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COMMERCIAL FOOT SOLDIERS OF THE EMPIRE:

FOREIGN MERCHANT POLITICS IN TAMPICO, MEXICO, 1861-1866

During the period from Mexican independence in 1821 to the end of the French intervention in 1867, Mexico's primary tie to the outside world was based on trade. The foreign merchants, who monopolized this activity, played a crucial role in the economic, diplomatic, and political life of Mexico. The current literature on these nineteenth century merchants includes studies of foreign groups, such as the French, detailed case studies of individual entrepreneurs, firms and merchant families, and one work that provides a unique state-centered perspective on the Mexican/merchant nexus.¹ None, however, have tried to conceptualize the role of foreign merchants as a whole, across national lines and individual rivalries, in the port cities that were the central arena of contact and conflict with the outside world.

These merchants, it has long been assumed, were characterized by an anarchic individualism marked by the exclusive pursuit of their own immediate interests. These competitive pressures are thought to have produced the dispersion and fragmentation that most believe typified merchant life. Examining the foreign merchants of the Gulf port of Tampico, Tamaulipas, this study demonstrates that resident foreign merchants, despite diverse origins, coalesced into a stable upper class characterized by group cohesion and long-term patterns of collective action. Moreover, to the extent that existing tendencies towards competition and divisiveness did exist, they will be shown to have been more than offset by established practices that favored cooperation and solidarity *vis-à-vis* Mexican authorities.

For these merchants, possession of a foreign nationality and consular

¹ Enrique Florescano noted in 1977 the need for serious scholarly study of foreign merchants in Mexico in the pre-Porfirian period, especially their "social and economic position in the society of their time." Enrique Florescano, "Mexico," in *Latin America: A Guide to Economic History, 1830-1930*, ed. Roberto Cortés Conde and Stanley Stein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 450. For the most recent work on merchants in this little understood period, see the works cited later in this essay by Penot, Barker, Tenenbaum, Mayo, Cerutti, and the 1978 collection edited by Ciro Cardoso.

privileges were fundamental and the defense of their property was viewed as inseparable from the protection of their prerogatives as foreigners. In this regard, we have for too long accepted the foreign merchants' self-interested portrayal of themselves as victims of the Mexicans, the result of "their political vulnerability and their lack of access to the decision-making process."² In fact, control of the economic lifeline of ports like Tampico made the foreign merchant the single most powerful and dominant figure on the local scene. Over many decades of foreign invasions, civil war and political upheavals, foreign merchants in Tampico and elsewhere emerged as the only enduring source of power. Absolutely dependent upon revenues from the trade these merchants generated and controlled, Mexican authorities were forced against their own wishes to accord these foreign traders a remarkable degree of privilege.

A clear pattern of merchant politics emerged over several decades of conflict with any type of outside authority that sought access to merchant profits or control over their activities. Focusing on the architecture of power, this essay will trace this dynamic bargaining relationship with an eye on the strategies and tactics of both sides within a constantly shifting balance of power at the local, national and international levels. In examining two disputes with the Mexican government in 1861 and early 1862, we will demonstrate the existence of merchant collective bargaining, based upon cross-national solidarity, organized and conducted by local merchants who held foreign consular positions. At the same time, we will show how special privileges for individuals or national groups were used, in turn, by local authorities to undermine merchant unity by exploiting rivalries among nationalities and individuals. Yet in the end, such rivalries did not disrupt the wealthy foreigners' cohesion and solidarity when dealing with the Mexican authorities.

The mentality, rhetoric, and behavior of these foreign merchants were shaped by this inherently conflictual bargaining relationship which, in the case of mid-nineteenth century Mexico, was decisively influenced by the weakness of the Mexican side and the imperialist aggressiveness of the governments of Europe and the United States. Indeed, Mexico's nineteenth century history is filled with charges of injuries and damages allegedly sustained by these foreign merchants, claims that were vigorously pursued by foreign nations in order to pressure Mexico and to justify armed aggression.

The linkage of mid-nineteenth century merchant behavior in Mexico to

² David W. Walker, *Kinship, Business, and Politics: The Martínez del Río Family in Mexico, 1824-18* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 13-14.

the larger imperialist framework is the subject of heated debate. Criticizing the dependency framework of Barbara Tenenbaum's work, David Walker has vigorously rejected a "Black legend" that, in his words, condemns foreign merchants as "perfidious outside forces" that destabilized the Mexican "economy and polity" and "maliciously encouraged armed intervention or threats of intervention for personal profit." For Walker, foreign merchants had more than their share of valid complaints, were often disadvantaged by their foreign nationality, and faced home governments neither willing nor able to protect their interests.³

This essay, however, agrees with Ciro Cardoso's view that merchants' economic and diplomatic links to the exterior were a positive factor of "primordial importance" in Mexico before 1870.⁴ Indeed, the self-styled "foreign capitalists" of Tampico are best understood as the commercial foot soldiers of the European and North American drive for overseas expansion and colonial empire. Most importantly, their belligerent local activism in port cities such as Tampico fitted into and was encouraged by the foreign claimsmanship and imperial ambitions that characterized their home government's mid-nineteenth century policies towards a weakened Mexico.

We have chosen to examine the behavior and attitudes of Tampico's foreign merchants during the period of conflict and upheaval between 1861 and 1866 that coincided with the Tripartite and French interventions in Mexico. We will compare how Tampico's foreign export-import merchants pursued their individual, national, and collective interests under both Mexican sovereignty and during the extraordinary circumstances of occupation by the French. Having vigorously responded to alleged Mexican "outrages" and "exactions," we will find a far milder and more restrained response by merchants and foreign consular, diplomatic, and military personell to the far harsher actions carried out by the French occupiers of the port.

THE SETTING

Foreign commerce at the outlet of the Tamesi and Panuco rivers grew out of the years of the struggle for Mexico's political and commercial indepen-

³ Operating in "anarchic marketplace sometimes without law and often without justice," foreign merchants were subject, according to Walker, "to illegal confiscations or outright robberies. . . by powerful local interests or a predatory military" as well as facing unfair "tax assessments. . . [and] blatant violations of the law" (Walker, *Kinship*, p. 14). Walker was especially critical of a properly influential article by Barbara A. Tenenbaum, "Merchants, Money and Mischief, The British in Mexico, 1821-1862," *The Americas* XXXV, no. 3 (1979).

⁴ Ciro Cardoso, ed. *Formación y Desarrollo de la Burguesía en México, Siglo XIX* (México: Siglo XXI, 1978), pp. 19-20.

dence. Pueblo Viejo was opened to the coastal trade in 1811, and the Tampico area quickly became a center of active smuggling from the United States in the 1810s and early 1820s.⁵

Prospects for trade attracted foreigners. The present-day city of Tampico was founded in 1823 at the request of French, Spanish, and Mexican residents of Altamira who desired a settlement more conveniently located for commerce than Pueblo Viejo.⁶ In 1824, a visitor commented on the "astonishing gathering of Europeans" in Tampico who shared the port's trade with what was initially a large number of North Americans.⁷ The newly established town, also known in the early nineteenth century as Santa Anna de Tamaulipas, grew rapidly in population from 1,748 in 1826 to 2,712 in 1834, 5,078 in 1845, and 6,168 in 1859.⁸

Nationally, the value of Tampico's trade was second only to that of the rival Gulf port of Veracruz.⁹ Silver from the largely British-owned mining industry around San Luis Potosí remained Tampico's major export, while the port's imports served widely scattered markets in the interior such as San Luis and Zacatecas.¹⁰

The most striking characteristic of Tampico's social structure was its domination by a small upper class composed of resident foreign merchants allied with other foreigners who were artisans or shopkeepers. Out of a population estimated at perhaps 4000 in 1864, Tampico's 800 foreign resi-

⁵ John Bauer, "The Evolution of a Mexican Foreign Trade Policy, 1821-28," *The Americas* XIX, no. 3 (1963), pp. 227, 233; J. C. Beltram, *Mexico* (Paris: Delaunay Libraire, 1830; Querétaro: Francos Frías, 1852), p. 30.

⁶ Luis Velasco y Mendoza, *Repoblación de Tampico, Documentos Compilados con Disertación y Notas* (México: Imprenta Manuel León Sánchez, 1942), p. 26; Auguste Genin, *Les Français au Mexique du XVI^e Siècle à Nos Jours* (Paris: Nouvelles Editions Argo, 1933), pp. 363-65.

⁷ Beltram, *Mexico*, p. 30; Bauer, "Mexican Foreign Trade Policy," p. 236.

⁸ Archivo Histórico Municipal de Tampico (hereafter cited as AHMT), 1826 Expediente 51, 1835 Expediente 94, 1859 Expediente 6, 168. For the 1845 figure, see Carlos González Salas, *Tampico: Mi Ciudad* (México: Ediciones Contraste, 1981), p. 51.

⁹ Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, *Comercio Exterior de México desde la Conquista hasta Hoy* (México: Banco Nacional de Comercio Exterior, 1967), Chart 42. A recent study distinguished Tampico from Veracruz since the former served as a center for both distribution and business transactions by resident merchants. Veracruz, by contrast, served only an intermediary role since business operations were in the hands of large commercial houses located in Mexico City. This may explain, in part, Veracruz's surprisingly small population of 10,982 in 1860 compared to Tampico with 6,168 in 1859 (Carmen Blázquez Domínguez with Concepción Hernández Ramírez and Aurelio Sánchez Durán, *Veracruz Liberal (1858-1860)* [Mexico: El Colegio de México, 1986], pp. 165, 199.)

¹⁰ For an overall description of the port of Tampico, consult Francisco López Camara, *La Estructura Económica y Social de México en la Época de la Reforma* (México: Siglo XXI Editores, 1967), pp. 123-33. Carmen Domínguez has lamented "the absence of first hand documentation or specialized monographs" on the region of Tampico and Huasteca (Domínguez, *Veracruz*, p. 164).

dents included 275 North Americans, followed by the Spaniards with 250, the French with 210, Italians with forty, Germans with twenty, and fewer than five British citizens.¹¹ Although not all were engaged in foreign trade, it was the import/export merchants who provided stability and long term leadership to each foreign ethnic segment in Tampico. Together, foreigners monopolized both the international and local commerce of Tampico to the exclusion of Mexicans.¹²

The foreign merchants' dominant position was expressed in the physical appearance of the city itself. The port was a jumble of architectural styles because each foreign merchant built a substantial house and store according to the fashion of his home country.¹³ Although divided by their nationalities and personal rivalries, Tampico's resident foreign merchants were invariably long term residents bound together by several decades of common experiences and friendships.¹⁴

¹¹ Although this estimate for 1864 provides the most exact figures for the period of this article, we cannot know if the decline in comparison to the 1859 figures reflects an inaccuracy in estimation, an earlier over-estimate, loss of population due to the war, or differing boundaries. (Lilia Díaz, ed., *Versión Francesa de México, Informes Económicos, 1851-1867*, [México: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1974], p. 298) Usually fluctuating between 10 to 20% of Tampico's total population, the foreign community always included transient elements that lacked the long-term residence typical of the foreign merchant community. The French consul's estimate of 800 foreigners in 1864 included a floating group of some 100 French from New Orleans and an unusually high number of North Americans. His report divided those from the United States into 25 whites and 250 French-speaking "people of color." Although an Afro-American presence in Tampico can be documented since at least the 1820s, the latter group were most likely refugees from a Black colony established in 1857 in the interior of the state by Luis N. Fouche, "a colored native of the state of Florida." (Franklin Chase, 13 October 1857; Dallas Historical Society [hereafter cited as DHS], Ann Chase papers A50144 MSB -2, pp. 84-85. The author would like to thank Thomas Schoonover for calling the Ann Chase collection to his attention.)

¹² On the foreigners' commercial monopoly in Tampico, see R. A. Humphreys, ed., *British Consular Reports on the Trade and Politics of Latin America, 1824-1826* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1940), pp. 302-3; Charles J. Latrobe, *The Rambler in Mexico* (London: R. B. Seeley, 1836), p. 24; Benjamin Norman, *Rambles by Land and Water* (New York: Pain & Burgess, 1845), p. 100. Foreigner's control of Mexico's international commerce placed severe restrictions on participation by Mexican merchants. (Inés Herrera Canales, "La Circulación: Transporte y Comercio," In: Ciro Cardoso, ed., *México en el Siglo XIX (1821-1910)* [México: Editorial Nueva Imagen, 1980], 220).

¹³ Latrobe, *Rambler*, p. 24; Calderón de la Barca, *Life in Mexico* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1843), pp. 430-31; Norman, *Rambles*, p. 102; *El Restaurador de Tamaulipas*, 29 August 1833, 5 December 1833.

¹⁴ Nationalist sensitivities among the port's various non-Mexican groups could, on occasion, reach a flash point. In the second half of 1862, there was a public controversy between the Spanish Vice-Consul Ramón de Obregón and four German merchants who, having gotten drunk while celebrating a friend's return to Europe, knocked down the Spanish coat of arms. Seeking a public apology for this assault on Spanish dignity, Obregón took court action and the two sides exchanged printed accusations. For details, see the 27 page pamphlet "Manifestación Documentada del Vice Consul Español en Tampico Ramón de Obregón," (Tampico: n.p., 1862). These problems did not, however, bar simultaneous joint German and Spanish action to defend foreign interests.

Tampico's wealthiest foreigners also shared a common experience as the local consular representatives of their respective countries.¹⁵ These merchant consuls charted their official course, as Tenenbaum suggested, in terms of their commercial and pecuniary interests as businessmen engaged in ongoing conflicts with Mexican authorities. Such consular positions were held only by important merchants and, as John Mayo has demonstrated for the West Coast of Mexico, the official policy of foreign powers like England not only countenanced but explicitly recognized and defended this identification of merchants' public and private interests.¹⁶

The pursuit of private interests in official guise necessarily involved the home countries in a myriad of parochial local disputes with Mexico. The belligerent activism of the merchants could even conflict at times with their own nations' diplomatic policies in Mexico. This conflict was minimal until 1861, however, because the merchants' self-interested special pleading aided the openly expansionist ambitions of aggressive foreign nations *vis à vis* Mexico.¹⁷

"FOREIGN CAPITALISTS UNDER ATTACK:" THE FOREIGN MERCHANT AS VICTIM

Benito Juárez's triumphant entry into Mexico City in January 1861 ended four years of political upheaval and economic distress in Mexico during the War of the Reform. Yet the Liberals' triumph proved only a brief breathing spell as European powers, encouraged by the outbreak of the U.S. Civil War, moved towards intervention in an exhausted Mexico.

Juárez's suspension of payment on Mexico's foreign debt in July 1861

¹⁵ Unpaid or poorly salaried, consular posts were invariably held by merchants in the nineteenth century. Merchants, for example, composed 78.5% of all U.S. consular appointees in Mexico and Central America prior to 1861 for whom data could be found. (Gerald E. Burns, "A Collective Biography of Consular Officers, 1828-1861," [Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1973], pp. 180-81, 207.) On similar conditions in the British consular service, see D. C. M. Platt, *The Cinderella Service, British Consuls since 1825* (London: Longman, 1971), p. 42.

¹⁶ Building on Tenenbaum's insight, John Mayo documents the open role played by the British Legation in Mexico City and the Royal Navy in defending and protecting illegal smuggling activity by a powerful British merchant consul. John Mayo, "Consuls and Silver Contraband on Mexico's West Coast in the Era of Santa Anna," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 19 (1987), pp. 397-403. His essay suggests that Walker is mistaken when he argued that "foreign merchants probably preferred the more secure legal trade to the uncertainties of commerce in contraband," an activity in which he believes Mexican merchants possessed a "comparative advantage." (Walker, *Kinship*, p. 14).

¹⁷ Like the United States, European powers had long used "unsettled claims, alleged violated rights, and similar complaints to apply diplomatic pressure for imperialistic goals such as territorial cessions or grants of economic or transit privileges." (Thomas D. Schoonover, *Dollars Over Dominion, The Triumph of Liberalism in Mexican-United States Relations, 1861-67* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978], p. 14.)

was followed by the English and French decision to break diplomatic relations. European diplomatic representatives in Mexico found a “good pretext for intervention,” in the words of British Minister Otway, in the Mexican debts derived from the claims of foreign nationals in Mexico.¹⁸ The seizure of Tampico was central to European plans for intervention, and worried local merchants began sending their money abroad.¹⁹ In October 1861, France, Spain, and Great Britain signed a convention in London establishing a tripartite intervention in Mexico with the landing of the first foreign troops in December 1861.

The atmosphere in Tampico on the eve of intervention was tense, with local Mexican authorities calling Tampico’s “valiant sons” to arms in defense of the nation.²⁰ The mid-December 1861 landing in Veracruz of the first contingent of the tripartite invading forces (which was Spanish) led to retaliatory action in Tampico consisting, according to contemporary diary entries by Ann Chase, of an order that the city’s two hundred or so Spanish residents were to retire at least fifteen leagues into the interior.²¹ “Strong representations” by foreign consuls, Ann Chase (the wife of the U.S. Consul Franklin Chase) reported, won the “well settled and wealthy” Spaniards the right to depart in late December on the next British steamer.²²

Meeting in Veracruz on January 17, 1862, the Spanish, French, and British commissioners demanded the revocation of the anti-Spanish action in Tampico and equal treatment for the nationals of all three countries.²³ In Tampico, the most striking feature of the foreign response, however, was the solidarity offered by the merchants of neutral countries to the Spanish. Despite possible short-term benefits, non-Spanish merchants refused to condone a Mexican action that eliminated their Spanish competitors, the port’s wealthiest and most powerful merchants. Such a defense of the integrity and untouchability of the foreign community had long been the most

¹⁸ In 1861, the British Minister to Mexico privately acknowledged that many of the claims against Mexico were “trumped [sic] up and fabricated as good speculations.” (Carl H. Bock, *Prelude to Tragedy: The Negotiation and Breakdown of the Tripartite Convention of London*, [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1966], pp. 68, 300, 32-33.)

¹⁹ Bock, *Prelude*, pp. 83, 107, 111; Franklin Chase Consular Dispatches, 6 August 1861; Lilia Díaz, ed., *Versión Francesa de México. Informes Diplomáticos* (México: El Colegio de México, 1963-1967), Vol. II, p. 264.

²⁰ DHS, Ann Chase papers, MSB-9, p. 26; Franklin Chase, 27 December 1861; British Consular Dispatches, Tampico, Mexico, 28 December 1861; AHMT, 1861 Expediente 4.

²¹ DHS, Ann Chase papers, MSB-9, pp. 26-27.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Gloria Grajales, ed., *México y la Gran Bretaña Durante la Intervención, 1861-1862* (México: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1974), p. 128; Genaro Estrada, ed., *Don Juan Prim y su Labor Diplomática en México* (México: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1928), p. 65.

basic principle of collective action by foreign merchants. Decades of experience had taught Tampico's foreigners that the best defense of any group lay in the defense of all. This cross-national solidarity was accompanied by an exaggerated rhetoric that portrayed a foreign minority surrounded by looming threats and hostility from the Mexican majority. While U.S. Consul Chase wrote Washington that he was "fearful" for the "lives and property" of the Spaniards, his energetic wife, Ann Chase, herself a merchant, wrote in her diary of the "fear of robbery and a general pillage" among the Tampico's foreigners.²⁴

The unanimity of nineteenth-century non-Mexican sources in depicting the foreigner as victim has misled even modern scholars of the foreign experience to view Mexico as xenophobic.²⁵ The ensuing distortions, which obscure the realities of foreign power, are a prime example of the "old myths and absurd misunderstandings" that, as Magnus Mörner has observed, can result from the uncritical use of nineteenth-century diplomatic and consular dispatches.²⁶

As we know from Ann Chase's diary, the version of the Tampico situation found in foreign consular, diplomatic, and military dispatches had little to do with the reality of Mexican behavior in Tampico. Both the U.S. and British consuls falsely reported to their home governments that the Mexicans had ordered the immediate expulsion of the Spanish residents in December 1861. From Havana, the Spanish hard-liner, General Serrano, likewise denounced Tampico's authorities for "violently expelling" the Spanish residents. Putting aside these factual distortions, the commander of the forces of the tripartite intervention in Mexico, the remarkable Spanish general Juan Prim, quite rightly pointed out to his incensed colleague Serrano that "the admirable thing," on the whole, was that "there were not many [Spanish] victims" throughout Mexico, especially since too few troops had been landed to have taken "vengeance for those abuses."²⁷

²⁴ DHS, Ann Chase papers, MSB-9, p. 26; Franklin Chase, 27 December 1861, 27 January 1862.

²⁵ "Foreign life and property," David Pletcher writes, "were never entirely secure in a country where revolution might break out at a moment's notice, bringing crowds into the streets with the cry of. . . Death to the Foreigners! According to the French minister, this meant that people wanted to loot." (David M. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Annexation, Texas, Oregon and the Mexican War* [Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973], pp. 53, 55.) For further examples of the scholarly influence of the xenophobic thesis, see Jacques Penot, "L'Expansion Commerciale Française au Mexique et les Causes du Conflit Franco-Mexicain de 1838-1839," *Bulletin Hispanique* 75 (1973), pp. 191, 193, 200; Nancy Barker, *The French Experience in Mexico, 1821-1861. A History of Constant Misunderstanding* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979); p. 201; Bauer, "Foreign Trade Policy," pp. 251-52.

²⁶ Magnus Mörner, "Problemas Que Presenta el Estudio Histórico de la Sociedad Hispano-Americana del Siglo XIX," *Cahiers des Amériques Latines*, nos. 9-10 (1974), p. 9.

²⁷ "Against the French and English," Prim also pointed out, "there is not, in this country, the hatreds and rancors that there are against the Spaniards." (Estrada, *Prim*, p. 137.)

Prim's remarks were an exception to the standard foreign reports, which emphasized the irrational nature of all Mexican authority, failed to distinguish between levels of Mexican governmental authority, and denied the possibility of low-level or unauthorized governmental decision making. All Mexicans were held responsible for the actions of any Mexicans anywhere regardless of the authorization, permanence, or impact of the measure in question.

The strictly local anti-Spanish measures in Tampico, mild as they were, were in fact neither authorized nor condoned by the national or state governments. Indeed, President Juárez's decree of December 17, 1861, had offered special guarantees to the nation's foreign residents. In line with this policy, the interim state governor of Tamaulipas issued a decree on December 28, 1861, ordering punishment for those who insulted or injured Spanish subjects.²⁸

In Tampico itself, the newly arrived Mexican general, Santiago Tapia, quickly revoked the earlier anti-Spanish measures and issued a decree in late December protecting Spanish property. Tampico's Spanish residents returned in February 1862 without having suffered any violence, looting, or additional losses.²⁹ Even the aggressive French envoy to Mexico praised General Tapia for castigating, "with an inflexible and salutary severity," those Mexicans in Tampico "guilty of attacks or insults against foreigners."³⁰

The Mexican authorities adopted this conciliatory course of action because they had a pragmatic grasp of the realities of power. Responsible Mexican leaders could ill afford to ignore the power of the port's merchants and their foreign patrons. However satisfying, a policy of retaliation or revenge against foreigners promised only to disrupt the Mexican defense efforts at a time of national peril. To undermine Tampico's foreign commerce could only lessen government customs revenue at a time when the port of Veracruz and its customs house were already in the hands of the invaders.

Tampico's foreign merchants were well aware of the irony that Mexico's ability to resist foreign invasion depended in part upon foreigners. For the fifty years since independence, they had been the only enduring power

²⁸ DHS, Ann Chase papers, MSB-9, p. 28.

²⁹ Franklin Chase, 4 March 1862; Vidal Covian Martínez, "Efemérides de la Intervención Francesa y del Llamado Segundo Imperio en Tampico," *Cuadernos de Historia* I: 8 (1967), 12; Ann Chase papers. MSB-9, p. 24; Ciro de la Garza Treviño, *História de Tamaulipas (Anales y Efemérides)* 2nd ed., (n.c.: n.p., 1956), p. 133.

³⁰ Díaz, *Informes Diplomáticos* II, p. 369.

holders in Tampico. Yet this Mexican dependence was not reflected in the merchants' projected self-image as a foreign minority living under a looming "threat of pillage" at the hands of the Mexicans.

An objective test of the extent of foreign vulnerability and of the Mexican "threat" itself is provided by the four occasions between 1862 and 1866 when Tampico changed hands. The first time, in November 1862, the precipitous withdrawal of the Mexican authorities left the port without protection and, the U.S. and French consuls insisted, in fear of looting by deserters from the Mexican forces. Concerned for their lives and property, the foreign community organized themselves into armed groups that patrolled the streets for the night pending the French occupation.³¹

The following day, the U.S., Prussian, and Spanish consuls met with the French to negotiate the port's peaceful occupation. The role of such merchant consuls in transferring power between the contending sides was a common nineteenth-century pattern.³² Civilian and military authorities might come and go, but all needed the cooperation and support of the only permanent local interests, those who held economic power.

Tampico's foreigners, even when not armed, were left untouched by the Mexican populace and troops on later occasions as well. The second time that Tampico changed hands, in January 1863, the withdrawal of French forces gave rise to merchant "fears" that French violence against Mexicans would be "avenged" on the foreign residents by the incoming Mexican "guerrillas." Moreover, the Mexican forces were commanded by the "notorious" general, Juan José de la Garza, a former state governor hated by local merchants for his "exactions" in the late 1850s.³³ Yet once again, the French consul himself soon noted that "the most perfect order reigns in Tampico."³⁴

The third, even more stringent test of Mexican behavior occurred in June 1863 when the hasty withdrawal of Tampico's Mexican military and civilian authorities left the city in the hands of the unpaid local soldiery. Yet the Mexican "troops, with arms in hand," U.S. Consul Chase reported with surprise, still did not "commit any depredations. . . [despite being] in

³¹ Franklin Chase, 24 November 1862; Díaz, *Informes Económicos*, p. 262.

³² Magnus Mörner gives another example of such a recourse to arms by the foreign population caught up in disturbances in the Chilean mining district of Copiapó in 1859. Discussing a travelogue by a German participant, he points out that "the solidarity and self defense of the foreigners could. . . [easily] lead to intervention" in local affairs. Magnus Mörner, "European Travelogues as Sources for Latin American History from the Late Eighteenth Century Until 1870," Paper 30 (Stockholm: Institute of Latin American Studies, 1981).

³³ Franklin Chase, 24 November 1862, 30 April 1858; Díaz, *Informes Económicos*, p. 242.

³⁴ Díaz, *Informes Diplomáticos*, p. 227.

a state of starvation and without officers.’’³⁵ During the fourth and final reoccupation of Tampico in August 1866, Chase likewise reported the “praiseworthy” conduct of the Mexican forces, which he had earlier called “an incorrigible band of guerrillas.”³⁶

Throughout the nineteenth century, Tampico’s wealthy foreign merchant community had always held this paradoxical status as virtual “untouchables.” As Santa Anna’s foreign minister observed in 1853, “foreigners in Mexico have always enjoyed better conditions than Mexicans.”³⁷ Yet many have uncritically accepted these repeated expressions of alleged foreign fears as validation of the existence of a real as opposed to hypothetical threat from Mexicans.

A more compelling interpretation would see the foreigners’ self-portrayal as victims of endless abuses by the locals as part of a pattern of merchant bargaining with Mexican authorities. The image of the foreigner besieged lent cohesion to the port’s upper class of foreign merchants, helped bind together the port’s more socially diverse foreign population, and established the credibility of future merchant claims against Mexico. The Mexican threat was also employed to convince distant home governments that coercion, especially the dispatch of ships of war, was the only means of dealing effectively with the Mexicans.

THE QUESTION OF SOVEREIGNTY: PATTERNS OF MERCHANT COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Although they were far from the helpless victims that they claimed to be, the foreign merchants’ considerable power was still less than absolute. The permanent tension and frequent conflicts between Mexican authorities and foreign merchants flowed from an inherent clash of interests. While the merchants sought to maximize profits, political and military authorities at the local, regional, and national level were determined to appropriate a share of their proceeds.³⁸ However limited or tenuous, Mexican sovereignty

³⁵ Franklin Chase, 8 October 1863.

³⁶ Franklin Chase, 2 March 1864, 15 August 1866.

³⁷ Antonio de la Peña y Reyes, ed., *La Insubsistencia de Una Convención de Reclamaciones* (México: 1928), p. xv. Given to lively expressions of fear about the Mexican rabble, U.S. Consul Franklin Chase, nevertheless, failed to report a single incident of anti-foreign violence in Tampico between 1836 and 1866.

³⁸ Mario Cerutti provides a remarkable discussion of the clash between the national government and the northern regional caudillo, Santiago Vidaurri of Nuevo León and Coahuila, who appropriated the customs house revenues destined by law for the national state. (*Economía de Guerra y Poder Regional en el Siglo XIX: Gastos Militares, Aduanas y Comerciantes en Años de Vidaurri (1855-1864)* [Monterrey: Archivo General del Estado de Nuevo León, 1983]). At the same time, Cerutti does not explain how Vidaurri achieved his remarkable triumph over localistic factions within the region who sought control of customs house revenues for their own purposes.

made the merchants' profit-making ultimately dependent upon the actions of Mexican political and military authorities.³⁹ Like any privileged class, Tampico's foreign merchants militantly resisted all Mexican efforts to appropriate any part of their resources.⁴⁰ The outcome of such disputes, at any given moment, was determined by the overall balance of power at the local, national, and international levels.

The nature of this bargaining relationship emerges clearly in the local controversy created by President Benito Juárez's December 26, 1861, decree that established an across-the-board two percent tax on all capital, Mexican and foreign. Tampico's "foreign capitalists," U.S. Consul Chase reported, were under attack through a tax as "absurd as it is unjust and arbitrary."⁴¹

Tampico's local merchant community treated the Juárez tax as a frontal assault on their collective interests. The first step in resisting such "exactions" was to transform the dispute into a diplomatic clash through a public protest signed by the consuls of the United States, France, Prussia, Hanover, and Hamburg (the Spanish Consul was still in exile).⁴²

The joint consular note deemed the tax illegal despite treaty provisions that often "expressly recognized" that foreigners were "subject to the taxing power of the state along with natives," including special contributions.⁴³ While few protesting merchants expected to escape the tax entirely, their uncompromising stance established an initial bargaining position and avoided the unfortunate precedent that would have been set by ready foreign payment.

The conciliatory public response of the Juárez regime's local representative in the next months was due to the overall weakness of the Mexican

³⁹ The ultimate sanction in this ongoing conflict is suggested by an apocryphal exchange between a Mexican military man and a Tampico merchant. "When you fail to furnish us with the money for payment of our men, we will give them the privilege of paying themselves." (Franklin Chase, 22 September 1866.) Yet this negative power was of limited practical utility, since its use would undermine the foreign commerce that financed all the Mexican factions.

⁴⁰ The municipal archives contain many expedientes dealing with legal merchant resistance to local taxes. AHMT, 1861 Expedientes 25, 113, 127.

⁴¹ Franklin Chase, 27 January 1862.

⁴² Franklin Chase, 27 January 1862, 4 February 1862; Díaz, *Informes Económicos*, p. 252.

⁴³ Franklin Chase, 27 January 1862, 12 May 1862; F. S. Dunn, *The Diplomatic Protection of Americans in Mexico* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1933), p. 118. As U.S. Minister to Mexico Thomas Corwin pointed out, the United States was at that very moment taxing its own and foreign residents to finance the Union side of the U.S. Civil War. The logic of the merchants' position in this case led naturally to a demand for the establishment of full extra-territoriality, a common imperialist demand in Asia at this time.

bargaining position. While defending the Mexican right to decree such a tax, Tampico's general, Santiago Tapia, proposed that the bonds for the sums in question be placed with the U.S. consul pending a formal appeal to Mexico City. Both Tapia and local Mexican newspapers also noted that the protest did not have the support of the local British consul.⁴⁴

Yet this breach in local merchant unity mattered little given the presence of British, French, and Spanish troops on Mexican soil. The U.S. decision to uphold the tax, thus overruling Consul Chase, likewise provided only moral vindication, because of U.S. weakness. Moreover, General Tapia, newly arrived in Tampico, was in a precarious position, and revenues from even less than a two percent tax, if received immediately, might spell the difference between maintaining or losing control of the port. The final compromise reached in March 1862, the month of an unsuccessful military rising against Tapia, favored the merchants by establishing three graduated tax brackets.⁴⁵

Tampico's merchants had always been quick to exploit the ongoing financial exigencies of the port's political and military authorities. In their search for a better deal, foreign merchants had come to play an important role in fostering Mexico's internal turbulence and discord.⁴⁶ The Tamaulipas newspaper *La Concordia* was not alone in blaming the merchants of Matamoros and Tampico for the Federalist revolts of 1837 and 1838. Merchant gold, Franklin Chase observed in 1860, was often "an irresistible temptation on the part of the troops."⁴⁷ "The means to quickly obtain what one wants, even the just thing" was easy in Tampico, a Spanish diplomat noted in 1840, because the troops, when not paid, went in for gambling and *pronunciamentos* (sedition).⁴⁸

In 1852, the port's merchants sought to use their economic leverage to force the new city authorities to lower customs duties and lift import prohi-

⁴⁴ *Boletín de Noticias*, 1 February 1862 in AHMT, 1862 Expediente 126; Franklin Chase, 27 January 1862, 4 February 1862; British Consular Dispatches, 27 January 1862, 23 August 1862. The British consul was trying to curry favor with the Mexicans in an unsuccessful effort to avoid his pending expulsion for his attacks on the Captain of the Port (Franklin Chase, 27 May 1863.)

⁴⁵ *Boletín de Noticias*, 26 April 1862 in AHMT, 1862 Expediente 126.

⁴⁶ See Stuart Voss, *On the Periphery of Nineteenth Century Mexico, Sonora and Sinaloa 1810-1877* (Tucson: Univ. of Arizona Press, 1982), p. 125. Foreign merchant "interference in political questions was notorious." Carmen Domínguez has noted, since whatever the risks, "political agitation increased the power of the strongest commercial houses." (Domínguez, *Veracruz Liberal*, p. 201.)

⁴⁷ *La Concordia*, 15 June 1839; Franklin Chase, 9 March 1860; On the Federalist revolt in Matamoros, see Robert Potash, *El Banco del Avío de Mexico* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1959), p. 198.

⁴⁸ Javier Malagán Barceló, et al., eds., *Relaciones Diplomáticas Hispano-Mexicanas I* (México: El Colegio de México, 1966), p. 27.

bitions.⁴⁹ "Experience has taught," Tampico's French consul observed three years later, "that providing momentary satisfaction to the imperious necessities of the Treasury" made possible many "mysterious tricks that rebound to your benefit."⁵⁰ Desperate for funds in March 1861, the state governor granted so many "discounts from duties" in exchange for monetary advances that Tampico merchants were expected to be free of customs house obligations "for many months to come."⁵¹

Mexico's internal instability, which both encouraged and flowed from such merchant mischief, undermined Mexican sovereignty and invited further foreign intervention. For the merchants of Tampico, the degree of Mexican need and foreign aggressiveness towards Mexico determined the limits of the possible in resisting such monetary demands. European governments and the U.S. aided merchants by pressuring Mexico City to overrule local actions and by weakening the Mexican monopoly of coercion in Tampico itself with visits by foreign warships.⁵²

The insistent consular requests for visits by foreign ships of war reflected the merchants' belief, in the earlier words of Oliver Cromwell, that "a man-of-war is the best ambassador." This "mode of negotiation" and "intimidation" by warship, as foreign diplomats noted, was especially successful because the Mexicans had "scarcely any ships, either of war or commercial vessels."⁵³

⁴⁹ Moisés González Navarro, *Anatomía del Poder en México (1848-1853)* (México: El Colegio de México, 1977), pp. 316-318.

⁵⁰ Díaz, *Informes Económicos*, pp. 212-13. Tampico's trade, as foreign visitors often commented, amounted to a "regulated system of smuggling" by which "the purposes of the merchants were fully answered and at least half of the established duties saved to them." G. F. Lyons, *A Journal of a Residence and Tour in the Republic of Mexico in the Year 1826* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1971), p. 36; Latrobe, *Rambler*, p. 24; R. H. Mason, *Pictures of Life in Mexico* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1852), p. 148. In many ways, the very concept of "smuggling" is problematic for this period in Mexico since it assumes a sovereign national state.

⁵¹ Díaz, *Informes Económicos*, p. 184; British Consular Dispatches, 31 March 1861. There is a perverse logic to the dilemma facing Mexican authorities in this situation of incomplete sovereignty. When the need for resources is the greatest, a sovereign state can increase its share of the proceeds of economic activity through taxation and other measures. In the Mexican case, however, it is precisely at the moment of greatest need that authorities have the least leverage over those who control liquid wealth such as merchants. As Cerutti documents, Vidaurri's response to political and military crisis was to decrease rather than increase customs duties. As this and other incidents suggests, even a relatively successful regional caudillo held at best modest power in his relations with local merchants. Later Vidaurri increased tariffs for cotton during the U.S. Civil War but only because the southerners, facing an increasingly successful Union blockade, had no alternative outlet for their cotton. (Cerutti, *Economía*, pp. 96, 76, 80, 160-2, 198, 107.)

⁵² Such pressures helped force Mexico to make good on the seizures of *conductas* carrying specie in Tamaulipas in 1861. Díaz, ed., *Informes Económicos*, p. 251.

⁵³ W. R. Manning, ed., *The Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States: Inter-American Affairs, 1831-1860 IX*, (Washington D.C., 1932-1939), pp. 859, 904; Waddy Thompson, *Recollections of Mexico* (New York: Wiley & Putnam, 1847), p. 227.

Visiting war ships often stayed in port for several weeks, and naval officers were prepared, on more than one occasion, to use force if Mexican prudence had not precluded such an outcome. Naval commanders joined local consuls in their negotiations with Mexican authorities to demand redress for Mexican "outrages" and "exactions" against foreign merchants, even those who were not their co-nationals.⁵⁴

Such gunboat diplomacy reinforced belligerent merchant attitudes. "In Hispanic America," the local French consul wrote in 1858, "neutral interests cannot be really protected without shaking off the scruples which inhibit action in more civilized places." As the Mexican mission in Paris likewise observed in 1844, foreign merchants calculated that through the use of force "to sustain their pretensions and protests, they will obtain some privileges. . . and indemnization for damages of which they considered themselves victims."⁵⁵

THE PURSUIT OF SPECIAL PRIVILEGES: RIVALRY AND ITS LIMITS WITHIN THE FOREIGN MERCHANT COMMUNITY

The demonstrated ability of Tampico's foreigners to engage in collective action should not be seen as evidence of a monolithic merchant unity. The forces making for cohesion coexisted with disintegrative forces that fostered intra-class dissension. In a competitive commercial environment, rivalry and conflict were inevitable as each individual merchant and national group sought to advance its own interests and undermine those of competitors. If unchecked, the vigorous pursuit of such special privileges created tensions that could potentially undermine the solidarity essential to the defense of collective merchant interests.

Foreign merchant politics was thus shaped by a complex interaction of individual, national group, and cross-national collective merchant interests, factors which also shaped Mexican strategies towards the foreign merchant community. The fact that an across-the-board threat, like the Juárez two

⁵⁴ For a full discussion of the commercial mission of the nineteenth century U.S. Navy, see Peter Karsten, *The Naval Aristocracy: The Golden Age of Annapolis and the Emergence of Modern American Navalism* (New York: The Free Press), pp. 152, 161, 174-75, 201. On Spanish, French, and U.S. naval visits, see Barceló, *Relaciones Diplomáticas I*, pp. 141, 191-92; Díaz, *Informes Diplomáticos II*, p. 143; U.S. National Archives and Record Service, Record Group 24, "Ship's Log, USS Fulton, October 6, 1857-August 9, 1858." For a U.S. naval officer's account of conducting negotiations with Mexican authorities, including President Juárez, on behalf of local Tampico merchants, see Madeline Dahlgren, *Memoirs of John A. Dahlgren* (Boston: James Osgood & Co., 1882), pp. 213-216. Like a disgusted Dahlgren, a British naval officer on the West Coast of Mexico in 1844 spoke openly about his "strong inclination" to teach a lesson to the Mexican official who tried to interfere with his embarkation of illegal silver contraband (Mayo, "Consuls," p. 401).

⁵⁵ Díaz, *Informes Económicos*, p. 240; Luis Weckmann, *Las Relaciones Franco-Mexicanas II*, p. 32.

percent tax, usually fostered a collective response from the foreign merchant community often led the weaker partner in this bargaining relationship, the Mexicans, to prefer raising funds through separate deals for "special privileges" with individual or national groups of merchants.⁵⁶ By avoiding measures that united merchants, the Mexicans could undermine merchant collective bargaining and encourage rivalries that might fragment the foreign merchant community.

"Special privileges" included a wide variety of attractive forms of deal-making which might include, for example, unofficial one-time waivers of import duties, such as that for a thousand sacks of coffee imported by the German Gresser & Co. in 1862. As the port's wealthiest merchants, the Spaniards were especially likely to profit, the French consul complained, through "shameful dirty deals" with the Mexicans.⁵⁷ In some cases, Tampico's local authorities took the initiative by proposing, as they did in 1842, substantial discounts on silver export duties if Spanish merchants paid the sums immediately. In other cases, merchants took the lead as in 1856 when the Spanish firm of García and Cortina provided a substantial sum for the expenses of the troops in Tampico in exchange for the right to import four thousand bales of plain cotton, "to the extreme prejudice," U.S. Consul Chase reported, "of many other merchants established here."⁵⁸

Yet not all special privileges were local. Since England was the dominant foreign power in Mexico, British interests were well situated to achieve substantial savings through deals at the national level. After the April 1862 breakup of the tripartite intervention, Tampico's French consul complained bitterly about the "illicit" agreement through which the Mexicans had allowed the British-owned Real del Monte mine to export silver through Tampico without paying regular export duties.⁵⁹

Such special privileges represented, the jealous French consul insisted, a "bad type of commerce, based on intrigues. . . [and] the purchase, more or less disguised, of privileges" from the Mexicans.⁶⁰ Yet the French position

⁵⁶ For a detailed examination of such special deals from the Mexican side, see the discussion of government finance in northeastern Mexico during the Wars of Reform in Mario Cerutti, *Economía de Guerra*. See also his "Guerras Civiles, Frontera Norte y Formación de Capitales en México en Años de la Reforma," *Boletín Americanista* 33 (1983), pp. 235-6; Mario Cerutti, "El Préstamo Prebancario en el noreste de México: Las Actividades de los Grandes Comerciantes de Monterrey (1855-1890)," In: Leonor Ludlow y Carlos Marichal, eds. *Banca y Poder en México (1800-1925)* (México: Grijalbo, 1985), pp. 122-3.

⁵⁷ Díaz, ed., *Informes Diplomáticos*, Vol. 3, pp. 212-3; Díaz, ed., *Informes Económicos*, p. 267.

⁵⁸ Weckmann, *Relaciones Hispano-Mexicanas*, Vol. II, p. 107; Franklin Chase, 8 May 1856.

⁵⁹ Díaz, ed., *Informes Económicos*, p. 255; Franklin Chase, 28 June 1862.

⁶⁰ Díaz, ed., *Informes Económicos*, p. 267.

was not based on a principled opposition to privileges *per se*. Wily maneuvers were the bread and butter of commercial life as Tampico's foreign middlemen survived and got ahead by cutting corners and using sharp business practices. Illegal and arbitrary deals were especially appealing because they afforded the beneficiaries an advantage over their competitors. In 1858, for example, Tampico's French merchants refused to join a British protest over special privileges accorded Pacific coast ports, motivated "without a doubt," the French Consul said, by "the more or less well-founded hope to obtain the same concessions" themselves.⁶¹

For any given national group of merchants, their home country's blockade, occupation or conquest of Mexico offered the ultimate special privilege.⁶² In mid-1862, Tampico's French merchants were quick to exploit the newly declared French blockade of the port for commercial advantage. The blatant partiality of the blockade, which affected only the vessels and shipments of French competitors, led thirteen non-French merchants in Tampico to draft a public note of protest that caused the British Foreign Office to lodge an official complaint with France.⁶³

The first French occupation of Tampico in November 1862 also demonstrated the advantages that accrued to the merchants of the conquering country. In planning the occupation, the French government accorded the port's French merchants a privileged position as the middlemen in the hoped-for sale of some two thousand mules needed by the French army for their southern operations. Like his U.S. counterpart during the U.S. occupation of Tampico in 1847-1848, French Consul Charles St. Charles became Tampico's customs collector and could now rectify the "injustices" he had so recently denounced. In January 1864, during the second French occupation, a major shipment of silver specie, under consignment to the British, was ordered shipped to France aboard a French vessel.⁶⁴

The exploitation of the French advantage in such a selfish and self-interested way generated conflicts within Tampico's foreign merchant commu-

⁶¹ Díaz, ed., *Informes Diplomáticos*, Vol. 3, p. 212-213.

⁶² Tampico's foreign merchants envied the success achieved by their Texas trading partners, McKinney and Williams, during the 1830s. By financing and supplying the Texas revolt in 1835, the McKinney and Williams firm had guaranteed themselves a favored status in the Lone Star Republic in the form of customs waivers, repayment of their loans, and the right to form the state's first and, until 1865, only chartered bank—despite a constitutional ban on corporate banking. Joe B. Frantz, "The Mercantile House of McKinney & Williams, Underwriters of the Texas Revolution," *Bulletin of the Business History Society*, Vol. XXVI 1 (1952).

⁶³ Franklin Chase, 21 July 1862; 7 August 1862; Díaz, ed., *Informes Diplomáticos*, Vol. 3, p. 201-206, 212-213, 216.

⁶⁴ Díaz, ed., *Informes Diplomáticos*, Vol. 3, p. 226; British Consul, 25 January 1864.

nity. The first French occupation also saw major clashes between Spanish merchants and the French in charge of the port. The French military were convinced, quite rightly, that Spanish merchants, especially Vice Consul Ramón de Obregón, were providing funds to the Mexican guerrillas in exchange for free transit for their goods through the Mexican blockade of the port. Tension was further heightened by a series of violent incidents in December 1862 in which a number of Spanish citizens had their homes looted and were beaten or arrested by the French invaders.⁶⁵

The French decision to withdraw from Tampico in January 1863, against the advice of local French merchants, provides an important test of the substantive impact of such intra-merchant clashes. The Spanish vice consul, Ramón de Obregón, with his acknowledged influence with the besieging Mexicans, held the key to the fate of Tampico's French residents. The single-minded pursuit of his fellow Spaniards' justifiable complaints against the French or a desire to damage a foreign rival could have led Obregón to respond less energetically to the perceived Mexican threat to the French merchants. Yet Obregón, citing his "sacred debt" to the French, travelled across French lines to personally win a pledge of no reprisals from the Mexican general, Juan José de la Garza. Even the thoroughly compromised French consul, St. Charles, was allowed to remain in port.⁶⁶

As this incident suggests, merchant disunity and rivalry were, in the end, limited to the commercial sphere and involved only individual and national group interests. However heated the rhetoric they occasionally directed at each other, the port's merchants did not allow their jealousies and special deals to disrupt the unity essential to the defense of their overall position. Indeed, they pursued cooperative action because they judged that collective defense of their common interests as the dominant class in Tampico was the best means of serving individual interests.

THE WAR FOR THE CUSTOMS HOUSE: THE CHALLENGE OF FRENCH OCCUPATION

Tampico's first citizens, the foreign merchant upper class, met the second French occupation between 1863 and 1866 with neither violent opposition nor real enthusiasm. With a studied pragmatism, these practical men of commerce eschewed the loyalties or ideological allegiances that often shaped the politics of Western legations in Mexico City. Foreign merchants, as Voss noted, "cared little who occupied the seats of government" as long as business remained profitable. Rather than being hurt by political

⁶⁵ Díaz, ed., *Informes Diplomáticos*, Vol. 3, pp. 250, 234-6.

⁶⁶ Díaz, ed., *Informes Diplomáticos*, Vol. 3, pp. 226-8, 232-3.

instability, alert merchants realized the counter-intuitive reality that any change in the control of Tampico, whether by *pronunciamento*, military victory, or peaceful turnover, could be easily turned to commercial advantage.⁶⁷

Each faction that rose or returned to power offered merchants a new partner who, pressed by need and unbound by past agreements, might be amenable to new and potentially profitable arrangements. Initial French behavior met these expectations as the new occupiers abolished the Mexican list of prohibited imports and appointed merchants of all nationalities to administrative positions in the customs house. By "favoring the interests of . . . [Tampico's] commerce," the local French commandant wrote in 1864, "it will be easy to attract the population of Tampico."⁶⁸

Yet the Mexicans understood better than the French that Tampico was a useless prize if cut off from the source of its wealth in the interior. As they had done in 1862, the withdrawing Mexicans quickly established a blockade in 1863 that cut off supplies, disrupted or stopped normal commercial operations, and left the occupying troops exposed to the ravages of yellow fever. As the French soon learned, it was easy to occupy a port but much more difficult to gain any advantage from it.⁶⁹

During their three years in Tampico, the French were caught in the classic bind of many who had held the port in the past. Funds for the local garrison could be derived only from a brisk trade; yet to foster such trade, the occupiers needed money to finance the military efforts to break the blockade of the port. The French also faced another classic dilemma of such wars for the customs house. Even the relatively unified French command structure could not prevent local commanders in other ports, such as Matamoros or Veracruz, from lowering tariffs in a bid for a larger share of existing commerce.⁷⁰ As in the past, the effort of each port's commander to

⁶⁷ Voss, *On the Margins*, p. 80. It is erroneous to emphasize solely the drawbacks of their involvement in domestic factional politics in Mexico. Discussing the national scene, Ciro Cardoso rightly points out that basically "such dangers were quite relative since the new regime. . . [being equally needy of their] financial support had in the end to reach an accord even with those capitalists who had been important backers of the government they had replaced: with the result that, after passing problems, in all cases the threatened entrepreneur could recover." (Cardoso, *Formación y Desarrollo*, p. 20.)

⁶⁸ Díaz, ed., *Informes Diplomáticos*, Vol. 3, p. 228.

⁶⁹ Díaz, ed., *Informes Diplomáticos*, Vol. 3, pp. 214; Niox, *Expédition du Mexique, 1861-1867* (Paris: 1874), pp. 228, 310, 390.

⁷⁰ Charles Martin, *Campagne du Mexique* (Paris: Tonera, 1863), p. 132; Díaz, ed., *Informes Diplomáticos*, Vol. 3, p. 210. Competition between ports was a recurring problem. For another example, see the defense offered by the Veracruz customs house against charges that it was charging lower duties to the detriment of merchants in Tampico (*Vindicación de la Aduana Marítima de Veracruz con Motivo de las Inculpaciones que le Hacen los Comerciantes de Tampico* [Mexico: Imprenta de I. Cumplido, 1869]).

resolve his own monetary crisis came at the expense of those of the other ports and led to a decline in the overall revenues derived from Mexico's foreign trade. French failure to control the hinterland also provided the Mexicans with a small but important flow of funds as sharp Tampico merchants like Obregón bought their way through the Mexican blockade.

Facing such pressures, the French, especially under the notorious Colonel Charles Du Pin in 1864 and 1865, were responsible for more assorted "outrages" and monetary "exactions" against merchants than any Mexican faction had been in the past. Heading a group of contra-guerrillas "known chiefly for their cruelty, excesses and unmilitary conduct," Du Pin was a decorated veteran of French military campaigns in Africa, the Crimea, and Italy and had served most recently as an active participant in the 1860 fighting in China. As a fellow contra-guerrilla officer recalled, Du Pin was a firm believer that a "system of terrorism . . . [was] necessary to dominate the country."⁷¹

For Tampico's foreigners, Du Pin's lootings, arrests, whippings, and executions of Mexicans were regrettable but not an immediately compelling concern. But the French also manhandled and mistreated the other foreigners. Unlike the Mexicans, the French, foreign consuls now reported, were acting "with a very high hand" and treated the port's foreign residents with "utmost license." Even foreign citizenship was not as much of a bar to arrest and harassment as it had been under Mexican sovereignty. Early on, the British consul commented that many foreigners would "now gladly accept a return to [the] old [state of] affairs" under Mexican control.⁷²

However irksome, such mistreatment was minor compared to French monetary exactions, large and small. From the outset, foreigners were forced, along with Mexicans, to billet the French troops or pay a special tax for that purpose. The French also embargoed foreign property, including the best carriage horses of the Spanish and British and the lighters and boats of the North Americans.⁷³

In June 1864, the month of Maximilian's arrival in Veracruz, the "impe-

⁷¹ Jack A. Dabbs, *The French Army in Mexico, 1861-1867* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1963), p. 62; Niox, *Expédition*, p. 427; Emile de Kératry, *La Contre-Guérilla Française au Mexique* (Paris: Librairie Internationale, 1869), p. 312. For a brief biographical summary of Du Pin's life, see *Dictionnaire de Biographie Française*, Vol. 12 (Paris: 1970), p. 362.

⁷² British Consular Dispatches, 28 August 1863; on French "outrages," including the arrest and imprisonment of North American citizens, see Franklin Chase, 27 April 1864; 9 June 1864; 16 February 1866.

⁷³ British Consular Dispatches, 28 August 1863; Franklin Chase, 22 April 1864; 27 June 1864; 27 July 1864.

rious” Du Pin overran the Mexican-held Tancasnequí interior commercial depot and seized a large quantity of Spanish- and French-owned goods “as booty of war . . . taking the largest share for himself.”⁷⁴ Short of funds, Du Pin also demanded that local merchants immediately pay the sums they allegedly owed the customs house.⁷⁵ Even after Du Pin’s departure in the fall of 1865, the deepening economic crisis of the French expedition and Maximilian’s empire led to involuntary advances on future customs duties, “forced loans,” and orders to prepay certain destination fees in Tampico.⁷⁶

The French, Tampico’s British consul complained in 1864, had brought only ruin, misery, and distress to the district. By 1865, it was clear that the French actions could no longer be justified as being necessary to open the way for a future flourishing of trade. The ragged Mexican blockade of Tampico held and the French proved unable to guarantee the security of merchant shipments. In January 1866, a successful Mexican raid on the now French-held Tancasnequí and Tantoyuquita commercial depots resulted in further costly losses to the port’s merchants.⁷⁷

The French were conducting a vicious war of conquest in Mexico, in the course of which they failed to observe the strict rules and standards of conduct to which foreigners had long held the Mexican factions. Yet where, as an observant German journalist rightly inquired in 1863, were “the objections of the foreign powers that had always protested against such situations in the past?”⁷⁸ Ironically, the foreign intervention that Tampico’s merchants had helped to bring about was now hurting rather than helping their commercial ventures.

A comparison of merchant commentary on the French and on the Mexicans in Tampico reveals a double standard shaped by racism and a chauvinist disdain in dealing with a weaker non-European people. With the French, however, Tampico’s foreign merchants, even when angry, were still dealing with a European power whom they respected and whose motivation they could understand.⁷⁹ Yet this double standard of judgement alone

⁷⁴ Kératry, *Contre-Guérilla*, pp. 159-60; Franklin Chase, 27 June 1864.

⁷⁵ Kératry, *Contre-Guérilla*, pp. 151; British Consular Dispatches, 27 August 1864.

⁷⁶ Franklin Chase, 27 March 1866; 26 February 1866.

⁷⁷ British Consular Dispatches, 27 August 1864; Díaz, ed., *Informes Diplomáticos*, Vol. 4, pp. 107, 135-36, 302, 271; Franklin Chase, 27 February 1866.

⁷⁸ Jesús Ruiz, ed., *México en 1863, Testimonios Germanos Sobre la Intervención Francesa* (México: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1974), p. 98.

⁷⁹ For a detailed analysis of Franklin Chase’s rhetoric in this regard, see John D. French, “A U.S. Merchant Consul and the Foreign Community: Franklin Chase and His Friends and Enemies at Tampico, Mexico 1861-1865” (M.A. thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 1978). See also Nancy N. Barker, “The Factor of ‘Race’ in the French Experience in Mexico, 1821-1861,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 59: 1 (1979), 64-80.

is not a sufficient explanation for the relative inaction of Tampico's foreign merchants and consuls under the French.

Over the previous forty years, aggressive merchant collective action had been predicated on an overall balance of power on the local, national, and international levels favorable to merchant interests. Belligerent merchant behavior and exaggerated rhetoric was an integral part of the foreign claimsmanship that provided the pretexts for intervention sought by aggressive foreign governments. After the arrival of the French in Tampico, however, local merchants well understood that diplomatic browbeating, gunboat diplomacy, and threats of invasion could not credibly be used against one of Europe's most powerful nations.

Under the French, the parochial problems and complaints of Tampico's commercial foot soldiers of empire were simply no longer useful to their home governments. For their own reasons of state, Europe's rulers all offered tacit or overt recognition and support to France's doubtful Empire in Mexico under the Austrian prince, Maximilian. While the French government could be expected to sacrifice private interests to grand policy, even the powerful British officially agreed not to hold Maximilian's regime responsible for their nationals' losses in Mexico, including those at Tampico.⁸⁰

In this context, Tampico's foreign merchant community had little incentive to engage in the sort of spectacular public protest that had marked their struggle with Mexican General and Governor José de la Garza in 1857-1858. Between the second French occupation in 1863 through early 1866, Tampico saw no collective consular protests, menacing visits by ships of war, or tests of the limits of official (in this case, French) tolerance through collective merchant nonpayment. If home government policy had earlier encouraged merchant intransigence *vis-à-vis* the Mexicans, their favorable policies towards Maximilian's Empire had discouraged such merchant actions against a French occupier that was, moreover, far more powerful and less subject to merchant pressure than any earlier Mexican faction.

The cautious public stance of Tampico's foreign merchants during the heyday of the French puppet regime only began to change as the fortunes of Maximilian's empire dramatically declined in 1866. The merchants' previously diffuse discontent and quiet lobbying slowly gave way to a more open expression of discontent. In February 1866, local merchants rejected French efforts to draft them into a new guard unit created to defend the city

⁸⁰ Arnold Blumberg, *The Diplomacy of the Mexican Empire, 1863-1867* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1971), p. 70.

against the Mexicans. A joint note by the local non-French consuls rejected this cynical effort to exploit the traditional solidarity of the port's foreigners. Over the next months, merchant delegations to Mexico City also lobbied the imperial government of Maximilian and the French to make good on the losses incurred by the Mexican seizure of Tampico's interior commercial depots in January 1866.⁸¹

These more active if still mild merchant protests were further encouraged by the shift in European diplomacy brought about by impending Mexican victory. Locally, Tampico's foreign merchants in mid-1866 prepared for the future by sending increasing financial support and supplies to the besieging Mexican forces. On August 7, 1866, preliminary contacts by the U.S., Prussian, and Spanish consuls led to a negotiated French surrender, with Tampico finally returning once again to Mexican sovereignty.⁸²

CONCLUSION

If Mexico was to retain its separate national existence, Ann Chase had written in her diary in December 1861, the nation's inhabitants would have to "unite zeal with conviction and energy with Patriotism." The French intervention, as Stuart Voss has written, was "an ideological and economic test of nationality for all regions of Mexico."⁸³ The defeat of the French invaders in Mexico's Second War of Independence definitively resolved the fundamental question of sovereignty whose impact had been so strongly felt in nineteenth-century Tampico. Tampico, in the years between 1821 and 1867, had experienced a Spanish invasion in 1829, a filibustering expedition from the United States in 1835, a French blockade in 1838, and foreign occupations under the United States (1847-48) and the French (1862-1866). Moreover, part of its customs revenues had been formally consigned to France and Great Britain in settlement of certain claims and debts.

The defeat of the French, "our barbarous civilizers" in the words of Benito Juárez, ended an era in which, to quote Stuart Voss, the "rich purses of the foreign merchants dominated" the ports to the detriment of Mexican sovereignty.⁸⁴ Not all foreign merchants and local Mexican authorities rec-

⁸¹ Blumberg, *Diplomacy*, pp. 71-74; Díaz, ed., *Informes Diplomáticos*, Vol. 4, pp. 272, 294.

⁸² Recalling the past year, Franklin Chase reported in late 1866 that Tampico's merchants had grown "fatigued and disgusted by the arbitrary acts of power which the French rulers wielded over the merchants of this place." Writing after the Mexican reoccupation, he wrote that merchants had "finally smuggled out supplies and money to the liberals" to facilitate their reoccupation of the port. (Franklin Chase, 22 September 1866; 4 & 8 August 1866).

⁸³ DHS, Ann Chase, MSB-9; Voss, *On the Periphery*, p. 173; Cerutti, "Guerras Civiles," p. 223.

⁸⁴ Benito Juárez, *Obras Completas*, Vol. 7, p. 263; Voss, *On the Periphery*, p. 80.

ognized, at first, that times had changed decisively. In line with past practices, Article Three of the October 1866 surrender agreement had guaranteed, by name, that French Consul Charles St. Charles would continue in his functions. Breaking with a shameful past, Mexican President Juárez struck down Article Three and ordered the expulsion of the French consul.

Through such symbolic actions, Juárez sought to make clear that the foreign immunity of the past was over forever. Formally rejecting past coerced claims agreements in 1869, Juárez signaled that the balance of power had shifted decisively towards the Mexicans.⁸⁵ In Tampico, cross-national merchant solidarity and old imperial ambitions remained, but there would be no return to the foreign merchant politics of old. As Voss noted for Mazatlan, even the port's foreign merchants, who had "generally cooperated with the imperial occupation, now understood the new realities" in the aftermath of the French Intervention.⁸⁶

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⁸⁵ Franklin Chase, 9 August 1866; Covian Martínez, *Efemérides*, p. 26; Peña y Reyes, *Insubsidencia*, pp. xxvii, viii.

⁸⁶ Voss, *On the Periphery*, p. 174.