

PUERTO RICO UNDER  
COLONIAL RULE

*Political Persecution and the  
Quest for Human Rights*

*Edited by*

RAMÓN BOSQUE-PÉREZ

AND

JOSÉ JAVIER COLÓN MORERA

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# Vieques ca. 1940

ATLANTIC OCEAN

CARIBBEAN SEA



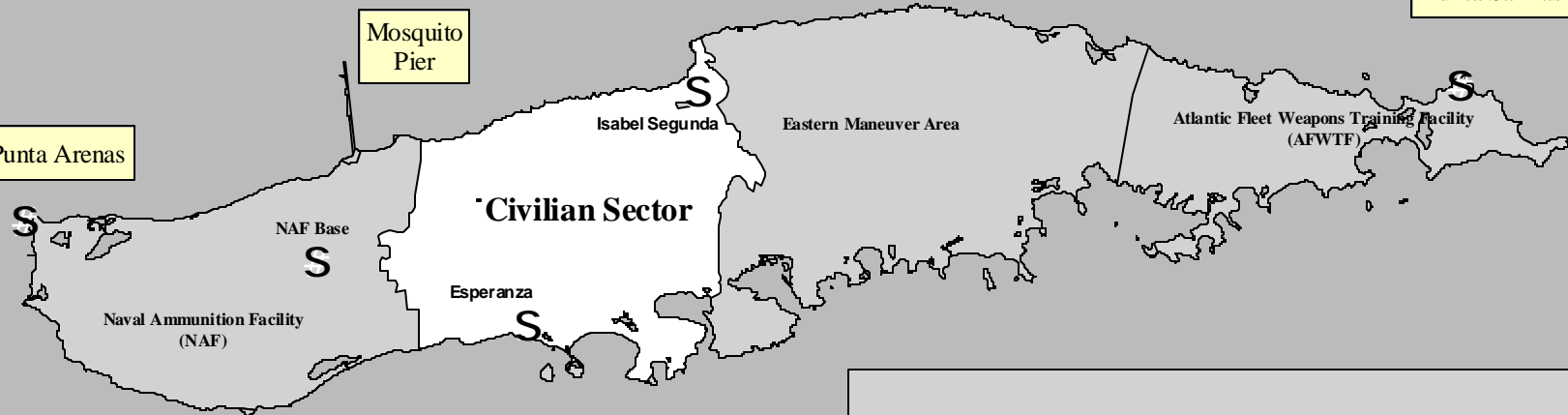
# VIEQUES ca. 2000

ATLANTIC OCEAN

Punta Salinas

Mosquito Pier

Punta Arenas



NAF Base

Naval Ammunition Facility (NAF)

Civilian Sector

Esperanza

Isabel Segunda

Eastern Maneuver Area

Atlantic Fleet Weapons Training Facility (AFWTF)

CARIBBEAN SEA

Puerto Rico



Culebra

San Juan

Fajardo

Ceiba

Humacao

Vieques

## TEN

# Expropriation and Displacement of Civilians in Vieques, 1940–1950

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César J. Ayala and Viviana Carro-Figueroa

THE ORIGIN OF THE CONFLICT in Vieques lies in the expropriation of civilian lands during the 1940s to build military facilities for the U.S. Navy. These expropriations took place in two waves: 1942–1943 and 1947–1950. At present, the facilities in Vieques are part of a larger military complex known as “Roosevelt Roads,” which spans eastern Puerto Rico and the island of Vieques. Roosevelt Roads is one of the largest U.S. naval bases outside of the Continental United States. It was built during World War II with the capacity to house the British Navy in case it became necessary during the war (Veaz 1995, 166). Since the 1940s, the western part of Vieques is used as a munitions depot, while the eastern part serves as a target range for combined sea-air-ground maneuvers. The U.S. Navy rents the island of Vieques to the navies of other countries for target practice (Langley 1985, 271–75; Giusti 1999b, 133–204). For six decades, the civilian population has been constrained on the center of the island, surrounded by the ecological devastation produced by navy bombardments.

In this chapter, we examine navy expropriations in Vieques during the 1940s, utilizing two sources of original data. We have examined the tax record data for all properties located in Vieques in the fiscal years 1940, 1945, and 1950.<sup>1</sup> The profile of land-ownership in Vieques allows us to set comparisons of social and economic conditions before and after the first and second rounds of expropriation. The records can be matched owner by owner so the data yield exact quantitative information on who suffered the expropriations, how much land they lost, and the location of each property.<sup>2</sup> In addition to

the land tenure data based on archival sources, we present here some of the results of a set of interviews with residents of Vieques who experienced expulsion from the land in the 1940s. In 1979, under the sponsorship of the Youth Exchange Project of the American Friends Service Committee (later to become the *Proyecto Caribeño de Justicia y Paz*, Caribbean Project for Justice and Peace, hereafter *PCJP*), fifty-three personal interviews were conducted with a sample of Viequenses who were—themselves, their parents, grandparents, or close relatives—affected by the expropriations of the navy during the 1940s. Two additional interviews with former large landowners of Vieques also were carried out in Puerto Rico as part of that study. The survey was conducted by a team of seventeen Viequenses and eight persons from the main island of Puerto Rico.<sup>3</sup> The mean age of those interviewed was sixty-seven years in 1979.

In the more than twenty years that have passed since the initial *PCJP* research on the expropriations of Vieques lands by the navy, several accounts have been published that depict many issues that in the late 1970s were unclear to both activists and researchers. After the 1999 killing of David Sanes Rodríguez by a stray bomb, the struggle to oust the navy from Vieques has become a national and global issue of justice and respect for human rights. Television and newspaper reports occasionally portray the memories of old Vieques residents who lived through the traumatic expropriation experience, or the account of second-generation relatives who have kept their stories alive for present-day Viequenses.

One of the basic findings that both kinds of data yield is that land was extremely concentrated in Vieques at the time the U.S. Navy took over. For this reason, the data on land tenure imply a limitation in that they give us insight into only those who owned property. It leaves out of sight all of the rural workers and *agregados*<sup>4</sup> who did not have title to lands but who were nevertheless expelled from the land when the titled owners were expropriated by the U.S. Navy. Thus our approach is twofold: on the one hand, we reconstruct the disappearance of the landowners of Vieques as a result of the expropriations. On the other hand, we try to assess the broader social impact of the expropriations by looking into the experience of those who did not own land but who were nevertheless displaced.

#### LAND CONCENTRATION IN VIEQUES

The degree of land concentration in Vieques at the time of the expropriations is in large part due to the existence of a sugar-plantation economy since the nineteenth century. Concentration of land-ownership is typical of all sugar plantation regions in the Caribbean. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Vieques had four sugar mills (*centrales*): the Santa María, the Arcadia, the Esperanza, also known as “Puerto Real,” and the Playa Grande

(Bonnet Benítez 1976, 126). Central Arcadia produced sugar in the years 1907 to 1910 but ceased operations sometime before 1912. *The Book of Porto Rico*, edited by Eugenio Fernández García, gives production figures for Puerto Rico's sugar mills between 1912 and 1922. The sugar output of *centrales* Puerto Real, Playa Grande, and Santa María is listed in the municipality of Vieques, but not that of the Arcadia mill (Fernández y García 1923, 544; Bonnet Benítez 1976, 126). Possibly the Arcadia stopped grinding between 1910 and 1912. The Santa María mill is listed in Fernández García's book until 1923, displaying small outputs of sugar, and Bonnet Benítez states that it produced in its distillery a brand of rum, the Santa María. Nevertheless, in 1930, the Santa María mill is not listed in Gilmore's *Sugar Manual* (1930), an indication that it had either stopped grinding, or that its sugar production was negligible. The Puerto Real mill ground its last crop in 1927. After that date, some of the cane was ground at the Playa Grande mill (Bonnet Benítez 1976, 126), and some was shipped by ferry from Vieques to the Pasto Viejo mill in Humacao.<sup>5</sup> By 1930, the Playa Grande mill enjoyed "the distinction of being the surviving sugar factory on the island of Vieques" (Gilmore 1930).

The 1930s were years of a terrible crisis in the sugar industry in the entire Caribbean (Ayala 1999, 230–47). By 1940, the sugar industry of Vieques was in sharp decline. The number of *cuerdas* planted in cane had decreased from 7,621 in 1935 to 4,586 in 1940. Cane yields had dropped from twenty-four tons of cane per *cuerva* in 1910 to twenty-two in 1935 and nineteen in 1940. During the 1930s, the control of the great landowners over land resources reached its peak. The Eastern Sugar Associates owned 11,000 acres of land, of which 1,500 were planted in cane. The cane was shipped to Pasto Viejo (Picó 1950, 209–11). Puerto Rican geographer Rafael Picó argued in 1950 that toward the end of the 1930s, more than two-thirds of the land planted in cane in Vieques was in the hands of the Benítez Sugar Company, owner of the Playa Grande mill, and the Eastern Sugar Associates. Thus according to Picó, "the evils of land concentration and absentee ownership, prevailing in most sugar cane lands in Puerto Rico, were deeply intensified in Vieques. The bulk of the population was landless, a part of the 'peon' class" (Picó 1950, 209).

The Playa Grande sugar mill, owned by the Benítez family, went bankrupt in 1936 and was under receivership to the Bank of Nova Scotia until 1939, when it was purchased by Juan Angel Tió. In the tax assessments of 1940, however, the Benítez family still appears as the principal owner of the lands. The taxes charged were small compared to those paid by the Eastern Sugar Associates, probably because of the state of bankruptcy of the Playa Grande corporation, its doubtful legal standing, or litigation in court and competing claims by the bank and the new owners. Despite the fact that Tió started to operate the Playa Grande mill in 1939, in the tax records for 1940,

the members of the Benítez family were still listed as the principal landowners of Vieques, owning almost half of the land in the island municipality. Dolores Benítez, Carlota Benítez and others, Carmen Aurelia Benítez Bithorn, and María Bithorn Benítez each appear as the owner of 3,636 *cuerdas*, while Francisco and J. Benítez Santiago are listed as the owners of a tract of 1,191 *cuerdas*. In sum, the above-mentioned members of the Benítez family “owned” 15,735 *cuerdas* of land out of a total of 36,032 *cuerdas* assessed for taxation, or 44 percent of the land of Vieques. These 15,735 *cuerdas* were assessed at \$47,410 for tax purposes in 1940, or \$3.01 per *cuerda*. In contrast to the situation of the Benítez family, the 10,043 *cuerdas* of the Eastern Sugar Associates were assessed in the same year at \$661,400, or \$63.95 per *cuerda*, twenty times more per *cuerda* than the lands of the Benítez family.

According to the census of 1930, two owners of more than 1,000 acres controlled 71 percent of the farmland in the municipality of Vieques. Only in Santa Isabel, a municipality controlled by a U.S. corporation, the Aguirre Sugar Company, and in Guánica, a municipality controlled by the South Porto Rico Sugar Company, was there a structure of land concentration more unbalanced than that of Vieques. One farm of over 1,000 acres owned 87 percent of the farmland in Santa Isabel. In Vieques, farms of over 100 acres occupied 93 percent of the area, while in Santa Isabel the corresponding figure was 98 percent. According to the *Census of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration*, in Vieques, the average farm spanned 393 acres, while in all of Puerto Rico, the average farm size was thirty-six acres. In more than 70 percent of Puerto Rico’s municipalities, the average farm size was below fifty acres, and there were only eight municipalities with average farm sizes larger than 100 acres (Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration 1938, 124). Vieques was the third most extreme instance of land concentration in Puerto Rico and was surpassed only by the *municipios* (municipalities) controlled by the South Puerto Rico Sugar Company (Guánica) and the Aguirre Sugar Company (Santa Isabel). There is no doubt that the problem of land concentration dominated the social and economic landscape of Vieques, to a much greater degree than in the majority of the *municipios* of Puerto Rico.

The U.S. Navy’s accounts of the expropriations generally emphasize that most of the land was acquired from a handful of owners.

Of the 21,000 acres, 10,000 acres or nearly half were acquired from Juan Tio, owner of Playa Grande mill and sugarcane lands in the western, central, and eastern sectors. Another substantial portion, nearly 8,000 acres, was acquired from Eastern Sugar Associates who had owned and operated the Esperanza sugar mill and lands in the east central sector. Lands of two other major families, Benítez and Rieckehoff, brought the total to over 19,000 acres, or 90% of this first series of acquisitions. (Department of the Navy 1979, vol. 1, sect. 2, p. 199)

## EXPROPRIATION OF THE LANDOWNERS

The tax records offer a glimpse into rural life in a plantation society dominated by a few landowning families. For example, the farm of “Carlota Benítez and others,” located in the *barrio*,<sup>6</sup> Punta Arenas, spanned 3,082 acres. There were “62 houses” among the improvements listed in 1940. The farm of Francisco and J. Benítez Santiago in Punta Arenas, which spanned 558 acres, contained sixty houses. The Eastern Sugar Associates had sixty-two houses in one of its properties. Another farm owned by Carlota Benítez in Barrio Llave, spanning fifty-four acres, had a cockpit in addition to a number of houses (AGPR, DH 1940). These were *ranchones* or *barracones*, which housed some of the poorest workers. Even cockfights, which were an important part of rural community life, took place on the land of the great landowners. The land and the houses were listed in the tax records as belonging to the landowners, who paid the corresponding taxes. The workers, having no titles, were removed without legal obstacles when the large landowners sold their properties. The ease of eviction was due, to a large degree, to the degree of rural landlessness among a rural population whose only possession was, as they say in Vieques, “the day and the night” (Pastor Ruiz 1947, 196).

Tax records provide no insight, nevertheless, on how big landowners experienced the expropriations, or how this process differed from the plight of small farm owners and *agregados*. As part of the 1979 study, the team interviewed one of the members of the Tió family—the largest landowning family of Vieques in 1941, controlling more than 10,500 *cuerdas* at that time—on the expropriation proceedings and the position taken by the family during the process.<sup>7</sup> Together with the testimonies of descendants of other large landowners and information gathered during the research process on the litigation followed in the federal court, an outline emerges of the expropriation experience and its significance from the point of view of the landowning class.

As it already has been portrayed in this chapter, the sugar economy of Vieques was in critical condition by 1941. The Playa Grande mill, the only one still grinding cane in Vieques at the time, had been acquired by the Tió family from the Bank of Nova Scotia just two years earlier. The Tiós had been able to operate only during three harvests before the entrance of the United States into World War II. They acquired not only the lands and the mill from the bank in 1939, but they also inherited the *agregado* system, which was “already established in the land at the time of purchase.”

*Agregados* were rural workers who lived on the plantations and exchanged labor services for usufruct over the land. Relations of *agregado* existed in Puerto Rico since the nineteenth century and developed initially in the interior high-land region that specialized in coffee production (Bergad 1983). In its origins, *agregado* relations served landowners as a means of securing workers in a context

TABLE 10.1  
Principal Landowners of Vieques in 1940-1941 and Their Properties in 1944-1945

Last Name	Name	No. Farms		Cuerdas	No. Farms	Cuerdas	Cuentas: Difference <sup>1</sup>	Value of Land 1940	Value of Land 1945	Land Value Difference	Improve-ment Value		Improve-ment Value Difference
		1940	1945								1940	1945	
Eastern Sugar	Associates	10,343	15	1,825	1	1,825	-8,518	662,210	121,010	-541,200	77,720	0	-77,720
Benítez	Dolores	3,636	2	0	0	0	-3,636	2,720	0	-2,720	0	0	0
Benítez	Carlota y otros	3,636	2	0	0	0	-3,636	0	0	0	12,870	0	-12,870
Benítez Bithorn	Carmen Aurelia	3,082	1	0	0	0	-3,082	20,300	0	-20,300	0	0	0
Bithorn Benítez	María	3,082	1	0	0	0	-3,082	19,590	0	-19,590	0	0	0
Benítez Santiago	Francisco y J.	1,191	2	0	0	0	-1,191	0	0	0	6,080	0	-6,080
Benítez Bithorn	Carmen Amelia	554	1	0	0	0	-554	3,800	0	-3,800	10	0	-10
Bithorn Vda. Benítez	María	554	1	0	0	0	-554	3,720	0	-3,720	10	0	-10
Simons	Miguel	2,129	4	1,308	4	4	-821	83,770	54,320	-29,450	12,230	610	-11,620
Díaz Sabino	Esteban	678	16	0	0	0	-678	37,250	0	-37,250	5,190	0	-5,190
Rieckehoff	Ana	468	1	0	0	0	-468	17,150	0	-17,150	150	0	-150
Bermúdez	Juan	441	4	108	4	4	-333	7,920	7,920	0	3,100	3,100	0
Haristroy	Justine y M.	347	1	0	0	0	-347	34,740	0	-34,740	2,150	0	-2,150
Díaz	Esteban	333	4	0	0	0	-333	10,740	0	-10,740	10	0	-10
Quiñones Imodóvar	Manuel	293	3	105	1	1	-188	7,950	3,150	-4,800	0	0	0
Rivera Sucn.	Sixto A.	243	1	243	1	1	0	19,600	19,600	0	50	50	0
Rivera	Sixto A.	242	3	243	3	3	1	13,740	13,740	0	100	100	0
Ramírez	Tomás	210	2	315	3	3	105	6,300	10,500	4,200	0	0	0
González Mercedes	Jovito	190	2	0	0	0	-190	9,110	0	-9,110	300	0	-300
Quiñones Almodóvar	Natividad/otros	181	2	0	0	0	-181	10,000	0	-10,000	90	0	-90
Brignoni Vda. Pérez	Rosa	180	8	182	9	9	2	12,240	12,350	110	140	140	0
Brignoni Mercado	Juan	167	1	0	0	0	-167	11,620	0	-11,620	0	0	0
Cruz Vélez	Eulogio	166	18	0	0	0	-166	12,140	0	-12,140	2,070	0	-2,070
Quiñones Sucn.	Epigмене	146	2	0	0	0	-146	3,112	0	-3,112	530	0	-530
Díaz Esteban y	Belén Carcaño	129	1	0	0	0	-129	3,870	0	-3,870	100	0	-100

Benites Castano	Carlos	124	1	0	0	0	-124	6,430	0	-6,430	0	0	0	0
Emeric	José	115	1	0	0	0	-115	4,200	0	-4,200	80	0	0	-80
Brignoni Mercado	Inés	110	1	110	1	0	0	8,280	8,280	0	60	60	0	0
Acevedo Guadalupe	Antolino	108	1	0	0	0	-108	1,250	0	-1,250	0	0	0	0
Brignoni Huertas	José	108	1	0	0	0	-108	1,260	0	-1,260	0	0	0	0
Fix Alais	A.	105	1	0	0	0	-105	3,150	0	-3,150	0	0	0	0
Pico Mora	Arturo	105	1	6	1	0	-99	4,200	600	-3,600	1,450	1,400	0	-50
Fix	Nangaret D.	105	1	0	0	0	-105	3,150	0	-3,150	0	0	0	0
Carle Dubois	Carlos	103	2	24	1	0	-79	9,110	2,400	-6,710	1,070	1,330	260	0
Jaspard	Carlos	100	2	0	0	0	-100	8,480	0	-8,480	20	0	0	-20
TOTAL		33,705	110	4,469	29	0	-29,236	1,063,102	253,870	-809,232	125,580	6,790	0	-96,670
Familia Benítez		15,736	10	0	0	0	-15,736	50,130	0	-50,130	18,970	0	0	-18,970
Familia Benítez (%)		47%	9%	0%	0%	0%	54%	5%	0%	6%	15%	0%	0%	20%
Eastern Sugar (%)		31%	14%	41%	3%	3%	29%	62%	48%	67%	62%	0%	0%	80%

Source: AGPR, DH 1940-1950.

<sup>1</sup>The total for this column exceeds the total expropriated by the navy, because some landowners not included in this table actually acquired land between 1941 and 1945.

Note: One *cuerda* = .9712 acres.

TABLE 10.2  
Summary of Naval Land Acquisitions

	<i>Approximate Acreage<sup>1</sup></i>	<i>Approximate Price<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>Price in \$ per Acre<sup>3</sup></i>	<i>Number of Parcels</i>	<i>Approximate Number of Parties<sup>3</sup></i>
Naval Land Acquisition, 1941–1943					
Civil Action No. 2300	10,209	379,300	37	6	30
Civil Action No. 2443	97	18,200	188	18	55
Civil Action No. 2487	687	56,900	83	34	150
Civil Action No. 2604	1,234	66,600	54	6	15
Civil Action No. 2714	7,937	423,800	53	2	4
Civil Action No. 3211	13	1,200	92	1	10
Civil Action No. 3254	140	21,500	154	7	25
Civil Action No. 3361	696	74,000	106	42	0
Subtotal	21,013 (21,020)	1,041,500	50	116	489
Navy Land Acquisitions 1950					
Civil Action No. 6108	4,340	530,400	122	9	40
Totals	25,353	1,561,900	62	125	529

<sup>1</sup>Acreages derived from U.S. Navy P.W. Drawing No. 1952 and U.S. Navy Files. Acreage for Civil Action No. 6108 derived by subtraction using interrogatories 20–24, supplying total acreage for selected years. Numbers in parentheses indicate acreage according to U.S. Navy Interrogatories (1978) for the appropriate years.

<sup>2</sup>Derived from U.S. Navy Interrogatories 20–24, August 1978.

<sup>3</sup>Many individuals and banks were parties involved in a number of parcels. Estimate attempts to avoid double counting and is considerably less than the total number named for each action. It also appears that tenants were in some cases made parties in the court actions.

<sup>4</sup>Calculated by Ayala and Carro-Figueroa.

Source: Department of the Navy 1979, vol. 1, sect. 2, p. 200.

of labor scarcity by offering land, sometimes a house, cows for milk, and so on. As the landless population and the supply of labor increased in the nineteenth century, the terms of *agregado* deteriorated for the workers, and by the twentieth century, many *agregados* were in practice undistinguishable from rural workers. In Vieques, the traditional usufruct was not taken into account during the expropriations, and the navy compensated the owners of the properties without being concerned about the fate of the *agregados* and rural workers who were settled on the land on terms defined by traditional relations of *agregado*.

The expropriation process began several months before Pearl Harbor, but the attack was the event that made landowners accept the decision without further litigation. According to the Tiós' recollections, a marshal from the federal court brought a notification to the family that explained that the navy was expropriating most of their lands and had already deposited in the federal court the amount of money deemed reasonable compensation for their property. Initially, the family tried to defend their assets by contesting the condemnation decree and trying to prove in court that the allocated compensation did not correspond to the real market value of their property. But the pace of the process was too rapid to allow them to organize a better defense.

The Tió family remembers how immediately after the notification, the navy asked for permission to start the construction of military installations in Monte Pirata, the highest elevation of Vieques, located within their fields. Subtle intimidation of the family by the commander in chief of the base followed. The expertise of A. Tió, an engineer, was sought by the navy to assemble a map of the island's properties and their legal owners. As recorded in the 1979 transcript of our interview with A. Tió, his cooperation was secured in the following manner:

Commander Johnson, chief of the base came to talk with Tió. He already had in place several study brigades to measure the island of Vieques. He asked Tió to draw for him a landholding map, as best as he could, and to have it ready in 30 days. The only way to accomplish this task was to take some measurements, and by putting into a bigger map all of the already existing maps of the island. Tió replied to Johnson that, how was he going to do this if they were going to use this map to expropriate him? The commander told him that if he didn't do it he was going to recruit him, make him a lieutenant, and then order him to do it. This was said half jokingly and half seriously, but more seriously than jokingly. This was a few days before Pearl Harbor, and when the attack occurred, he went to the federal court, settled the case, and finished with everything. He did the map, as best as he could, exactly enough.<sup>8</sup>

Tió remarked that his family did not participate in any way in the process of notifying or removing the *agregados* from the property. The navy took charge of everything. The principal way in which his family was affected was

in economic terms. They had sizable capital losses that were difficult to deduct from their income tax. They had to sell in a hurry 2,000 head of cattle, which grazed in the expropriated lands, and since they did not have enough lands to keep them, they had to accept whatever price was offered by the purchasers. The family concluded that pursuing their case in the federal court would only increase their final compensation by 10 percent, and that amount was not enough to justify putting up a struggle during the war emergency. Although several landholding families opted for litigation, apparently, by 1942, most of the cases were settled.

#### EXPULSION OF AGREGADOS AND WORKERS

Surrounded by the beauty of the ocean and the green cane fields, a man starved to death. The ocean, rich in mysteries and hidden wealth, could not help him. The soft and whispering cane field was a sight to behold. But that was all [. . .] the ocean and the cane-field have no heart. (Pastor Ruiz 1947, 199)

The existence of a plantation economy and society in Vieques had important repercussions during the expropriations. As in many other plantation regions, there was no geographic separation between workplace and place of residence. The workers lived and worked on the land of the large landowners. This gives plantation life a kind of “total” character that is different from the situation of most urban wage workers.<sup>9</sup> When the expropriation of the large landowners took place, workers lost in one single blow both their jobs and their houses. To urban workers, this would be the equivalent of being fired from the job and evicted by the landlord on the same day.

Workers who lived on the land of the landowners typically had subsistence plots as part of the usufruct characteristic of the traditional arrangement known as *agregado*. In Vieques, the small amounts of land for planting available to those who described themselves as *agregados* indicate that the function of the plots was principally the production of subsistence garden crops rather than commercial agriculture. For example, Matilde Bonaro indicated that at the time of the navy’s expropriations, she was an *agregada* in Playa Grande who had at her disposal half a *cuerda* of land. Francisco Colón López had two *cuerdas* available in Barrio Mosquito, Ventura Feliciano Corrillo had one *cuerda*, and Teodora Velázquez and Juan Sherman had one and a half *cuerdas* each as *agregados* (PCJP 1979). On this scale, it is not possible to make a living without recourse to wage labor in the sugar fields at harvest time. Clearly the function of usufruct was to facilitate the reproduction of labor power while guaranteeing a supply of laborers to the landowners. The frontier between *agregado* as a sort of tenancy or sharecropping arrangement and rural proletarianization is therefore blurred, so it is not possible to speak

clearly of “tenants,” on the one hand, and “workers,” on the other hand. Among the forty-one Viequense *agregados* interviewed in 1979 who reported farm size, the median size of the plots held in usufruct was two *cuerdas*.<sup>10</sup>

Subsistence plots were particularly important during the idle season of the sugar industry, which lasted from June to November. During these months of *tiempo muerto*, most sugarcane workers were unemployed. In Vieques, people who lived during the epoch of the sugar plantations refer to the dead season as *la bruja* (“the witch”), and the term *pasar la bruja* means “to survive the idle season.” In other areas of Puerto Rico, the relation of rural peasant/proletarian communities to the ecology has been amply documented (Giusti-Cordero 1994). In Vieques, this aspect has yet to be studied, but it has undoubtedly conditioned the claims of the communities which, based on traditional rights of *agregado* relationships, understood that they had certain rights of possession and usufruct over the land. This explains the double reality of lack of titles, on the one hand, and the widespread feeling of rural dispossession after the houses, built by the workers themselves, were leveled during the expropriations, on the other hand. The U.S. Navy itself acknowledges, concerning the land title issues extant in the resettlement areas of Vieques, that traditional usufruct associated with Puerto Rican *agregado* relations has conditioned the expectations of the civilian population regarding their right to have a place to live: “For those who now live in Vieques and who once lived on Navy land, a sense of ‘ownership’ and therefore desires for return *pertains to their former rights of access and use of land*” (Department of the Navy 1979, vol. 1, sect. 2, p. 213, emphasis in original).

The existence of usufruct also affected the expelled populations who could not count on subsistence plots in the resettlement plots provided by the navy and whose means of subsistence were thus radically curtailed.

For many *agregado* families, the loss of animals and subsistence crops was traumatic, because it represented a family’s insurance policy against hard times. Doña Nilda reflected on this experience. She and her family were evicted from their home in the second wave of military expropriations in 1947. “Those who were living as *agregados* . . . I was also living as an *agregado* when the Navy came,” Doña Nilda explained, “The land we lived on the owners of the land gave us to live on. But we didn’ t receive money [when the land was expropriated]. I had chickens, pigs, all of this I had to let go. I had to let the animals go, because in Tortuguero there was no place to raise the animals. As *agregados* we could raise them on the land.” “How did you learn of your eviction,” I asked Doña Nilda. “The owner of the land told us,” she responded. “As we were *agregados* they just told us to leave.” (McCaffrey 1999, 77–78)

After the July 2001 referendum in which Viequenses voted to request the immediate withdrawal of the navy, the New York press ran stories referencing

the decline of usufruct. Ninety-one-year-old Nazario Cruz Viera was quoted saying that before the expropriations, “There were farms and the landowners needed many people to work them. They even gave you a place to live. We had everything. We lacked nothing” (González 2001). *Newsday* featured an article about seventy-four-year-old Severina Guadalupe, who was thirteen years old when the bulldozers razed her family’s home in Vieques. Even though the Guadalupes were small landowners and not *agregados*, when we interviewed her in Vieques, Ms. Guadalupe emphasized the transition from the rural economy, where food was abundant, to the squalor of life on the Santa María resettlement tract (Associated Press 2001; Ayala 2001). The transition from an *agregado* settled on the land to an urban dweller settled on a navy resettlement tract in Montesanto or Santa María produced an increase in the number of families living in poverty and a deterioration of living conditions. The Rev. Justo Pastor Ruiz described the transition experienced by the dispossessed as follows: “Those who had garden plots or lived happily on the landowner’s land surrounded by farmland and fruit trees, live today in overcrowded conditions and lack even air to breathe” (Pastor Ruiz 1947, 206).

Thus the impact of the navy’s expropriations was much broader than one might suppose by considering only the property owners of the island who were evicted through the navy’s condemnation proceedings. Seventy-seven percent of those interviewed by the *Proyecto Caribeño de Justicia y Paz* in 1979 described themselves at the time of the expropriations as *agregados* (PCJP 1979). In addition to landowners large and small, the families of the *agregados* and rural workers who lived in the land of the property owners were affected by the expropriations. They were expelled from the land and relocated to the central parts of Vieques. Thus it would seem necessary to distinguish between the process of *expropriation* as such and a much wider process of *evictions* (*desalojos*), which affected not only landowners but *agregados* and rural workers as well. In measuring the social impact of the expropriations, the fate of the landowners who received compensation must be sorted out from the situation of the *agregados* who generally did not receive any compensation.<sup>11</sup> The navy’s own conservative estimate is that altogether, “Navy land acquisitions dislocated an estimated 4,250 to 5,000 people or 40 to 50% of the total population and resettled, with Navy assistance, 27% of the population, altering both the social structure as well as the economy” (Department of the Navy 1979, vol. 1, sect. 2, p. 204).

#### CONDEMNATION PROCEEDINGS

In 1979, the editor of *Sea Power Magazine* wrote an apologetic article defending the navy against the accusations made by a community movement led by fishermen.<sup>12</sup> The fishermen complained that navy bombardments curtailed their livelihood. In the battle of words over the origins of the problems in

Vieques, and as part of a public relations campaign, the article argued that the United States did not “expropriate any property on Vieques.” The navy, continued the argument, “purchased” the land over a nine-year period (Hessman 1979, 14). However, a scholarly study produced by the navy in the same year talks of “expropriations” and “displacement” and mentions that the urgency of the war situation necessitated “condemnation proceedings” to move the civilian population. According to the navy, “Condemnation was the method of acquisition at this time and was utilized because of the haste necessitated by wartime conditions” (Department of the Navy 1979, vol. 1, sect. 2, p. 199). What is at stake is not whether property owners received some compensation but the element of compulsion in the sale.<sup>13</sup>

The initial stage in the eviction of the Vieques population from their land took place between 1941 and 1943 and began in the western section of the island, the region closest to the Isla Grande (Puerto Rico), for which the navy had immediate occupation plans. Most of the families (74 percent of those interviewed in 1979) were notified by a letter with a heading from the Naval Station Officer-in-Charge of Construction, informing them that the United States had acquired the house and land occupied by the tenant’s family, and that the property had to be abandoned in no more than ten days after receiving the notification. Still, over 30 percent of those interviewed reported that this written notification was delivered only twenty-four to forty-eight hours in advance of their actual eviction. The former manager of the Central Playa Grande, immediately employed as a field manager by the navy, delivered most of the letters accompanied by “an American or soldier.” Those who lived closer to the eastern section of Vieques were given, according to our interviewees, more time to move out. In case the family had nowhere else to go, the navy offered to relocate them on a plot of land, provided that they agreed to abandon this place again, with only twenty-four-hour advance notification and to surrender any future claims. No cement dwellings were to be constructed in these plots, according to the navy’s instructions recalled by our informants. This latter condition increased the insecurity felt by most families, then and over the years, since no matter how long they had been living in the navy resettlements or how many improvements they had made to their houses as time went by, they felt that they could again be evicted from one day to the next without any legal rights to protect them.<sup>14</sup>

The recollections of how the actual expulsions took place were still vivid in the memory of the dislodged families and their relatives. In the words of one informant (our translation): “A truck was sent with a carpenter in charge of tearing down the dwelling. Our things were thrown into the assigned plot.” Those who had more than twenty-four-hour notice recalled: “We gathered our animals and began to tear down the house,” and “Our things were thrown out in the new lot and we had to begin to clear out the brush.” Another family

remembers that after tearing the house down, the truck did not arrive that day, and they had to sleep out in the open. Others related that after their houses were torn down, they were taken to the assigned lots, given a tarpaulin, and lived under those conditions for three months, until the navy brought wood planks to their new place.

The situation of female-headed households with children and of expectant mothers in the community was singled out by our interviewees as being particularly pitiful: "Women with their children were brought here under the rain and were left with just a zinc plank above."; "Many gave birth under those zinc boards."; "My sister was pregnant and ill. She got wet during the eviction and died soon after." The fields that were converted into residential plots evidently lacked any previous conditioning, water, or basic sanitary provisions. "They were bitten by scorpions and rats. Water and food were lacking. Their skin was swollen," and "We arrived during the rainy season. Many contracted the flu. They were carried in hammocks to the hospital" (PCJP 1979).

The massive eviction evoked feelings of sadness, bitterness, and impotence in the majority of those interviewed for this study. "My mother cried and cried. She arrived in Santa María with her face covered with a towel."; "I was heartbroken."; "I thought I was not going to be able to survive."; "Even a hurricane would have been better than the expropriations." Others, however, believed that their situation was not too different from before and, in fact, improved in the short term. "In the Tió farm [where they lived as *agregados*] there was no water. Besides, a house was given to us in the new plot."; "We were sad, but they promised so much lasting work . . ."; "When the navy arrived in Vieques, the sugar mill stopped grinding cane. The construction of the base created at least some jobs."

One of the principal effects of the expropriations was the destruction of the sugar latifundia, replaced by concentrated military landholdings in the hands of the U.S. Navy. Would the process of expropriation have taken the same course had there been a numerous settled peasantry with property over the land? Would the removal of the families from the land, farm by farm, have been as easy? Perhaps a numerous peasantry would have responded with social movements of resistance, but the actual process took another course.

Generalized distress was not translated into an open kind of resistance. Many reported talks among their neighbors of refusing to leave, but their determination was weakened by several conditions: they were *agregados*, not the owners of the land, and they felt that if their landlord was willing to comply and received money, then there was little they could do. "People were afraid of the navy and scared of being jailed."; "They were *agregados* and respected the federal government. They believed the Americans would send them to Devil's Island." The bulldozers used to clear the expropriated lands scared the population and became an effective deterrent to any action. "I was

afraid of the bulldozers. The marines were evil.”; “We had seven children, they threatened us with the bulldozers . . .”; “The law was more stringent then, you had to obey. I was scared of the bulldozers.”

Yet equally important was perhaps the general understanding that they were ill equipped to face forces too superior for them, and that they would be alone in any type of struggle chosen. “There was nobody backing us. There was fear because of the language [English]. It was mandatory [to leave].”; “We were disoriented. Those who could offer any help were in favor of the navy. Nobody paid any attention if anyone protested.” Reflecting on the question of the lack of resistance, one last interviewee summarized the general outlook as follows: “There was a lot of opposition, but people were afraid to express themselves openly. The government and all the powerful were Americans. We had no support. We were slaves. We had no rights.”

#### THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE BARRIOS

The two successive processes of expropriation in Vieques affected the Western barrios first and then the eastern barrios. The condemnation proceedings that began in late 1941 affected all of Punta Arenas, Llave, Mosquito, and some of the lands of Puerto Ferro, Puerto Diablo, and Florida. The navy acquired by its own reckoning 21,020 acres, or approximately two-thirds of the island, in the period 1941–1943. In a second wave of expropriations, the navy acquired an additional 4,340 acres in the eastern portion of Vieques, principally in Puerto Diablo (Department of the Navy 1979, vol. 1, sect. 2, p. 193). According to the municipal taxation records, the barrio of Punta Arenas totally disappeared during the first wave of the expropriations of the navy. Llave lost 95 percent of its land, Mosquito lost 91 percent, and 76 percent of the lands of Puerto Ferro was taken during the first round of expropriations. Due to the high degree of land concentration, the largest haciendas spanned two or more barrios, and for this reason it is difficult to establish with precision what percentage of the large farms belonged to which barrio. For example, during the period 1940–1941, the tax records list 5,856 *cuerdas* of land belonging jointly to the barrios of Puerto Real and Puerto Ferro, without listing which part of the land belonged to which barrio. In 1945, as a result of the expropriation of the lands of Puerto Ferro, some of the land that had previously been listed jointly now appeared to belong solely to Puerto Real. Due to this statistical effect, Puerto Real appears to have had more land in 1945 than in 1940. On the entire island of Vieques, the Department of the Treasury of Puerto Rico assessed for taxation purposes 36,032 *cuerdas* of land during the period 1940–1941, but only 9,935 in 1945. The difference of 26,097 *cuerdas* (72 percent of the land of Vieques) is greater than the figure cited by J. Pastor Ruiz of 22,000 *cuerdas* expropriated by the U.S. Navy during this period (the navy figure is 21,020 acres or 21,415 *cuerdas*).<sup>15</sup>

In the second wave of expropriations, the number of *cuerdas* registered in the municipal taxation records decreased from 1,204 in Florida in 1945 to 369 in 1950, a decrease of 69 percent. In Puerto Diablo, the corresponding decrease was from 3,921 to 2,791 *cuerdas* (a 29 percent decrease), and in Puerto Real, the number of *cuerdas* taxed by the municipality decreased from 4,238 to 1,689 (a 60 percent decrease). In Vieques as a whole, the total area under civilian control according to the taxation records decreased from 9,934 *cuerdas* in 1945 to 5,685 in 1950, a 43 percent decrease from the land area available in 1945. If we consider the original taxation figure of 36,032 *cuerdas* in 1940, before the first wave of expropriations, and 5,685 in 1950, the municipality of Vieques was taxing only 16 percent as much land in 1950 as in 1940. This is a dramatic decrease in the civilian land area, and even allowing for some error in the municipal taxation figures of 1940, this means that in 1950, civilians had in the best of cases one-fifth of the land they had in 1940. This is a remarkable figure if one considers that the population of Vieques did not decline proportionally. In 1950, there were 9,228 persons in Vieques, compared to 10,037 in 1940. In other words, 89 percent of the civilian population remained on the island during the 1940–1950 decade, but civilians retained only 16 percent as much land in 1950 as in 1940. Land available to civilians decreased from 3.6 *cuerdas* per person in 1940 to 0.6 *cuerdas* per person in 1950. It does not take much of an imagination to visualize the effects of this change on a society that had been fundamentally rural and agrarian in 1940.

The fifty-three persons interviewed in 1979 came from all parts of Vieques. Most, however, lived in the western barrios, which were the most populous before the expropriations. Only eight of the fifty-three lived in the eastern sectors. Many were *agregados*, and they listed as their place of residence communities whose names are difficult to locate on today's maps. In the interviews, Viequenses who experienced expulsions from the land were asked not only where they lived before the expropriations but also where they went after the expropriations. Fifteen were relocated to Montesanto and twenty-one to Santa María, the rest moving to various other places in Vieques and even to the main island of Puerto Rico. The navy's version of events concedes that the population of *agregados* and workers (i.e., those who were not property owners) was larger than that of the property owners. This is what one would expect given the degree of concentration of landed property in Vieques and the rates of rural landlessness.

A larger population living on the acquired lands, who were not property owners, were resettled to Montesanto (a tract isolated from the other acquisitions) and to Santa María (a tract at the northeastern edge of the Eastern Sugar Associates acquisition and close to Isabel Segunda). Resettlement to these areas was proposed and accomplished in a relatively short period of

time. Records indicate that a proposal of December 1942 to relocate “agregados” [sic] from the Naval Ammunition Facility to Montesanto was a reality by August 1943, and that the Santa María tract had also been established. Those now in Vieques who were among the resettled recall an extremely rapid resettlement. Although recollections of the types of Navy assistance vary widely, the moves appear to have been accomplished with some Navy assistance. The numbers of tenant families affected range from about 500 at a minimum to 1,300 at a maximum, with 800 the most frequently cited number. (Department of the Navy 1979, vol. 1, sect. 2, p. 201)

With an average family size of approximately five persons in Vieques, 500 families translates into 2,500 individuals, or one-quarter of the population of Vieques. The figure of 1,300 families translates into 6,500, or 65 percent of the population of Vieques. Between these two extremes, the “most frequently cited” number of 800 families means 4,000 individuals, or 40 percent of the population of Vieques. The number of those affected by the evictions ranges between a quarter and 65 percent of the population of the island. Thus the expulsions had a much greater social impact than the expropriations per se, which affected only the minority, property-owning population of Vieques.

#### RECONCENTRATION

The population of Florida, a central barrio of Vieques, doubled during the decade of 1940–1950 due to the settlement, in the vicinity of Isabel II, of the population expelled from Punta Arenas, Mosquito, and Llave. However, the population of Florida was already on the rise at the time of the expropriations and had increased during the period 1935–1940 due to a 1937 resettlement project of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, which provided plots of two *cuerdas* to 199 homesteaders (Department of the Navy 1979, vol. 1, sect. 2, p. 190). In Punta Arenas, the population declined by 100 percent, in Mosquito, it dropped by 98 percent, and Llave lost 89 percent of its population during the period 1940–1950. The increase in the central sector of Vieques is the counterpart to the decrease in the barrios affected by the expropriations. According to Rev. Justo Pastor Ruiz, “The barrios of Tapón, Mosquito, and Llave disappeared. All the neighbors and small owners disappeared and formed new barrios in Moscú and Montesanto” (Pastor Ruiz 1947, 206). The navy’s version of events is not very different.

Both personal recollections of the relocation and naval records substantiate that those who lived in barrio Llave (including the Playa Grande settlement), Resolución, the Monte Pirata area, and Punta Arenas were moved to Montesanto. The records of lot assignments to Montesanto reveal that of 383 tenant families who lived in the western and southern

TABLE 10.3  
Civilian Ownership of Farms in Vieques, by Barrio, 1940, 1945, 1950

Barrio	No. Farms in 1940	Cuerdas in in 1940	No. Farms in 1945	Cuerdas in 1945	No. Farms in 1950	Cuerdas in 1950
Florida	41	1,475	23	1,204	18	369
Llave	80	4,152	30	218	28	164
Mosquito	10	95	2	9	2	9
Puerto Diablo	24	7,539	23	3,921	18	2,791
Puerto Ferro	27	915	15	220	15	505
Puerto Real	193	2,418	165	4,238	155	1,689
Punta Arenas	7	13,369	0		0	
Florida and Puerto Ferro	0		1	124	1	124
Florida-Puerto Real	2	3	0		0	
Puerto Real and Llave	0		0		0	
Puerto Real and Puerto Ferro	1	5,856	0		0	
Unknown	2	210	0		6	34
Total	387	36,032	259	9,934	243	5,685

\*Some farms spanned more than one barrio, and it was not possible to assign portions of farms to specific barrios. We retained the classification of the original documents. Urban land lots are not included.

Source: AGIPR, DH 1940-1950.

TABLE 10.4  
Population of Vieques, by Barrio

Barrio	Population 1899 <sup>a</sup>	Population 1910 <sup>a</sup>	Population 1920 <sup>b</sup>	Population 1930 <sup>b</sup>	Population 1935 <sup>c</sup>	Population 1940 <sup>d</sup>	Population 1950 <sup>d</sup>	Population 1960 <sup>e</sup>	Population 1970 <sup>e</sup>
Town (Isabel II) <sup>1</sup>	0	3,158	3,424	3,101	2,816	2,678	3,085	2,487	2,378
Florida <sup>1</sup>	2,645	565	603	775	659	1,253	2,638	1,989	2,381
Llave <sup>1</sup>	1,059	1,610	1,715	1,583	1,683	1,776	191	89	73
Mosquitos <sup>1</sup>	0	748	847	818	785	851	20	4	
Puerto Diablo <sup>1</sup>	0	854	584	505	687	548	894	693	709
Puerto Ferro <sup>1</sup>	879	638	1,041	839	776	570	723	507	884
Punta Arenas <sup>1</sup>	0	922	1,102	833	884	901	0		30
Puerto Real <sup>2</sup>	1,344	1,930	2,335	2,128	1,747	1,785	1,677	1,441	1,312
Vieques, Total	5,927	10,425	11,651	10,582	10,037	10,362	9,228	7,210	7,767

<sup>1</sup>Not counted separately in 1899.

<sup>2</sup>Identified as Puerto Real Arriba and Puerto Real Abajo in 1899.

Sources:

<sup>a</sup>U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 1913, 1190.

<sup>b</sup>U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 1932, 131.

<sup>c</sup>Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration 1938, 12.

<sup>d</sup>U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 1952, quoted in Veaz (1995, 202).

<sup>e</sup>Department of the Navy 1979, vol. 1, sect. 2, p. 187.

TABLE 10.5  
Barrio and Sector of Residence at the Time of the Expropriations  
(No. of Persons Interviewed = 53)

<i>Barrio</i>	<i>Sector</i>	<i>No. of Cases</i>	<i>%</i>
Florida	Total	3	5.66%
	Bulfo	2	
	Peña	1	
Llave	Total	14	26.42%
	Unspecified	1	
	Central Playa Grande	7	
	Martínez—GPG*	4	
	Pocito—CPG*	2	
Punta Arenas	Total	12	22.64%
	Resolución—CPG*	7	
	Ventana**	4	
	Colonia Uvero	1	
Mosquito	Total	12	22.64%
	Berro	1	
	Comp. Benítez	2	
	Palma	5	
	Santa Elena	1	
	Perseverancia	2	
	Unspecified	1	
Puerto Real	Total	4	7.55%
	El Pilón**	3	
	Unspecified	1	
Puerto Diablo	Total	8	15.09%
	Unspecified	2	
	Finca Genoveva	1	
	Finca de Enrique Cayeres	1	
	Campaña	3	
	Puerto Negro	1	
Total		53	100.00%

\*The Playa Grande estate included different sectors such as those mentioned here. However, not all were located in the Llave barrio.

\*\*The communities known as Ventana and El Pilón are meeting points of several barrios. Ventana is located on the border between Llave and Punta Arenas. El Pilón is a sector common to Florida, Puerto Real, Llave, and Mosquito. Therefore, our classification of these sectors in Punta Arenas and Puerto Real is somewhat arbitrary.

Source: PCJP 1979; *Vieques, Archivo Fuerte Conde de Mirasol, Expropiaciones, Generalidades*, #9.

TABLE 10.6  
Barrio Where Relocated after the Expropriations  
(No. of Persons Interviewed = 53)

<i>Barrio</i>	<i>Sector</i>	<i>No. of Cases</i>
Pueblo	Total	3
	Unspecified	2
	Morropó	1
Puerto Diablo	Total	22
	Santa María	21
	Leguillou	1
Puerto Ferro	Total	2
	El Destino	2
Florida	Total	21
	Montesanto	15
	P.R.R.A.*	1
	Tortuguero	5
Total		48

Two individuals did not respond.

One individual did not live in the expropriated property, so there was no resettlement.

Two individuals moved to the larger island of Puerto Rico.

\*Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration

Source: PCJP 1979; Vieques, *Archivo Fuerte Conde de Mirasol, Expropiaciones, Generalidades*, #9.

sector, 284 resettled in Montesanto, and the remaining 99 chose to go elsewhere. The 17 tenants who had lived in Montesanto prior to the establishment of the resettlement tract were also assigned lots. Records and recollection confirm that families who lived in the Mosquito area (Barrio Mosquito and portions of Florida) on land associated with the Benítez sugar family were moved to Santa Maria. Tenants in the eastern sector lands owned by Eastern Sugar Associates and by Juan Tió were also apparently relocated to Santa Maria. Estimates of the number relocated there range from 180 to 200 families, but estimates of the number who may have lived on the affected lands would be considerably higher. A 1943 investigating committee places the total number of affected families in both tracts as high as 825. (Department of the Navy 1979, vol. 1, sect. 2, p. 201)

A study carried out by the Agricultural Experiment Station of the University of Puerto Rico (1943, 1) states: "The total number of families affected is undoubtedly larger than the 825 families mentioned above."

## LONG-TERM POPULATION EFFECTS

The long-term effects of the expropriations on the population levels of Vieques cannot quite be described as catastrophic. The situation that emerged was rather one of stunted growth. The population of Vieques peaked in 1920, when the census counted 11,651 persons living on the island. During World War I, the price of sugar soared to unprecedented levels, and it remained high until it dropped precipitously in October 1920, ending the famous "Dance of the Millions," which made the sugar mill owners of the Caribbean fabulously wealthy during the European armed conflict. During this sugar boom, the population of Vieques increased, but with the drop of the price of sugar in the 1920s, some locally owned sugar mills in Puerto Rico (and in Vieques) began to experience difficulties. The population of Vieques remained stable at around 10,000 people for the next twenty years. The precise figures are 10,582 persons in 1930; 10,037 in 1935, and 10,362 in 1940. This means that even before the expropriations, Vieques could not support an increasing population, and each year a number of Viequenses emigrated, some to Puerto Rico, others to the neighboring island of St. Croix, which is located only a few miles to the northeast. In the mid-1940s, the majority of Puerto Ricans living in St. Croix were from Vieques.

To be exact, between 1930 and 1940, 26 percent of the population of Vieques emigrated (2,749 persons), most of them to St. Croix. In 1947, there were more than 3,000 Puerto Ricans living in St. Croix, most of them from Vieques. Despite the fact that the economy of St. Croix had been experiencing a protracted contraction and a long-term population decline, from about 26,681 persons in 1835 to 11,413 in 1930, the residents of Vieques migrated to St. Croix because the employment situation in Vieques was even worse. In his 1947 study, Clarence Senior pointed out that migrating to an island such as St. Croix seemed like "jumping out of the frying pan into the fire."<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the residents of Vieques moved there due to lack of employment in the sugar industry of the Puerto Rican island. The expropriations affected an island that already had problems supporting the population level it had reached in 1920.

CAPITAL ASSETS, EMPLOYMENT,  
AND HOW TO MAKE A LIVING

The wealth assessed in Vieques had several components: land, improvements to land, and movable or "personal" property, which included cattle and vehicles. The taxable value of the land decreased by 74 percent as a result of the expropriations, from \$1,248,512 in 1940 to \$328,772 in 1950. During the same period, the value of improvements to the land decreased by 32 percent, from \$294,770 to \$201,500. The value of personal property,

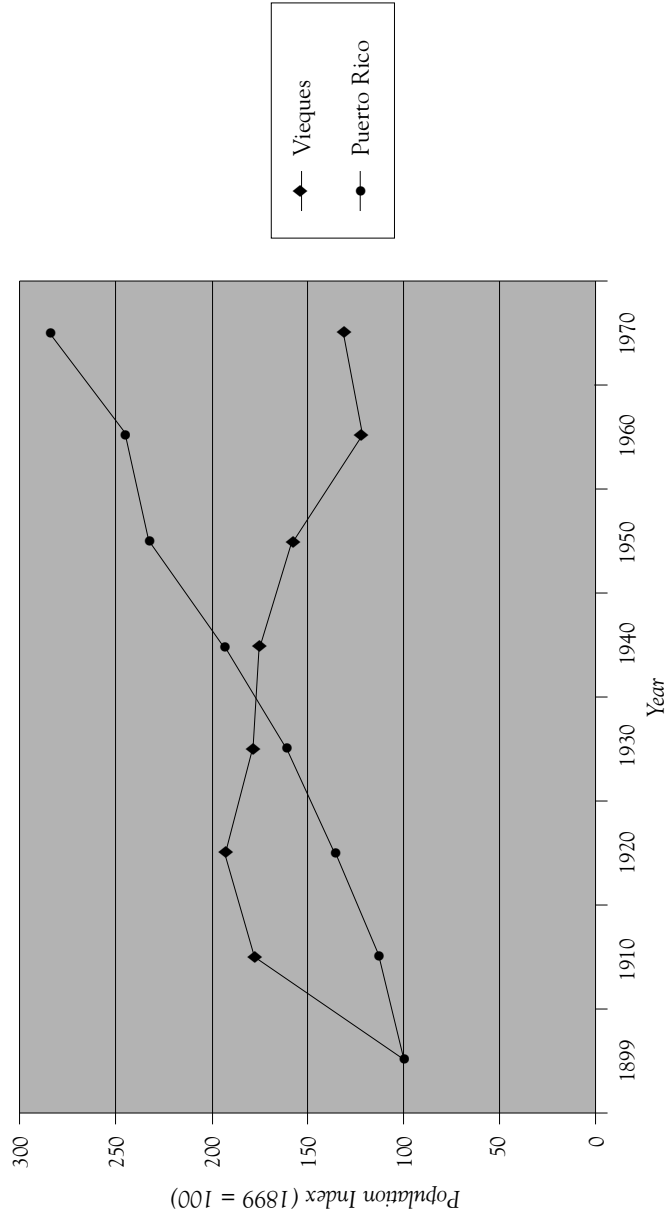


FIGURE 10.1  
Population Growth, Vieques and Puerto Rico

Sources: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1913, 1932; Yeaz 1995; Department of the Navy, 1979.

which includes vehicles and cattle, increased by 2 percent between 1940 and 1945, from \$368,300 to \$375,780. This probably reflects the inventories of local merchants who sold goods to the troops and to workers who had employment in construction during the war. The value of personal property then dropped dramatically between 1945 and 1950 to \$268,720 (a decrease of 27 percent). The drop between 1945 and 1950 probably reflects the decline in the commercial sector once construction activity ceased in Vieques and the war ended.

The net effect of the expropriations was a decrease in the amount of capital available to generate income. Since the decrease in property value was more extreme than the decline in population, total assets per person decreased from \$186 to \$86 per capita. This means that Viequenses were left in 1950 with less than half of the assets per person they possessed in 1940, that is, with less than half of the capacity to generate income.<sup>17</sup>

Before the expropriations, rural stores in the Vieques neighborhoods were known as *pulperías* and *colmados*, in addition to company stores in the sugar mills known as *tiendas de raya*. The sale of alcohol was not specialized but took place instead together with the sale of foodstuffs and supplies. Between 1940 and 1945, the number of *pulperías* on the tax lists decreased from six to three, and the establishments that sold "*Provisiones y Mercancía*" decreased from three to two. Against this trend, in 1945 there appeared a number of establishments dedicated exclusively to the sale of alcohol: one "*Bar y Hospedaje*," one "*Cafetín y Rancho Chico*," ten "*Cafetines*," one "*Bar, Cafetín, y Mesa de Billar* [pool table]," one "*Bar*," and one "*Cafetín y Establecimiento Comercial Independiente*." Not one of these businesses appears on the list in 1940. Their existence reflects the new purchasing power introduced by the military personnel in Vieques. Likewise, the number of civilian automobiles registered in Vieques increased from forty-two in 1940 to seventy-four in 1945 (AGPR, *DH* 1940–1950). Many of these were used to transport the population from the military base to town and back. During the same period, prostitution thrived in Vieques. The neighborhood known as "*El Cañón*," near the old Vieques cemetery, became forbidden to the troops, because the prostitutes lived and practiced prostitution there.<sup>18</sup>

During the war, despite the catastrophic decline in land and improvements to the land in civilian hands, the value of personal property remained relatively stable. The number of stores of all kinds remained stable, and their value increased by 27 percent. The number of automobiles increased by 76 percent and their value by 278 percent between 1940 and 1945.<sup>19</sup> The number of bars, pool halls, restaurants, and hostels increased. The prosperous period of 1942–1943, during which the Mosquito pier was built, reduced the negative economic impact. Since landlessness and poverty had been so extreme in Vieques before the expropriations, the social profile of the island did not seem as dramatically different as one might expect when one consid-

ers that the navy took four-fifths of the land. Evidently there was a sector of the population for whom employment in military construction meant a good source of income, at least before the cessation of all construction in 1943.

The increase in the number of jobs in construction and other sectors promoted by military contracts during the Second World War compensated for the decline of employment in the sugar industry. In addition, the new jobs paid better wages. Pastor Ruiz refers to the years 1941–1943 as the period of the “fat cows.” Between 1941 and 1943 in Vieques, according to Pastor Ruiz, “the town swam in gold for a couple of years” (Pastor Ruiz 1947, 206). This explains why the decline in population was not proportional to the decline in available land, in a society that had been fundamentally agrarian before the expropriations.

The construction of the pier and the Mosquito base generated payrolls to civilians of \$60,000 a week and reached at one point the sum of \$120,000 weekly, which was “a fantastic amount,” according to Rev. Justo Pastor Ruiz. These were the years of the “fat cows,” of employment at better salaries than under the old sugar plantation regime, a period of feverish economic activity (Pastor Ruiz 1947, 205). However, in the summer of 1943, Viequenses marched with black flags to protest the lack of employment. This signaled the beginning of a period of squalor for the majority of the population. After 1943, German submarine activity in the Caribbean faded, the focus of the war moved to North Africa and Europe, and construction practically came to a halt in Vieques. While it is true that the first two years of the war were the period of “pharaoh’s cows,” when the court of the pharaoh withdrew, Vieques was overtaken by the period of the “thin cows.” The protests with black flags during the summer of 1943 signaled a new consciousness concerning the impact of the expropriations: the future looked bleak, there were no jobs, and there was no land.

Unemployment became rampant. Most of the workers in Vieques had been in one way or another involved in the sugar industry. Among the fifty-three persons interviewed, thirty-two (60 percent) had jobs in the sugar industry or related to it. Secondly, the wave of expropriations during the period 1947–1950 further reduced the civilian land area from 9,939 *cuerdas* in 1945 to 5,685 in 1950. Capital assets, including land, taxed by the municipality shrank from \$1,911,582 in 1940 to \$798,992 in 1950 (see Table 10.9). The military base never generated enough employment in Vieques but only temporary jobs during maneuvers.

The great sugar-producing landed estates disappeared, and so did the sugar industry, during the first expropriations. Some ranching interests remained on the island, but they were the object of the second round of expropriations by the navy in 1947 (Veaz 1995, 185). All attempts to restore sugar production were unsuccessful. An experiment to substitute the production of sugar with pineapples did not meet with great success. The navy’s expropriations of 1947 dislocated pineapple production and cattle ranching (Picó 1950, 216–17). As

of 1950, the scenario in Vieques was of a reconcentrated population, without the agricultural economy that had existed before the war, without an alternative economy to replace what was lost, surrounded by a military base that generated no employment and that restricted the access of the community to most of the seashore and mangroves, to most of the coconut groves, and in short, to most of the rich, tropical ecology of Vieques.

The situation in 1950 was therefore dramatically different from that of 1943. Not only did landed assets and improvements to land decrease dramatically because of the expropriations, and then even more because of the second round of expropriations in 1947–1950, but the value of movable or “personal” property declined as well. The commercial sector of Vieques, which had been able to hold its own during World War II, also had collapsed by 1950. If the taxation records indicate anything, they point to the catastrophic economic scenario of a reconcentrated population without assets to make a living and without the kind of insurance against hunger that *agregado* usufructs used to provide before the expropriations. To top it off, the interaction with the local ecology was barred, as Viequenses could not access most of the coastline for fishing, or the mangroves, which provided sources of fish, crabs, and mangrove wood for charcoal making. Even the coconut groves were destroyed by the navy during maneuvers in February 1950 (McCaffrey 1999, 122; Harris 1980, 20). Faced with such a catastrophic scenario, and lacking alternative sources of employment, Viequenses took to the sea. A Vieques fisherman eloquently expressed the dilemma: “The only factory that has its door open to whomever wants to work is the sea” (McCaffrey 1999, 149).<sup>20</sup>

TABLE 10.7  
Vieques: Civilian Land Ownership in 1940, 1945, 1950

Farm Size in Cuerdas	Cuerdas, 1940		Cuerdas, 1945		Cuerdas, 1950	
		%		%		%
Less than 5	166	0.46%	88	0.89%	83	1.47%
5 to 9	284	0.79%	222	2.23%	206	3.62%
10 to 19	464	1.29%	191	1.92%	151	2.66%
20 to 49	913	2.53%	521	5.24%	597	10.50%
50 to 99	485	1.35%	357	3.59%	345	6.06%
100 to 174	1,690	4.69%	1,096	11.03%	508	8.94%
175 to 499	3,129	8.68%	1,331	13.39%	2,362	41.55%
500 to 999	694	1.93%	2,237	22.51%	1,433	25.20%
Over 1,000	28,208	78.28%	3,896	39.20%		0.00%
Total	36,033	100.00%	9,939	100.00%	5,685	100.00%

Source: AGPR, DH 1940–1950. Departamento de Hacienda, Registro de Tasación de la Propiedad (1940, 1945, 1950).

## CONCLUSION

It would be inaccurate to characterize the economy and society of Vieques before the expropriations of World War II as a prosperous and an egalitarian paradise. Society in Vieques was highly stratified in specific ways characteristic of plantation societies. The land belonged to a chosen few, and the major-

TABLE 10.8  
Vieques: Non-Farm Property in 1940, 1945, 1950

Type of Property	Value in 1940	(%)	Value in 1945	(%)	Value in 1950	(%)
Stores	\$47,380	13%	\$60,070	17.23%	\$46,310	17.23%
Cinema	\$1,220	0.34%	\$1,220	0.35%	\$1,220	0.45%
Boats	\$1,600	0.44%	\$11,100	3.18%	\$32,500	12.09%
Bars, "Cafetines," Pool Halls, Restaurants and Hostels			\$9,020	2.59%	\$13,700	5.10%
Cattle	\$129,370	35.83%	\$128,730	36.93%	\$53,740	20.00%
Cattle, Machinery, Dry Goods*	\$181,520	50.27%	\$136,900	39.28%	\$119,750	44.56%
Factories		0.00%	\$1,500	0.43%	\$1,500	0.56%
Total	\$361,090	100%	\$348,540	100.00%	\$268,720	100.00%

\*The category "Cattle Machinery and Dry Goods" includes the assets of the Eastern Sugar Associates Corporation.

Source: AGPR, DH 1940–50. Figures do not include \$7,210 of cars and vehicles in 1940 and \$27,240 in 1945. The 1950 tax records do not include cars and vehicles.

TABLE 10.9  
Vieques: Assessed Value of Land, Improvements to Land,  
and Personal Property in 1940, 1945, 1950

Year	Land Value	Land Value (%)	Improve- ment Value	Improve- ment Value (%)	Personal Property Value	Personal Property Value (%)	Total Value
1940	\$1,248,512	65%	\$294,770	15%	\$368,300	19%	\$1,911,582
1945	\$573,175	49%	\$219,721	19%	\$375,780	32%	\$1,168,676
1950	\$328,772	41%	\$201,500	25%	\$268,720	34%	\$798,992

Source: AGPR, DH 1940–1950.

ity of the population was landless. Rural proletarianization and relations of *agregado* were the counterpart of rural landlessness, in a sort of continuum in which it was difficult to differentiate the worker from the *agregado*, as one category blended into the other in the farms and *colonias* of this tropical plantation island. Both *agregados* and workers were a resident labor force on the plantations. Precisely because the class structure was one characteristic of a plantation society, the effects of the expropriations were felt in ways influenced by preexisting social conditions. Landowners received compensation, but the dispossessed majority did not. Because workers lived and worked on the farms of the large landowners, the navy's expropriations signified the simultaneous loss of their homes and their jobs. *Agregados* had certain usufructs and access to the rich, tropical ecology of the island, which they also lost in the process of eviction. Thus the expropriation of the land of the large landowners had a triple effect on the resident labor force: (1) eviction from home; (2) loss of employment; and (3) no access to subsistence crops and the rich, tropical ecology. These three components constitute the whole process commonly referred to simply as "eviction" (*desalojos*), or "expropriations."

The triple-effect evictions took place in the context of a plantation economy that was already facing serious economic difficulties. Viequeses had already started to migrate to neighboring St. Croix in the 1930s in search of employment. The expropriations accentuated the trend toward out-migration. Vieques settled into a role as a reserve of labor in which population growth was stunted due to the constriction on economic development placed by the disappearance of the best lands for agriculture and grazing. Although the conditions of life in the resettlement tracts have not been the subject of any systematic study in scholarly works, it is clear that those who stayed were condemned to squalor. Because no alternative economy was ever established, long-term deterioration of living conditions ensued. For Viequeses, the expropriations of the U.S. Navy were a disaster whose effects continued to be felt over the long term.

#### NOTES

1. The complete list of owners, their properties, and assessed values can be found at the following internet site: <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/ayala/Vieques/> (accessed June 15, 2003).

2. The *Archivo General de Puerto Rico* contains the records of all municipal tax assessments from 1905 until 1955. The assessments in the *Archivo General de Puerto Rico* are organized by *municipio*, in handwritten volumes that measure approximately 15" by 21" and include the following variables: (1) name of the owner (which allows the researcher to determine the gender of the owner); (2) type of property (e.g., farm, urban lot, personal property); (3) location of the property (barrio for farms, street and number for urban lots); (4) area in *cuerdas* (a Puerto Rican *cuerda* is equal to .9712

acres); (5) assessed value of the land; (6) type of improvements to the land; (7) assessed value of improvements; (8) type of personal property (e.g., trucks, cars, cattle); (9) assessed value of personal property. The data was photocopied at the *Archivo General de Puerto Rico* and entered into a computerized database at Lehman College, City University of New York. *Archivo General de Puerto Rico*, Departamento de Hacienda, Registros de Tasación sobre la Propiedad, Vieques, 1940–1950. (Hereafter cited as AGPR, DH 1940–50.)

3. The following interviewees participated in the project in Vieques and in Puerto Rico: “Cheo” (no last name in manuscript), Eugenia Acuña, Salvador Beauchamp, “Tuti” Belardo, Viviana Carro, Ana Rosa Cuilan, “Chachi” De Rivera, Pedro Encarnación, Aleida Encarnación, Osvaldo Esquerette, “Ito” Félix, Nydia González, Pablo Hernández, Migda Maldonado, Arturo Morales, Cristina Pérez, Víctor Ruiz, Tita Tirado, Wilfredo Tirado, Diana Tirado, Pablo Torres, Vitalia Velásquez, Soilo Velazques, Abraham Velázquez, and Lisa Wheaton. Hereafter cited as *PCJP (Proyecto Caribeño de Justicia y Paz)* 1979.

4. See the discussion on *agregados* in the section “Expulsion of *Agregados* and Workers.”

5. The Eastern Sugar Associates owned both of the lands of what was once the Puerto Real mill in Vieques and the Pasto Viejo mill in Humacao.

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

7. Interview with Aurelio Tió, by Vivian Carro and Lisa Wheaton, February 1979. Unless otherwise specified, the information presented in this section was provided by Aurelio Tió and obtained from the summary transcript of this interview.

8. Interview and translation to English by Viviana Carro.

9. On the “total” character of plantations, see Best (1968) and Beckford (1970).

10. We use the median because one *agregado* reported “2,000 *cuerdas*,” which refers to the extent of the landowner’s holding. That extreme value would distort our average if we utilized the mean. Of fifty-three cases, twelve did not report farm size, thirty-one reported less than ten *cuerdas*, six reported between ten and fifty *cuerdas*, and one each reported 300 and 500 *cuerdas*, while two interviewees reported 2,000 *cuerdas*.

11. There were some exceptions. “It also appears that tenants were in some cases made parties in the court actions.” Department of the Navy (1979, vol. 1, sect. 2, p. 200).

12. Unless otherwise noted, this section of the chapter is based on the results of the 1979 survey conducted with fifty-three families expropriated or evicted by the navy during the 1940s.

13. The Superior Court of Puerto Rico has a *Sala de Expropiaciones* to deal with private owners who seek further compensation when the government uses its right of eminent domain. The term *expropriation* is not in any way meant to convey a lack of compensation but rather the *compulsory* character of the “sale” to the state.

14. This situation was still prevalent in 1979 at the time of the interviews. As a result of the struggle during that period, the navy began the process of transferring

rights to the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, which in turn titled some owners, although not all. Some communities are still seeking legal titles. See Giusti-Cordero 1999a.

15. The first round of expropriations lasted from November 1941 until September 1943 (Veaz 1995, 187). According to Pastor Ruiz (1947, 7) “It is estimated that of 33,682 arable *cuerdas*, the base took 22,000.” The navy figure is from the Department of the Navy (1979, vol. 1, sect. 2, p. 193).

16. “Puerto Rican migration to an island in such a depressed condition would seem like ‘jumping out of the frying pan into the fire.’ The answer lies partly in the fact that sugarcane continues to be the main crop of the island, and that cane needs seasonal labor. The Danes formerly brought in workers for the cutting season from the nearby British islands. This practice continued until 1927. The immigration laws of the United States were applied to the Virgin Islands in that year, and the cane growers had to look elsewhere for their labor. They found a situation made-to-order for them in the depressed conditions of the sugar industry on the island of Vieques. Sugar acreage and yield on that island of 51 square miles had been decreasing steadily since 1910, and people were looking for a chance to make a living elsewhere. Agents for the growers recruited sizable groups for transportation to St. Croix. Some of those who went on temporary jobs stayed. The tendency of Puerto Rican migration to St. Croix has been upward since that time” (Senior 1947, 7, 1–2).

17. This calculation does not take into account the assets of the navy. The payroll of the navy to civilians in 1941–1943 was spectacular, but it subsided after that date. The decrease is more extreme than the figures reveal if one considers that houses, particularly the cluster in Isabel Segunda, which were generally not income-generating assets, are included as “improvements” in the figures.

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

19. Automobiles were not listed in the tax records of 1950.

20. McCaffrey (1999) is a moving account of the origin and fruition of the movement of the Vieques fishermen, which culminated in massive protests against the navy in 1979. A revised version was published by Rutgers University Press (McCaffrey 2002).

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