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Yerba Mate as a Settler Crop: From the Decline of Old-Growth Trees to the Rise of Plantations

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Abstract. From the policies aimed at preserving old-growth yerba mate trees in the second half of the 19th century to the proliferation of plantations at the beginning of the 20th, the colonization of the present-day Argentine province of Misiones was closely linked to this crop. After the War of the Triple Alliance (1865-1870), the Argentine government became more aware of the strategic location of Misiones and expanded its knowledge of the bountiful natural resources the province possessed. This led to the creation of the National Territory of Misiones in 1881 and the implementation of government policies for colonization of the area by European immigrants.

Keywords: National territory; federalization; immigration; yerba mate.

Introduction

In the second half of the 19th century, Argentina embarked on an organizational process with a view to emerging as a nation. This process included the country's placement on the world market and its participation in the international division of labor; the establishment of a centralized bureaucratic apparatus and the approval of a national constitution; the demarcation of borders with neighboring countries; the settlement of the territory by immigrants; and the pursuit of cultural homogeneity through the formation of a country composed of "whites." In this context, the free navigation of rivers and the definition of international boundaries amid major changes to the world economic structure played an important role in the emergence of national sentiment.

During this eventful period, the territory of Misiones was the scene of major disputes with neighboring states and the ruling classes from bordering provinces. After the War of the Triple Alliance or the Paraguayan War (1865-1870)—which pitted Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay against Paraguay—the country became more aware of the strategic position of Misiones and its copious natural resources. This led inexorably to the federalization of Misiones in 1881—a process which, as we will see, was not exempt from conflict—at a time when the federal government was preoccupied with the settlement of the territory through the arrival of European colonizers. Yerba mate was a key product throughout this period, in terms of both its exploitation at the work sites and the proliferation of plantations.

A regionalist approach¹ "allows for observing in more detail the contacts between countries, overcoming boundaries and retrieving the idea of the frontier as a social space of interaction" (Bandieri & Reichel, 2012, p. 16)². For Eric Van Young (1987), the concept of region entails:

A 'spacialization' of an economic relation. A very simple, and admittedly tautological, working definition would be a geographic space with a boundary to set it off [...] On one hand, the boundary need not be impermeable, nor, on the other, is it necessarily congruent with the more familiar and easily identifiable political or administrative divisions, or even with topographical features (Van Young, 1994).

1 When we speak of "region," we refer "in principle [...] to a space that is discerned by researchers according to their objective or interest, but which has also been constructed by those who inhabit that space" (Miño Grijalva, 2002, p. 871). As Bolsi (quoted in Chiamonte, 2008, p. 8) has noted, "there are as many regional systems as there are problems worth studying."

2 All translations from the Spanish are by *Apuntes*.

This study is organized into two sections: the first contextualizes the economic, political, military and, above all, the border situation of Misiones during the 19th century, from the occupation by Corrientes to the creation of the National Territory of Misiones (in 1881) and the immediate consequences of this process. The second analyzes the execution of policies oriented toward populating the space and establishing yerba mate as a settler crop.

1. Corrientes in Misiones: from occupation to the creation of *latifundios*

By signing the Quadrilateral Treaty in 1822, the provinces of Buenos Aires, Corrientes, Entre Ríos, and Santa Fe expressed their recognition of the autonomy of Misiones and established “its boundaries with Corrientes along the Miriñay River and its extension northward up to the Tranquera de Loreto (now Ituzaingó)” (Bressan, 2017, p. 76). At the same time, the treaty recognized the right of Misiones to set up its own government, and permitted it to seek protection, when necessary, from any of the signatory provinces. Thus, in 1822, the province of Santa Fe committed to defending Misiones at the request of its authorities; but this “protectorate” did not take effect, because the leadership of Entre Ríos and Corrientes “did not recognize the political autonomy of Misiones, much less its institutional character as a Province” (Levington & Snihur, 2011, p. 83).

As a result, Corrientes continued its policy of occupation of the lands that previously belonged to the Jesuit Province of Misiones, and Brazilian and Paraguayan incursions were incessant. In 1832, the Corrientes House of Representatives executed the Decree for the Creation of the Provinces of Corrientes and Entre Ríos—originally issued in 1814 by Gervasio Antonio de Posadas, then supreme director of the United Provinces of Río de la Plata³—providing for the dissolution of Misiones as an independent territory and for the immediate incorporation of its dependencies by Corrientes. The new boundaries of Corrientes were defined as follows: to the west and north, the Paraná River; to the east, the Uruguay River; and to the south, “an imaginary line from the source of the Mocoretá up to the Curuzú Cuatiá Stream” to its mouth at the Miriñay River (as cited in Poenitz and Poenitz, 1998, p. 246).

3 de Posadas was supreme director of the United Provinces of Río de la Plata from January 31, 1814 to January 9, 1815.

The War of the Triple Alliance marked a very important moment in the history of Misiones. The breakdown in diplomatic relations and the declaration of war between the belligerent countries forced the Argentine provinces closest to Paraguay to question their own identity, stoked by a tension between the criteria of nationality upheld by Buenos Aires and the geographical and cultural proximity to the country to the north. As such, the war entailed not only armed hostilities between the two nations, but a far more subtle form of confrontation fought in the sphere of ideas.

The constant raids by troops into Misiones during the War of the Triple Alliance, and the large numbers of traders attracted there by the conflict, led to heightened awareness and appreciation of the resources the territory possessed—and in turn, to its invigoration. Given this awareness, and a fear that these resources would be exploited by the Brazilians, the Corrientes administration firmed up its desire to annex Misiones definitively. Thus, when the war ended in 1870, the administration launched “a policy of foundation of towns combined with the development of infrastructure projects for communication and transportation.” New railroads were built and river transportation became increasingly common along the upper Paraná (Bressan, 2017, p. 76).

The need to regularize the legal status of Misiones, however, was a bone of contention between the federal government and the province of Corrientes. Indeed, with the approval of the Immigration and Colonization Law (No. 817) in 1876—known as the Avellaneda Law after President Nicolás Avellaneda (1874–1880)—Misiones was recognized as one of the Argentine territories available for colonization. Corrientes considered this situation as a violation of a right enshrined in Article 13 of the National Constitution. Indeed, Corrientes included the territory of Misiones in its own Constitution of 1864, setting its boundaries as follows:

To the South, the Guayquiraró River, at its mouth to the Paraná River; and the Mocoetá Stream, at the mouth to the Uruguay River; to the East, the Uruguay River; to the North, the Paraná River to the Pepirí Guazú and San Antonio Guazú; and to the West, the Paraná River itself, and all the other lands in its possession, without prejudice to what may be resolved by the National Congress, pursuant to the authority conferred upon it Article 6, paragraph 14 of the Constitution of the Republic. (Constitución de la Provincia de Corrientes, 1864, art. 2)

The departments of Candelaria and San Javier were created in Misiones in 1870 and 1877, respectively. The government of Corrientes adopted

measures geared toward preserving old-growth yerba mate trees, planning new roads, and appointing authorities in these areas (Poenitz, 2013).

Map 1

Departments of Candelaria and San Javier, created in 1870 and 1877, respectively



Source: Stefañuk (1995, p. 190).

Politically, the problem of federal lands can be considered one of the facets of the conflict between the federal government and the autonomous provinces, in which “disagreement centered on sustaining the dispersion of sovereignty within multiple independent entities or its concentration in a centralized government endowed with wide-ranging powers” (Ruffini, 2007, p. 30). Thus, for instance, the Misiones question, conceived “as a strategy for reinforcing the positions of all in electoral contests,” precipitated a national-level dispute between regionalist and nationalist parties in which both sides were concerned about whom the resolution of the conflict would benefit (Bressan, 2017, pp. 80-81).

Although the federalization of Misiones was mooted by the federal government as a response to the stance of Corrientes⁴ and its support for the rebellion headed by the governor of Buenos Aires province, the lawyer Carlos Tejedor,⁵ it was also part of a “long-term program that sought to extend national control and administration to the territories considered as marginal” (Bressan, 2017, p. 81).

Between 1872 and 1881, laws 576, 947, and 1149 were approved for the organization of the governorships of Chaco, Patagonia, and Misiones, respectively. In his message of 1881, President Julio Argentino Roca stressed the need to bring six territories under the aegis of the state through federalization: “The Territory of Pilcomayo, the Territory of Bermejo, the Territory of Gran Chaco, the Territory of Misiones, the Territory of Las Pampas, and the Territory of Río Negro.” Of the six, Misiones warranted special attention, having “under the undue appropriation of Corrientes [...] been subsumed into backwardness and neglect” (message by Roca in *La Tribuna*, 1881, quoted by Bressan, 2017, pp. 81 and 85).

During this period, the Corrientes government, aware of the growing importance of yerba mate as the foremost resource in Misiones, resolved to preserve the territory’s old-growth trees, approving to this end the Regulations for Yerba Mate Trees on November 20, 1876. This legislation provided for the conservation of the resource by regulating pruning by zones, as well as prohibiting the construction of permanent dwellings in the forests in order to “keep the federal lands empty” (Bolsi, 1986, p. 45).

The dissemination of the draft law for the creation of the National Territory of Misiones met with stiff opposition from the Corrientes government since it implied the loss of usufruct over the territory’s resources. In June 1881, given the inevitability of federalization, the Corrientes government authorized a swift sale of land in lots of 25 square leagues. The lots “sold” were located along the banks of the Paraná and Uruguay rivers and accounted for almost two-thirds of the territory; major buyers included the likes of Antonio B. Gallino, appointed governor of Corrientes following the removal of Felipe Cabral (an ally of Carlos Tejedor and member of the Partido Lib-

4 After the defeat of Tejedor, Corrientes’ officials were replaced from Buenos Aires by Antonio B. Gallino of the *Partido Autonomista*, who had links to Julio Argentino Roca’s nascent presidency (Larguía, 2006, p. 108).

5 In 1879 Tejedor and Julio Argentino Roca disputed the succession of President Nicolás Avellaneda, on the basis of quite distinct political agendas. The federalization of Buenos Aires—provided for by Article 3 of the Constitution of the Argentine Nation, approved in 1853 but postponed until 1879—paved the way for considerable centralization of state powers, diminishing provincial authority while altering “significantly the existing relationship models and eroding, to some extent, republican principles” (Ruffini, 2007, p. 30).

eral), and Rudecindo Roca, the first governor of the National Territory of Misiones and brother of the sitting president (Larguía, 2006, pp. 106-108).

Given this situation, Juan Balestra, the governor of the National Territory of Misiones at the time, acknowledged in a report on public land and colonization, submitted in 1894 to the Ministry of the Interior, that:

The intention admitted unashamedly by the government of Corrientes was to submit to the nation only jurisdiction, but not ownership, of the territory; and this extreme was reached, because in the law itself, in Article 6, the product of the sale is allotted to repayment of aid loaned and damages occasioned in 1878 by the defense of the institutions of the province, which in simple terms amounted to a distribution of money or land among the political friends of 1881 [...] (Balestra, 1894).

In the face of the “feared” federalization, the government of Corrientes’s government opted to divide the territory into two parts. The south, as far as Corpus and San Javier (lower Misiones), was “offered” for sale and acquired by representatives of the government themselves, giving way to the foundation of large *latifundios*. In turn, the lands to the north of Corpus and San Javier (upper Misiones) were made available for the creation of agricultural colonies, the terms of which permitted the exploitation of the old-growth plants protected by the 1876 Regulations for Yerba Mate Trees (Bartolomé, 1982). Corrientes authorities also authorized the disposition of land belonging to the departments of Candelaria and San Javier (which, as can be seen in Map 2, still included the territory later subject to the Cleveland Award), based on the argument that the province had outstanding debts to the federal government.⁶

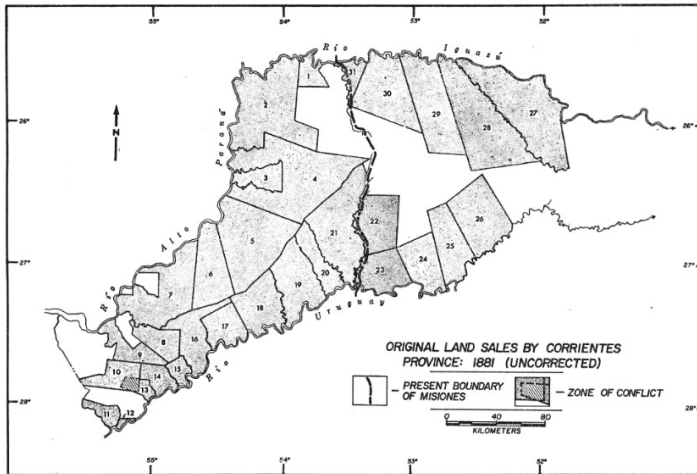
The memorandum that the federal government sent to Congress in defense of the creation of the National Territory of Misiones also revealed the irregularity of the procedure followed by Corrientes in the sale of public land in Misiones (Berrondo Guíñazu, 1947). Once the federalization of Misiones took effect through Law 1149 of December 18, 1881, practically two-thirds of its land had been amassed by a small number of individuals. “No more was sold, because it was believed that there was no more land; there was no time for surveying, before carrying out this plunder of national assets” (Barreyro, 1919, p. 9). Outstanding among the buyers were figures with close connections to Argentine politics, as well as those from Corri-

6 The province’s debt was represented by bonds, which were in the hands of capitalists who amassed large landholdings in the territory of Misiones -- such as Gregorio Lezama (Larguía, 2006, pp. 104-105).

entes's own political circles. As noted, they included Rudecindo Roca, who acquired 265,180 hectares; and Antonio B. Gallino, with 191,990 hectares.

The lack of precision with regard to the true dimensions of Misiones⁷ meant that the lands situated in the center of the territory (the differences in size are shown in maps 2 and 3) went unsold, and subsequently became the main focal points for the establishment of colonies organized by the state. The lands, as we have seen, were "sold" in lots of 25 square leagues without any prior surveying, at prices that ranged between 500 and 1,500 pesos⁸ per square league (approximately 2,500 hectares), payable upfront or in installments (Larguía, 2006, pp. 105-106).

Map 2
Land sale carried out by Corrientes province in the face of federalization



Source: Eidt (1971, p. 74).

In December 1881, through Law 1149 issued by the Argentine Congress, "the Province of Corrientes withdrew its authorities from the litigious

7 Stefañuk attributes this to the fact that contemporary mapping "was based on data about yerba mate trees and individuals [who were] more or less knowledgeable about the region" (Stefañuk, 1995, p. 98).

8 In the Argentine Pampas of the early 20th century, a hectare of land sold for between 15.15 and 30 pesos, and prices were constantly rising (Barsky & Gelman, 2009).

By comparison, land in Misiones was priced very low, particularly given the abundance of large old-growth trees that generated significant returns. However, the price of land in the Pampas region rose steadily, bolstered on the one hand by an increase in demand due to the rise in foreign and Argentine workers, and on the other, by the favorable international market for cereals as well as the modernization of transport within the region (Gorostegui de Torres, 1998).

territory and [its] adjacencies, and the Argentine Government appointed as governor thereof Colonel Rudecindo Roca, who took national possession of Misiones promptly, at the head of the 3rd Line Infantry” (Zeballos,⁹ 1894, p. 90).

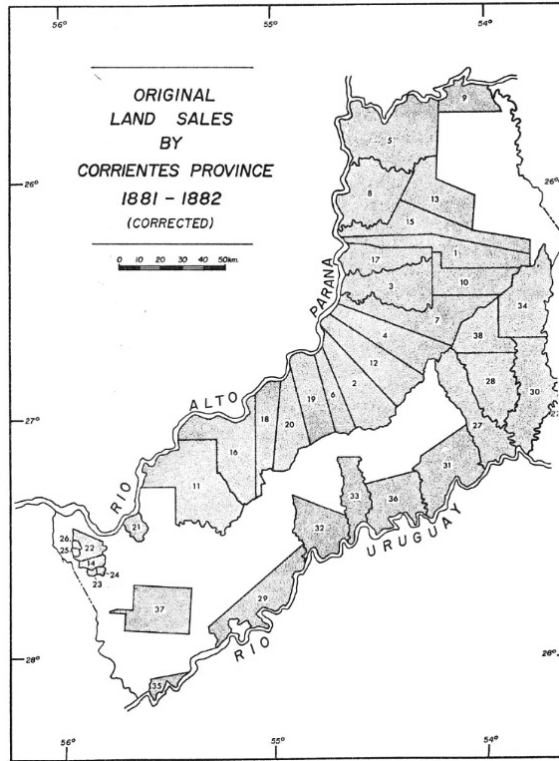
The creation of the National Territory of Misiones assumed, therefore, that the area would come under national sway, thus solving the problem of boundaries with the province of Corrientes. Soon after, Law 1532 on the organization of the National Territories was approved in October 1884. Under this law the appointment of governors fell to the Argentine government in collaboration with the Senate, for three-year terms that could be renewed by another equal period.

After Misiones was transferred to federal jurisdiction, the question of the border with Brazil remained. Brazilian–Argentine tensions escalated over a 30,000-square-kilometer strip in the northeast of Misiones following the War of the Triple Alliance. In 1895,¹⁰ the Cleveland Award put an end to the legal disputes over the land, delimiting borders between Brazil and Misiones that were favorable to the interests of the former.

9 Estanislao Zeballos was named Minister of Foreign Relations by President Juárez Celman in 1889, resigning the following year. On the matter of frontiers between Brazil and Argentina, in 1894, he published his *Alegato de la República Argentina sobre la cuestión de límites con el Brasil en el territorio de Misiones, sometida al presidente de los Estados Unidos de acuerdo con el tratado de arbitraje de 7 de setiembre de 1889*. Though he was not in charge of the Ministry of Foreign Relations and Worship at the time of the Cleveland Award, he was the main architect of its precursor, the Treaty of Montevideo of 1890.

10 The Treaty of Montevideo provided for equal distribution of the disputed territory between Argentina and Brazil. But the latter country did not recognize the new delimitation—named the Zeballos-Bocayuva line after the two negotiators—resulting in the appeal to international arbitration five years later. Stephen Grover Cleveland, president of the United States, was appointed to the role of arbitrator.

Map 3
Sale of land corrected after the Cleveland Award



Source: Eidt (1971, p. 76).

2. The start of settlement of a “uninhabited” territory

In the second half of the 19th century, the formation of stable settlements was stymied by the yerba mate regulations of 1864 and 1876—those which provided the legal basis for yerba mate exploitation. Under the terms of the 1864 legislation, the so-called *comitivas yerbateras*—groups of workers who ventures into the forests to harvest old-growth trees—had to request authorization from a government official in San Javier to carry out pruning, and the exploitation of each plot was performed every four years as a means of preservation. As noted earlier, the regulations of 1876 divided the yerba mate plantations in Misiones into four zones, between which pruning was alternated yearly—that is, exploitation in each was still limited to every four years, as with the previous legislation—but also prohibited the establishment of permanent dwellings in the forests (Bolsi, 1986, p. 45).

Though various attempts were made at implementing a policy to settle Misiones during the years of Corrientes dominion, it was only after federalization and the final delimitation of the territory's boundaries that one finally began to take shape. With the National Territory of Misiones now created, the federal government began to promote settlement of the space by European immigrants.¹¹ However, the formation of *latifundios* that followed federalization represented an obstacle to the foundation of agricultural colonies and conditioned the start of the settlement process (Hernández, 1887, p. 147). To this end, the surveyor Juan Queirel¹² argued that *latifundios*—which, he felt, “weigh [Misiones] down and will weigh it down for a long time, like lead” (Queirel, 1897, p. 365)—should be eradicated, and European settlers “to whom the big landowners would cede some 50% of their lands” be established there as a mechanism for bringing progress to the territory (Queirel, 1897, p. 45).

The government of Misiones initiated a policy geared toward settlement of the lands that had survived the privatization process of 1881 due to “ignorance” of the true extent of the territory (Barreyro, 1919, p. 9) (Map 4). These lands were located in the central mountains and the south, and became the sites of the subsequent national colonies. Moreover, in 1894, because much of the land sold had not been surveyed, the federal government revoked some of the dispositions executed by Corrientes, and they later became the focus of settlement by the first groups of European immigrants who arrived in Misiones.

As a result of this state-led push for colonization,¹³ Santa Ana and Candelaria were surveyed by Rafael Hernández in 1883; but it was with the refounding of old Jesuit colonies, which had not been considered as part of the sale of 1881, that state-sponsored colonization really gained ground. Thus, an agricultural colony was founded in Apóstoles in 1897 and received

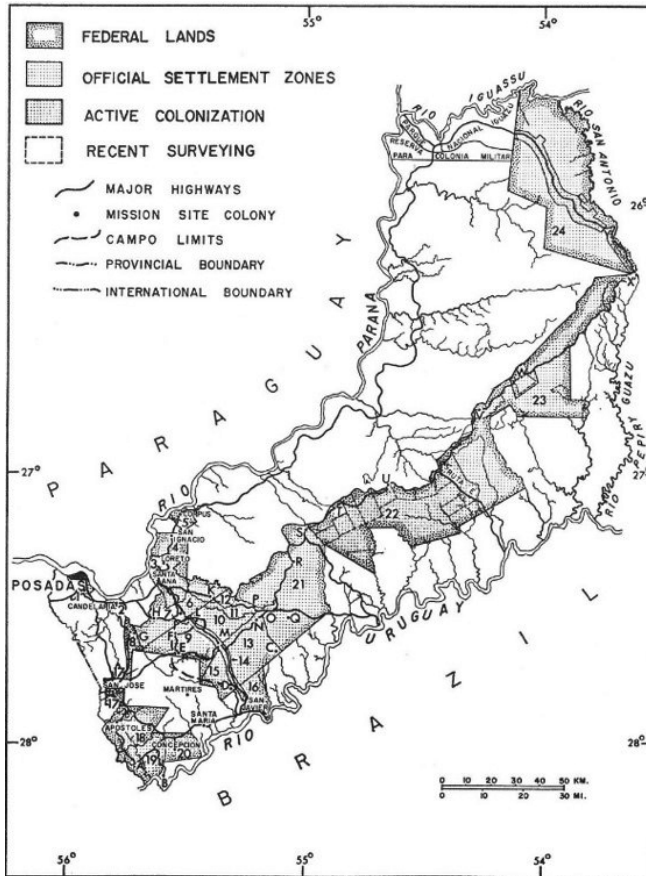
11 Indeed, from “an official perspective,” the idea of Misiones as an “empty space” propitious for “lowlifes” and fugitives, inhabited by “savage” Indians, was promoted—a representation that served to legitimize occupation by way of a “civilizing and modernizing project.” (Alcaráz, 2009, p. 22)

12 Queirel was born in the province of Corrientes in 1849 and died in 1907 while engaged in his work as a surveyor in the region of Chaco. He was traveling correspondent for Instituto Geográfico Argentino and full member of the Société de Géographie de Paris. He took part in the surveying of land in Misiones from the mid-1880s -- having arrived there in 1885 to carry out the demarcation of José Comas's holdings between the Piray Guazú and Piray Miní streams -- until 1897 (Alcaráz, 2009, p. 160).

13 National politicians were not unanimous in their concern for the settlement of this space. “The territory of Misiones has been settled little in comparison with other national governorships, since its federalization,” stated Governor Barreyro in a report presented to the executive; he attributed this “clear demographic stagnation” “purely and exclusively to the reprehensible neglect in which the public authorities have kept it” (Barreyro, 1919, p. 8).

Galician Polish immigrants¹⁴ through efforts led by the then-governor of Misiones, Juan José Lanusse (1896–1905). As a sparsely populated frontier territory—it had a population of 33,163, according to estimates from the census of 1895, over half of which was comprised of Paraguayans and Brazilians—the Polish migrants were intended to “guarantee the territorial integrity” of Misiones in the regional context (Porada, 2015, p. 88).

Map 4
Location of federal colonies in Misiones



Source: Eidt (1971, p. 188).

14 Argentina’s Polish community is one of the largest in all of Latin America. In Misiones, Polish peasants “were attracted by the benefits that the authorities granted to the settlers” (Porada 2015, p. 14) in a context of the considerable precarity of their rural communities of origin.

In the rest of Misiones, the establishment of *latifundios* and the shaping of what Roberto Abíznano (1985) has termed the “extractive front” delayed the start of its colonization. Thus, in the region of Alto Paraná—situated along the banks of the Paraná River, from the north of Misiones up to Corpus—the colonization process only began after the end of WWI, and was led by private companies.¹⁵ In 1919, there were two main colonization projects: that of Adolfo Schwelm in Eldorado; and that of the Compañía Colonizadora Alto Paraná Culmeyer y Cía., led by Carlos Culmeyer, in Puerto Rico and Montecarlo. The space where these colonies were founded had been acquired by two large *latifundista* owners at the start of the 20th century, once the extractive front had gone into decline. Within the territory of Misiones, these were the main focuses of settlement for German and German-Brazilian immigrants (Gallero, 2009) and, after 1936, for Swiss immigrants (Zang, 2017).

For the implementation of the colonization plan and the agricultural exploitation of Misiones, the federal government anticipated the arrival and settlement of immigrants from Europe, rejecting the notion of colonization by way of Latin American migrants. This much was stipulated by Governor Juan José Lanusse, who opined in his *Memorias* of 1896 that it would be “a lamentable error” to project and promote the agrarian development of the national territory using immigrants from the neighboring countries of Paraguay and Brazil, as this would do nothing to arrest “the perpetuation of the backwardness and the routine in which agriculture here languishes” (Lanusse, 1898, p. 10). The following table shows the largest migratory groups that arrived in Misiones in 1903.

15 The peculiarity of this colonization, according to María Cecilia Gallero (2008, p. 65), “was shown in that the private colonizers administered the land they bought and did not manage public land as official legislation established.”

Table 1
Foreign colonization of Misiones, 1903

Country/region of origin	Families	Hectares cultivated	Averages hectares per family
Poland	810	6,171	7.6
Brazil	502	2,544	5.1
Paraguay	116	458	3.9
Italy	72	584	8.1
Russia	70	363	5.2
Germany	59	322	5.4
Spain	38	240	6.3
France	30	195	6.5
Sweden	15	46	3.1
Oriental	10	54	5.4
Switzerland	6	55	9.8
Arabic	2	6	3.2
Denmark	1	3	3.0
English	1	2	2.0
Greece	1	3	3.0
English	1	5	5.0

Source: Eidt (1971, p. 93).

The aim of the federal government was to populate Misiones with European immigrants, and to consolidate productive settlements. Alfredo Bolsi (1986, p. 60) argues that “it seems that another of the particularities of state action was related to those regulations, implicit of course, that stimulated the handover of land ownership to the non-*criollo* population. The spirit of the time [...] considered the advantages of the agricultural tradition that European colonization incorporated.”

According to Bolsi, this policy of selective distribution of lands to immigrants was stepped up the point where over 80 percent of plots were allotted to non-*criollos* by the start of the 1920s.¹⁶ Thus, the colonies that emerged during that decade were populated primarily by European immigrants and their descendants.

¹⁶ The situation changed little during the subsequent decades of the 20th century. According to a survey conducted at the start of the 1970s, of 1,200 cases, “71.3% of landholding producers in Misiones are of ‘European or Euro-American’ ancestry,” while “92% of rural employees [...] correspond to the category of ‘undifferentiated American or Argentine’”; that is, as Víctor Rau (2012, p. 72) observes, there is a correlation between occupation and ethnic ancestry that has been perpetuated over time.

Given the overexploitation of the primary resources of Misiones—as well as old-growth yerba mate, the extraction of “legal timber” (*madera de ley*) was important¹⁷—the aim was to put the land into production, and in this yerba mate played an outstanding role. The colonization process and the establishment of agricultural colonies in the newly created national territory cannot be understood without taking this crop into account. Indeed, during the time of the extractive front, large native yerba mate trees¹⁸ were subjected to “haphazard felling everywhere and at all times” to facilitate harvesting, and thus “the process of their destruction advanced slowly but inexorably” (Daumas, 1930, p. 6).

By the end of the 19th century, the yerba mate plantations had deteriorated to such an extent that their propagation became a matter of concern to the governing elites. President Julio Argentino Roca addressed the issue in a letter to the Swiss Julio Ulises Martín—of whom Dr. Francisco Machón (1926) said “nobody contributed more to the development of Misiones”—who was in Paraguay¹⁹ at the time engaged in an attempt to recover the Jesuit practice of planting:

You, Mr Martin, propose to do in Paraguay what we need to do here. I have been thinking on this matter for some time. [...] if you truly understand this problem, plant yerba mate in our country and start your plantations in our colonies in Misiones. (Martin y Cía. Limitada Sociedad Anónima, 2004, p. 48)

In 1902, Martín began his yerba mate plantations on a commercial scale in San Ignacio, Misiones, where he had lands. Martín entrusted the management of his plantations to Pablo Allain—a Montpellier-educated Swiss agronomic engineer and son-in-law of Juan José Lanusse—who had also established plantations there at the behest of the company La Plantadora S. A.²⁰

17 Transported from Brazil to Argentina in the mid-19th century, the concept of “legal timber” was conceived by Emperor Pedro I to regulate the felling of highly prized tree species such as cedar (*Cedrea fissilis*), incense (*Myrocarpus frondosus*), pink trumpet tree (*Tabebuia ipe*) and petereby (*Cordia trichotoma*) (Arenhardt, 2005).

18 According to Daumas (1930), the old-growth yerba mate trees in Misiones exceeded 18 and 20 meters in height.

19 In Paraguay, Martín learned of the favorable results obtained by Federico Neuman, a German immigrant, in planting yerba mate trees, a practice that had been lost following the expulsion of Jesuit priests in 1776. Dr. Machón noted in an article published in the *Gazette de Lausanne* on Sunday June 13, 1926, that Neuman was convinced that “the pheasant of the forests [...] was a vital intermediary host in the germination of the ilex [yerba mate] seed” (Machón, 1926).

20 Pablo Allain was instrumental in starting up the public company *La Plantadora de Yerba Mate*, in 1910. In the years that followed, the company’s yerba mate plantations and those of Julio Ulyses Martín were the largest in San Ignacio.

Until 1912 yerba mate producers in Brazil, the main competitors of the Argentines and the region's major exporters, had a "lack of faith" in the progress of Argentina's plantations and so did not express any real opposition to their rivals (Daumas, 1930). But by 1915, yerba mate cultivation in Argentina was on the increase and on a scale comparable to the harvesting of old-growth trees; from that point on, Brazil grew increasingly concerned about the competition from its neighbor. However:

Powerful reasons of a political and strategic nature also encourage the promotion of the Argentine plantation. A small, far-away piece of the homeland, set between two foreign powers: Misiones, devoid of rapid transport links, requires populating, and the most active means of attracting immigration is by providing the resources to those who aspire [to go there]. The crop best suited to the climate of the territory and to the soil is, without the slightest doubt, yerba mate. (Daumas, 1930, p. 6)

The gradual substitution of wild yerba mate trees with plantations that did more than just alter the product's statistics of origin—it triggered a process whereby migrants arrived to begin plantations, bolstering the settlement of Misiones. In this way, the practice of sowing yerba mate and the subsequent consolidation of plantations became a key factor both in the settlement of immigrants and the orientation of their economic activities. Yerba mate is therefore considered as the period's settler crop par excellence. Indeed, from the perspective of Ladislao Ziman and Alfonso Scherer, "it was evident that the future of Misiones lay not in the virgin yerba mate trees with indications of depletion, but in cultivated yerba mate" (1976, p. 32).

In 1919, for instance, cultivated yerba mate trees were still largely in the hands of four or five large companies, including the *Santa Inés* plantation owned by the Spaniard Pedro Núñez, totaling 800 hectares in Posadas; as well as the *La María Antonia* plantation belonging to the Herrera Vegas family; the firm operated by Jules Ulyses Martin, which owned 650 hectares; and Pablo Allain's 577-hectare *Plantadora de Yerba S. A.*, all situated in San Ignacio. In turn, small-scale producers operating throughout the National Territory of Misiones together accounted for just 1,000 hectares (Larguía, 2006, p. 131). But this situation was reversed once the colonization process took off: in federal settlements (Bonpland, Corpus, Yermal Viejo, San José, San Javier, Apóstoles), the plantations were smaller, while the departments of Santa Ana and, above all, San Ignacio, hosted the largest plantations in the National Territory.

As part of the government's land concession policy, immigrants who arrived to work as farmers were given considerable incentives—such as land

at discounted prices and the option of paying for it in installments—to become medium-sized landholders, though in return they were obliged to dedicate a certain percentage of their fields to yerba mate cultivation. Thus, from 1926, by decree of President Marcelo T. Alvear, the National Land Directorate established “as a condition for being awarded lots in Misiones the obligation of residing on the plantation and planting between 20 and 50 percent of the surface area with yerba mate trees,” starting two years from receipt of the title deeds (Rau, 2012, pp. 79 and 64). These regulations, however, only applied to state-sponsored colonization of the National Territory of Misiones and not to the private sector, although this was not to say that those under no obligation to grow yerba mate did not do so regardless.

3. Conclusions

The colonization of Misiones cannot be understood without consideration of yerba mate as a settler crop, in terms of both the policies oriented toward the conservation of old-growth trees in the second half of the 19th century and the diffusion of yerba mate plantations at the start of the 20th. Control of the exploitation of this resource triggered strong disputes between neighboring countries and the provinces bordering Misiones. Indeed, this frontier area was, during much of the 19th century, hugely unstable both politically and administratively; Paraguayan incursions into the department of Candelaria and the war against the Empire of Brazil between 1825 and 1826 precipitated its gradual depopulation and the dispersal of its inhabitants. In this context, after a brief and ineffectual protectorate provided by the province of Santa Fe (in 1822), the Corrientes government dissolved Misiones as an autonomous territory—*de facto* and *de jure*—in 1832 and incorporated its dependencies. Between 1832 and 1880, Misiones was under the jurisdiction of this province.

This situation unraveled with the War of the Triple Alliance. The constant raids upon the territory of Misiones by troops under various banners, and the resulting proliferation of commercial activities to provision the armies, fostered a better understanding of the resources that were available in this space. After the war, the federal government took increasing interest in Misiones, leading to the federalization of the territory in December 1881. However, the province of Corrientes—mindful that the creation of the national territory halted the usufruct it enjoyed over the area—authorized a rapid sale of Misiones lands in large plots of 25 square leagues, which ultimately placed vast swathes in the hands of wealthy families linked to local and national circles of power.

The creation of the national territory gave rise to sizable *latifundios* that conditioned the implementation of a policy for populating Misiones; indeed, the main centers of settlement by the first European immigrants were precisely those areas of land that were not subject to the sale of 1881. There were two main routes for the settlement of Misiones: the first was state-led colonization, and the second took place through private colonization companies. The former centered on the spaces that were not sold by Corrientes in the south and center of the territory, while the latter unfolded in Alto Paraná following the decline of the extractive front.

At the same time, towards the end of the 19th century, the overexploitation of old-growth yerba mate trees presaged a decline in production. This stirred renewed interest in recovering the cultivation of new plants, a practice that had been lost with the expulsion of the Jesuit priests. In 1902 the Swiss immigrant Julio Ulises Martín, alongside the agricultural engineer Pablo Allain, succeeded in propagating yerba mate trees by sowing—a development that proved crucial both for the history of Misiones and for its settlement. On the one hand, raw material from cultivated yerba mate trees gradually subsumed that from old-growth forests; and on the other hand, the rising profitability of yerba mate cultivation rendered it one of the biggest attractions for immigrants who wanted to settle in Misiones.

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