between 1940 and 1945, the number of *pulperías* on the tax lists decreased from six to three, and the establishments selling “*provisiones y mercadería*” decreased from three to two. Against this trend, in 1945 there appeared a number of establishments dedicated exclusively to the sale of alcohol: one “*bar y hospedaje*,” one “*cafetería rancho chico*,” ten “*cafeterías*,” one “*bar, cafetería, y mesa de billar pool table*,” one “*bar*,” and one “*cafetería y establecimiento comercial independiente*.” None of these businesses appears in the list of 1940. Their existence reflects the new purchasing power introduced by the military personnel in Vieques. Likewise, the number of civilian automobiles registered in Vieques increased from 42 in 1940 to 74 in 1945. Many of these were used to transport the population from the military base to town and back.⁴⁰ During the same period, prostitution thrived in Vieques. The neighborhood known as “*El Cañón*,” near the old Vieques cemetery, became forbidden to the troops because prostitutes lived and practiced their trade there.⁴¹

Nevertheless, despite the massive reconcentration of the population towards the center of the island and the catastrophic decline in land and improvements to the land in civilian hands, the value of personal property remained relatively stable. The number of stores of all kinds remained stable, and their value increased by 27%. The number of automobiles increased by 76% and their value by 278%. The number of bars, pool halls, restaurants, and hostels increased. The value of cattle, agricultural machinery and vehicles declined by 25%, reflecting the decrease in land owned by civilians. Despite a decline of population of approximately 5% between 1940 and 1945, the total value of personal property increased by 2%. This means that the impact of the catastrophic decline in civilian land area was not reflected evenly in all sectors of the economy, and 95% of the population of the island still lived in Vieques at the end of World War II. The prosperous period of 1942–43, during which the Mosquito pier was built, reduced the negative economic impact. Since landlessness and poverty had been so extreme in Vieques before the expropriations, the social profile of the island did not seem so dramatically different as one might expect when one considers that the Navy took four-fifths of the land. Evidently, there was a sector of the population for whom employment in military construction meant a good source of income, at least before the cessation of all construction in 1943.

TABLE 8
Vieques, Personal Property, 1941-45

| TYPE OF PERSONAL PROPERTY | 1940 | ASSESSED VALUE 1940 | % PERSONAL PROPERTY 1940 | 1945 | ASSESSED VALUE 1945 | % PERSONAL PROPERTY 1945 |
|---|-----------|---------------------|--------------------------|----------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Stores | 37 | \$47,380 | 12.86 | 37 | \$60,070 | 15.99 |
| Automobiles & Vehicles | 42 | \$7,210 | 1.96 | 37 | \$27,240 | 7.25 |
| Cinema | 1 | \$1,220 | 0.33 | 74 | \$1,220 | 0.32 |
| Boats | 3 | \$1,600 | 0.43 | 1 | \$11,100 | 2.95 |
| Bars, Pool Halls, Restaurants & Hostels | 0 | \$0 | 0.00 | 5 | \$9,020 | 2.40 |
| Cattle | 9 | \$129,370 | 35.13 | 16 | \$128,730 | 34.26 |
| Machinery & Supplies | 5 | \$181,520 | 49.29 | 22 | \$136,900 | 36.43 |
| Factories | 0 | \$0 | 0.00 | 4 | \$1,500 | 0.40 |
| Total | 97 | \$368,300 | 100.00% | 1 | \$375,780 | 100.00% |

Source: A.G.P.R., *Departamento Hacienda, Registro de Tasaci n Sobre la Propiedad, Vieques, 1940-41 and 1944-45.*

The great sugar producing landed estates disappeared, and so did the sugar industry. Some ranching interests remained in the island, but they were the object of a second round of expropriations by the Navy in 1947.⁴² Attempts were made to restore sugar production, all unsuccessful. An experiment to substitute the production of sugar by pineapples did not meet with great success. The Navy expropriations of 1947 dislocated pineapple production and cattle ranching.⁴³ During the first years of World War II, German submarine activity justified the construction in Vieques of a gigantic pier. Construction of the pier and of the Mosquito Base generated payrolls to civilians of \$60,000 a week and at one point reached the sum of \$120,000 weekly, “a fantastic amount” according to Rev. Justo Pastor Ruiz. These were the years of the “fat cows,” of employment at better salaries than under the old sugar plantation regime.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, after 1943 German submarine activity in the Caribbean faded, the focus of the war moved to North Africa and Europe, and construction practically came to a halt in Vieques. While it is true that the first two years of the war were the period of “pharaoh’s cows,” when the court of the pharaoh withdrew, Vieques was overtaken by the period of the thin cows. In the summer of 1943 *viequenses* marched with black flags demanding jobs, and the effect of the expropriations finally hit home as the future looked bleak, there were no jobs, and there was no land.

Life in Vieques had always been hard for the workers in the sugar and fishing industries. The idle season of the sugar industry, the “dead season,” was a time of misery for most households. The Rev. Justo Pastor Ruiz, talking about the life of those workers before the expropriations, wrote that “neither the cane fields nor the sea have a heart.” Now, with the withdrawal of the pharaoh’s court, the outlook on the future was dismal and there were no easy escape routes. The march towards the Promised Land would have to be initiated without the benefit of help from the heavens, despite the best efforts of the Puerto Rico Agricultural Company (PRACO), an agency of the government of Puerto Rico that bought land and tried to instill some life into the moribund economy of Vieques after 1946.⁴⁵

Conclusion

The expropriations of the U.S. Navy in Vieques took place in a society characterized by extreme land concentration, so that the island experienced a transition from a sugar plantation regime to a situation of land concentration in the hands of the Navy. This transition dislocated the sugar economy of Vieques without providing alternative means of development for the population, which was “reconcentrated” in the central section of the island, which spans one-third of the land area. The large landowners received economic compensation, but workers were simply expelled from the land and their houses were demolished. The eviction of the agricultural workers disregarded traditional usufruct rights over parcels of land, which provided access to means of subsistence above the monetary wages of the workers. The destruction of garden plots and closure of access to fruit trees implied, over the long term, impoverishment for these rural workers. This process needs to be studied further through interviews of elderly Vieques residents. The level of land concentration in Vieques means that the evictions of people from the land had a much greater social impact than the expropriations per se. The number of people affected by the evictions could reach into the hundreds in the case of the expropriation of a single large farm with only one owner. Thus, while the landowners expropriated were a relatively small group, the number of families affected by the evictions included a large share of the population of Vieques.

Surprisingly, during the decade of 1940 the population of Vieques remained practically stable, despite the fact that the Navy took four fifths of the land of the island. During World War II, employment in military construction dampened the impact of the expropriations. When construction stopped and employment declined, Vieques was overtaken by economic crisis. The situation of the population has been precarious. Yet the problem of land concentration in Vieques is much older than the problems caused by the Navy’s presence. A solution to the land question will require the recovery and redistribution of the lands, and their creative use by the community.



NOTES

¹ Maribel Veaz, "Las expropiaciones de la década del cuarenta en Vieques," *Revista del Colegio de Abogados de Puerto Rico* 56 (2) (1995), 166.

² L.D. Langley, "Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico, U.S. Naval Base, 1941—", in P. Coletta y J.K. Dauer, eds., *United States Navy and Marine Corps Bases, Overseas* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1985), 271–275; Juan Giusti, "La marina en la mirilla: una comparación de vieques con los campos de bombardeo y adiestramiento en los Estados Unidos", in Humberto García Muñiz and Jorge Rodríguez Beruff, eds., *Fronteras en conflicto: guerra contra las drogas, militarización y democracia en el Caribe, Puerto Rico y Vieques* (San Juan: Red Caribeña de Geopolítica, 1999): 133–204, compares bases in Puerto Rico and in the United States.

³ María Eugenia Estades Font, *La presencia militar de los Estados Unidos en Puerto Rico, 1898–1918: Intereses estratégicos y dominación colonial* (Río Piedras: Editorial Huracán, 1988); Humberto García Muñiz and Jorge Rodríguez Beruff, eds. *Security Problems and Policies in the Post-Cold War Caribbean* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); Humberto García Muñiz, *Los Estados Unidos y la militarización del Caribe* (Río Piedras: Instituto de Estudios del Caribe, Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1988) and "U.S. Military Installations in Puerto Rico: Controlling the Caribbean", in Edgardo Meléndez and Edwin Meléndez, eds., *Colonial Dilemma: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Puerto Rico* (Boston: South End Press, 1993); Jorge Rodríguez Beruff, J. Peter Figueroa, and J. Edward Greene, eds., *Conflict, Peace and Development in the Caribbean* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991); Jorge Rodríguez Beruff, *Política militar y dominación: Puerto Rico en el contexto latinoamericano* (Río Piedras: Editorial Huracán, 1988).

⁴ "El análisis del desarrollo y uso de la propiedad y terrenos en Vieques es un tema de investigación fértil, pero no cultivado y ayudaría a esclarecer muchos puntos sobre la historia de Vieques durante este período." Veaz, "Las expropiaciones . . .," 206.

⁵ I have placed the complete list of owners in 1940 and 1945, their properties, and assessed values at the following Internet site: <http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/depts/latinam-puertorican/vieques/index.htm>.

⁶ The *Archivo General de Puerto Rico* contains the records of all municipal tax assessments from 1905 until 1955. The assessments in the *Archivo General Puerto Rico* are organized by *municipio*, in handwritten volumes which measure approximately 15" by 21", and include the following variables: 1. Name of the owner (which allows the researcher to determine the gender of the owner); 2. Type of property (e.g. farm, urban lot, personal property); 3. Location of the property (*barrio* in the case of farms, street and no. in the case of urban lots); 4. Area in *cuerdas*. (A Puerto Rican *cuerda* is equal to .9712 acres.); 5. Assessed value of the land; 6. Type of improvements to the land; 7. Assessed value of improvements; 8. Type of personal property (e.g. trucks, cars, cattle); 9. Assessed value of personal property. The data was photocopied at the *Archivo General Puerto Rico* and entered into a computerized database in Lehman College, City University of New York. There are 829 records for 1940–41 and 648 for 1944–45.

⁷ War Department, Office Director Census of Porto Rico, *Report on the Census of Porto Rico, 1899* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900), 335–8. The number of families owning land was calculated as follows: 1) The total rural population in each municipality was determined by subtracting the number of urban inhabitants from the total population. 2) The number of rural families was determined by dividing the total population by the average family size for each municipal district (listed in the documentation). 3) The number of families not owning land was determined by subtracting the number of farms in each district from the number of families in each district. This assumes that no family owned more than one farm. The number of landless families is therefore a *minimum*.

- ⁸ Robert Rabin, *Compendio de lecturas sobre la historia de Vieques* (Vieques, Puerto Rico: Museo Fuerte Conde de Mirasol, 1994), 72.
- ⁹ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930. Outlying Territories and Possessions* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1932), 124, 132; Administración de Reconstrucción de Puerto Rico, *Censo de Puerto Rico: 1935, Población y Agricultura* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1938), 8–12, 124. The rates of landlessness were calculated as in 1899.
- ¹⁰ Administración de Reconstrucción de Puerto Rico, *Censo de Puerto Rico: 1935...*, 124.
- ¹¹ On the “total” character of plantations see Lloyd Best, “The Mechanism of Plantation Type Societies: Outlines of a Model of Pure Plantation Economy,” *Social and Economic Studies* 17(3) (1968): 283–326, and George Beckford, *Persistent Poverty: Underdevelopment in the Plantation Economies of the Third World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).
- ¹² A.G.P.R., Departamento Hacienda, Registros Tasación sobre la Propiedad, Vieques 1940–41.
- ¹³ J. Pastor Ruiz, *Vieques antiguo y moderno* (Yauco, P.R.: Tipografía Rodríguez Lugo, 1947), 196.
- ¹⁴ Juan A. Giusti-Cordero, “Labor, Ecology and History in a Caribbean Sugar Plantation Region: Piñones (Loíza), Puerto Rico 1770–1950,” (Doctoral thesis, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1994).
- ¹⁵ J. Pastor Ruiz, *Vieques antiguo y moderno*, 206.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.* 199.
- ¹⁷ Juan Amédée Bonnet Benítez, *Vieques en la historia de Puerto Rico* (San Juan, P.R.: F. Ortíz Nieves, 1976), 126.
- ¹⁸ “It should be stated here that the system which Don Gustavo Murray [Mouraille, C.A.] had established in his cane farms was far from satisfactory. He had a style in which he was the prosecutor, the judge, and the collector of fines. It was a disciplinary system of his own making and we think that it originated in the French colonies but not in republican France, where the rights of man are so well respected. He used to fine the workers or leave them without work or confiscate their wages [...] There was also something between Murray and the other employers, because Murray took on certain rights and the others did not challenge him. Murray would take the police precinct to his own house. There he had the Judge and the Chief of Police. Whenever he wanted. I don’t know the extent of truth in the phrase, but I have heard that Murray and his cronies were abusive with the people that worked for them.” (Pastor Ruiz, *Vieques antiguo y moderno*, 174); Santiago Iglesias, *Luchas Emancipadoras* (San Juan: n.p., 1962), Tomo 2: 148–56, has details about the death of three strikers killed by the police and has the list of the workers sentenced to prison.
- ¹⁹ Bonnet Benítez, *Vieques en la historia...*, 126; “La Central Puerto Real está en manos de ‘receivers,’” *El Mundo*, July 9, 1921: 1, 3.
- ²⁰ On the web of interlocking directorates of the U.S. sugar corporations in Puerto Rico, the financial groups they represented, and the sugar refineries with which they were vertically integrated, see César J. Ayala, *American Sugar Kingdom: The Plantation Economy of the Spanish Caribbean, 1898–1934* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 74–120.
- ²¹ Eugenio Fernández y García, *El libro de Puerto Rico* (San Juan: El Libro Azul Publishing Co., 1923), 544; Bonnet Benítez, *Vieques en la historia...*, 126, mentions that the Arcadia mill was one of four mills in Vieques in the twentieth century, but offers no further information.
- ²² Bonnet Benítez, *Vieques en la historia...*, 126.
- ²³ A.B. Gilmore, *The Porto Rico Sugar Manual, Including Data on Santo Domingo Mills* (New Orleans: A.B. Gilmore, 1930).
- ²⁴ See Taller de Formación Política, *Huelga en la caña* (Río Piedras: Huracán, 1984).

²⁵ Rafael Picó, *The Geographic Regions of Puerto Rico* (Río Piedras, P.R.: University of Puerto Rico Press, 1950), 210–211.

²⁶ Picó, *The Geographic Regions*, 209.

²⁷ The South Porto Rico Sugar Company, the Aguirre Sugar Company, the Fajardo Sugar Company, and the United Porto Rico Sugar Company controlled approximately 40% of the sugar output of Puerto Rico. In the 1930s, the United Porto Rico Sugar Company was reorganized as the Eastern Sugar Associates.

²⁸ Our work with the archival sources in the *Archivo General de Puerto Rico* indicates that the Department of the Treasury assessed 36,032 *cuerdas* of land in 1940, a difference of 3,032 *cuerdas* from the commonly cited figure of 33,000 *cuerdas*.

²⁹ “Statement of Rear Adm. Arthur M. Knoizen, Commander, U.S. Naval Forces, Caribbean,” in *Naval Training Activities on the Island of Vieques, Puerto Rico: Hearings before the Panel to Review the Status of the Navy Training Activities on the Island of Vieques of the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives, Ninety-Sixth Congress, Second Session*, May 28, 29, July 10, 11, September 24, 1980, (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980), 55.

³⁰ Bonnet Benítez, *Vieques en la historia...*, 126–27, and from that same source, Tió, “Prólogo”: xii–xiii; According to Elizabet Langhorn, (*Vieques: History of a Small Island* (Vieques: Vieques Conservation and Historical Trust, 1987: 59), in 1939, “Don Pepe [Benítez] and Playa Grande went into the hands of the Bank of Nova Scotia. Later, under the pressure of war, the great estate went by forced sale to the U.S. Navy.” Tió, who purchased the *central*, states in his prologue to the book by Bonnet Benítez that the mill had been under receivership due to unpaid debt to the Bank of Nova Scotia since 1936.

³¹ We do not know whether in the process of bankruptcy the lands were transferred from the Benítez family to Aurelio Tio when he acquired *central* Playa Grande. Despite the fact that Tio operated *Central* Playa Grande since 1939, in the records of the Treasury Department of Puerto Rico the properties appear as belonging to the Benítez family in 1940–41. In either case, whether in the hands of the Benítez family or those of Tio, the structure of concentrated land tenure was intact at the time of the expropriations.

³² Julio Ghigliotty, “Reclamo de fincas en Vieques”, and “Sin esperanza los expropiados”, *El Nuevo Día* (San Juan, Puerto Rico), August 1, 1999.

³³ *Barrios* are minor civil subdivisions of *municipios*.

³⁴ The first round of expropriations lasted from November 1941 until September 1943 (Veaz, “Las expropiaciones...” 187). According to Pastor Ruiz, *Vieques antiguo y moderno*, 207, “It is estimated that of 33,682 arable *cuerdas*, the base took 22,000.”

³⁵ Some farms spanned more than one *barrio* and it was not possible to assign portions of farms to specific *barrios*. The classification of the original documents was retained. Urban land lots are not included. I wish to thank Dr. Marithelma Costa of Hunter College for sharing her ethnographic research regarding place names in Vieques. The documents contain the names of communities that no longer appear in the maps. Older residents of Vieques do know their location.

³⁶ “Puerto Rican migration to an island in such a depressed condition would seem like jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. The answer lies partly in the fact that sugar cane continues to be the main crop of the island, and that cane needs seasonal labor. The Danes formerly brought in workers for the cutting season from the nearby British islands. This practice continued until 1927. The immigration laws of the United States were applied to the Virgin Islands in that year and the cane growers had to look elsewhere for their labor. They found a situation made-to-order for them in the depressed conditions of the sugar industry on the island of Vieques. Sugar acreage and yield on that island of 51 square miles had been decreasing steadily since 1910 and people were looking for the chance to make a

living elsewhere. Agents for the growers recruited sizable groups for transportation to St. Croix. Some of those who went on temporary jobs stayed. The tendency of Puerto Rican migration to St. Croix has been upward since that time.” Clarence Senior, *The Puerto Rican Migrant in St. Croix* (Río Piedras: University of Puerto Rico Social Science Research Center, 1947), 7, 1–2.

³⁷ Pastor Ruiz, *Vieques antiguo y moderno*, 206.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ This calculation does not take into account the assets of the Navy. The payroll of the Navy to civilians in 1941–43 was spectacular.

⁴⁰ A.G.P.R., Departamento Hacienda, Registros Tasación sobre la Propiedad, Vieques, 1940–41 and 1944–45.

⁴¹ In an interview with Ismael Guadalupe (Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques), which took place in New York on May 23, 2000, Guadalupe clarified that the proliferation of bars and pubs was not only due to the purchases of the troops. They were small, unstable enterprises in a context of high unemployment.

⁴² Veaz, “Las expropiaciones...,” 185.

⁴³ Picó, *The Geographic Regions*, 216–17

⁴⁴ Pastor Ruiz, *Vieques antiguo y moderno*, 205.

⁴⁵ Picó, *The Geographic Regions*, 213–219.

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