

Craftsmen, Merchants, Adventurers. French Immigration to Northwest Mexico in the 18th and 19th centuries

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Introduction

To look on Mexico as a country of immigration and to talk of the French as a people of emigrants may seem as if the world were turned upside down. Present-day Mexico is generally perceived as a nation whose people leave in great numbers for such destinations as Europe and the US. As statistics are apt to show, Mexico is in fact a country of emigrants: the “Report of the Commission on Immigration Reform”, published in 1998, and the census of the year 2000 have yet again revealed that of the 38.5 millions of so-called Latinos living in the United States of America 54% are either Mexican or of Mexican descent and of the median age of 24. The Mexicans living in the US are thus a very young and fast growing ethnic minority.¹

This migration has a long standing tradition. Mexicans left their country for the United States as early as the mid-19th century, when thousands of them were moving to the placers of the California gold rush, hoping like so many other immigrants to make a quick fortune. At the beginning of the 20th century, emigration from Mexico soared when many Mexicans were fleeing the violence of the Mexican Revolution while others were attracted by the industrial development and the expansion of commercial agriculture. The federally sponsored “bracero” or guest-worker program that begun during the Second World War finally encouraged Mexicans to move to North American cities, where approximately 90% of them reside now.² In contrast, the French always have been characterized as a people who are unwilling to leave their beloved home country and whose character or “génie national”, as the French author Charles Lavollée put it in the 19th century, never incited them to emigrate.³ According to Lavollée the French furthermore lacked the most traditional incentives for migration: they neither suffered hunger nor lived in misery as the Irish or even the Germans would in the 19th century.⁴ Still, some French did become emigrants and left for French colonies such as Algeria, moved to the United States of America or to Canada and decided to make a living in Argentina, Chile, or Uruguay.⁵

This happened at a time when France was debating the advantages and disadvantages of European migrations and was still meditating the pros and cons of a large colonial empire and

¹ See: Durand, Jorge & Douglas S. Massey & René M. Zenteno: “Mexican Immigration to the United States. Continuities and Changes”, in: *Latin American research Review*, Vol. 36: 1, 2001, pp. 107-127.

² See: Gutiérrez, David G.: *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants and the Politics of Ethnicity*. University of California Press 1995; Meier, Matt S. & Ribera, Feliciano: *Mexican Americans, American Mexicans: From Conquistadors to Chicanos*. Hill & Wang 1993; Sánchez, George J.: *Becoming Mexican American*. Oxford University Press 1993.

³ See Charles Lavollée, “l’émigration européenne dans le Nouveau Monde”, in: *Revue des Deux Mondes: Recueil de la politique, de l’administration et des moeurs*, 1852, Tome 16 (Oct.-Déc.), p. 129.

⁴ loc.cit.

⁵ See for example: Cartes Montroy, Armando: *Franceses en el país del Bío Bío*. Santiago de Chile: Trama Impresores 2004.

Mexican politicians were also discussing the necessity of European mass immigration. It is a historic fact that all along the 19th century different laws were published to attract foreigners to the Republic of Mexico, but although great efforts were being made to bring immigrants to the countryside to give new life to underdeveloped rural areas, the country never became a “nation of immigrants”.⁶

Mexico also never attracted great numbers of French. In mid 19th century, French migrants would prefer Argentina or Uruguay which especially attracted French from the Pyrenees. The French colonies of Buenos Aires and Montevideo thus quickly surpassed their Mexican counterpart.⁷ And French men and women who were willing to emigrate preferred destinations such as Algeria, Canada and, of course, the United States, especially California.⁸ This was due to the fact that political instability and economic problems made other American destinations look far more promising than Mexico. The United States offered religious freedom and guaranteed personal well-being, whereas Mexico developed a certain reputation for xenophobia which also contributed to the image of Mexico as a country that was ill-suited for immigrants. It was furthermore well known that unless they were Roman Catholics, foreigners were likely to suffer discrimination. On the other hand, constantly changing legal conditions continued to discourage prospective immigrants. Even the highly distorted image of the natural richness of Mexico could not counterbalance these unfavourable conditions. The foreigners living in Mexico were then, on the whole, a very small group. Thanks to different population counts and censuses, it is possible to estimate the number of foreigners living in Mexico between 1848 and 1930 at a total of 1% of the population. In the year 1900 Mexico counted a total of 0.42% of foreign population which would at a first glance render the foreign population on the whole highly insignificant. Nevertheless, it is important to state that in a country which hosted only very few foreigners even such small numbers could have a great impact. And within this small group, the French played a vital role because they had secured themselves an important place in Mexican society and certainly influenced the national economy, especially on the periphery of the Republic. Removed from the political centre and always endangered by hostile indigenous people, the Mexican periphery nevertheless attracted a considerable number of foreigners and French.

In the following we will try to assess the French presence in a region of Mexico which has always been regarded as backwards and underdeveloped and place this presence in the national Mexican context. It comprises seven states which include the largest federal states such as Chihuahua and Sonora which had many peculiarities in common. They were all on the periphery of the Republic of Mexico, they were scarcely populated and they were struggling with rebellious indigenous population. This was the Mexican “frontier”, the *frontera* as the Spanish would say, *par excellence*. But this was also a part of the Mexican Republic which was praised for its economic potential and therefore attracted many foreigners who were looking for a way of enriching themselves quickly, among them French immigrants. We will try to give a first general view of French presence in this area and will tackle the question how we are able to trace these immigrants and write their stories in the region we are looking at.

⁶ Various colonization laws, a special governmental office dealing with development and colonization and different attempts at reforming the laws governing immigration did not prove successful.

⁷ See for example: Duprey, Jacques: *Voyage aux origines françaises de l'Uruguay*, Montevideo: 1952; Oddone, Juan Antonio: *La emigración europea al Río de la Plata. Motivaciones y proceso de incorporación*, Montevideo 1966.

⁸ For French migration to Alta California before 1848 cp.: Foucrier, Annick: *Le rêve Californien, Migrants français sur la côte Pacifique, XVIIIe-XXe siècles*. Belin: 1999, pp. 33-48.

Colonial antecedents: Some general trends of early French immigration to Mexico in the 18th century

If we try to establish and study different phases of French migration to the Mexican Northwest, we have to take a first look at its beginnings in the 18th century. Long before Mexico became independent from Spain, there had been French subjects living in what was then the viceroyalty of New Spain, even though their exact numbers are unknown. For centuries, the Spanish crown had maintained strict immigration policies and thus reserved Spanish America to Spanish subjects. Nevertheless, long before Spanish authorities allowed French men and women to immigrate to the New World, a certain number of French managed to travel to America and to stay there. They entered the official records as French, as we will see later, for a broad variety of reasons, and they apparently escaped harassment, even though they had acknowledged their nationality. Their immigration was possible because from very early times on there were living a considerable number of French in Spain. During the 17th and 18th centuries there must have been various thousands French living there, although their exact number is still subject to debate. Some authors claim that about 2000000 French were living in Spain during the 17th century, some 40 000 French in Madrid alone; still others argue that there were 14 000 French immigrants living in the Spanish capital and the sea port of Cádiz at that time.⁹

Although the numbers may vary, historians so far agree that the French community in Spain played a vital role in different parts of the economy. These immigrants laboured in menial tasks or were artisans and formed part of the lower middle class. Many apparently were married to Spaniards and their children usually spoke Spanish fluently, used Spanish first names and were able to move in Spanish society just as any Spaniard would have.

At the beginning of the 18th century, these well assimilated French profited from the laws that were introduced by the new dynasty reigning in Spain after the death of Charles II, the last Hapsburg king, and the War of Succession. The Bourbons on the Spanish throne clearly made it easier for French subjects to move to Spanish America, while the Indian Council now granted those foreigners who had been naturalized, who had special technical knowledge or were married to a Spaniard the right to migrate to the New World. Also foreigners living in Spain for more than six years were allowed to act as *alcalde mayor* and in consequence were then allowed to hold public office.¹⁰

Thus political changes in Spain played a decisive role in bringing French individuals to Mexico during the 18th century. Even though we mostly ignore the motifs that induced the French to migrate to Spain in the first place, it is possible to place these migrations in the context of the economic developments taking place in rural France at that time. We also know that in most of the cases in which internal migration did not serve as a prelude to emigration, there still were many cases in which high taxes or personal debts led many French to leave their country for good; many of them apparently leaving for Spain.¹¹ A combination of demographic and economic variables seems then to have been at work here. Finally, the French men and women who had left their home country for Spain were the first to go to the viceroyalty of New Spain. There they lived almost unnoticed by Spanish authorities and did not consider it necessary to request naturalization.¹²

⁹ See for example: Hoerder, Dirk: *Cultures in Contact. World Migrations in the Second Millennium*. Durham & London: Duke University Press 2002, p. 292.

¹⁰ Cp. Houdaille, Jacques: "Frenchmen and Francophiles in New Spain from 1760 to 1810", in: *The Americas*, Vol. XIII, No.1, 1956, p. 3.

¹¹ See: Poitrineau, Abel: *Remues d'hommes. Essai sur les migrations montagnardes en France aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*. Paris: Aubier Montaigne 1983, p. 5.

¹² Cp. Houdaille, *op.cit.*, p. 4.

We know about these early French in Mexico and the Mexican Northwest via different archival sources. There are Inquisition acts which reveal the names of French men and women denounced as bigamists or heretics, there are documents that mention the presence of “suspicious” French revolutionary elements which Spain was anxious to expel from its American provinces, there are the censuses of 1689 and 1753 of Mexico City, and there are documents which had been drawn up as first attempts to survey the number of foreigners living in New Spain at the end of the 18th century. All these types of documents render a first and more or less sketchy image of the French living in the viceroyalty of Spain and while they answer some questions, they raise many more.¹³

This is undoubtedly due to the nature of the documentation itself. One of the problems here is that they only bring those individuals into focus which represented social problems or religious deviation and thus only shed light on a very small fragment of the French community living in New Spain during colonial times. Those who were well adapted and moved with relative ease among other residents of New Spain were less likely to be spotted and therefore rarely show up in contemporary documents. On the other hand, French men and women with outstanding abilities and knowledge drew more official attention than simple folk. Then there is of course the problem of the reliability of censuses and the problem that some population counts tended on heads of families and therefore mostly focussed on men. Although we can assume that some of them may have been married to French women who emigrated with their husbands, we really know very little about the immigration of female French during this century. In spite of a growing female mobility during that century- the largest group of migrants who moved to the port of Bordeaux in the 18th century were women, they seem to be missing in early Mexican accounts.¹⁴

Thanks to these documents we know that a great number of the French living in Mexico in the 18th century had their residence in the capital where we also can find a number of Italians, Portuguese, Irish and English as well as German-Speaking individuals. The French obviously preferred the cities to country-side, like the Spaniards, and they seem to have settled mostly in the interior rather than on the coast even though we find some French in or near ports.

These French were apparently engaged in professions that combined French *savoir vivre* with an unflinching instinct for business opportunities. In Mexico-City there were bakers, tailors, cooks and a considerable number of merchants, but there were also surgeons and doctors who were very much in demand in New Spain. But we always have to be aware of the fact that the French who are recorded in the documentation cited above are not necessarily representative of the community as such, they just happen to have drawn the attention of crown officials. Other important French colonies were to be found in Zacatecas and Guanajuato, both famous for their rich mines, whereas the French living in Yucatán profited from the peninsula's closeness to New Orleans, Cuba and the Caribbean. There they engaged in trade even though the Spanish crown had reserved these activities to Spanish subjects. Still, these official policies could not suppress the lucrative business France was already conducting with the Spanish provinces. In spite of many commercial restrictions, the Spanish-American dominions imported many French products via Cadiz.¹⁵ The commerce that was conducted through this port then also testifies to the presence of French in Spanish-America, especially

¹³ See: Nunn, Charles F.: *Foreign Immigrants in Early Bourbon Mexico, 1700-1760*. Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press 1979.

¹⁴ For female migration to Bordeaux see: Moch, Leslie Page: “The Family and Migration: News from the French”, in: *Journal of Family History*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1986, p. 196.

¹⁵ Cp.: Sée, Henri: “Documents sur le Commerce de Cadiz, 1691-1752”, in: *Revue de l'Histoire des Colonies françaises*, Vol. XIX, 1926, pp. 465-520. See also: Sée, Henri: “Esquisse d'une histoire du commerce français à Cadiz au 18e siècle”, in: *Revue d'Histoire Moderne*, Vol. XIII, 1928, pp. 13-31.

New Spain, and underlines the inventiveness of French merchants who sought and found ways of making business there.

The Northwest of the viceroyalty of New Spain was little populated and did not offer the amenities of the Mexican capital or Caribbean coast. Nevertheless some French were to be found in the provinces of New Biscaye, Sonora, Coahuila, Texas and New Mexico.

California, both Alta and Baja California, was little explored and had so far attracted only a few pioneers.¹⁶

We know about these French also because the Spanish crown had set its mind on fighting back revolutionary French propaganda at the close of the 18th century. While they were hoping to quell any attempt at bringing the Revolution to New Spain, to be French was obviously enough to be arrested. Spanish authorities kept record of these French suspects and thus we know that most of the individuals arrested had arrived in the New World with Spaniards, travelling as their servants. They were either cooks or bakers or housekeepers. Others were soldiers who had been moved to the North while others had gone there on their own free will, following the lure of the mines. Northern New Spain also proved to be a contact zone between the Spanish and the French spheres of interest. Louisiana was close by, and so it was not surprising to find many French going back and forth, making a living in what would soon become the Mexican North and in French territory. They were living off their special talents as interpreters of native languages or serving as scouts to the Spanish military. Some cases also pinpoint the fact that many French who were literate could use this skill to occupy interesting positions in a society with high illiteracy rates and always in need of what would then be called “educated” people. This would become even more important during the 19th century.

Facing the Challenges of the 19th century: The French in North-West Mexico

Its resources of gold and silver had made New Spain a very profitable and famous colony. It had from the early beginning attracted French interest and various texts concerning its history, as for example its conquest by Hernán Cortés, had found many eager readers.¹⁷

After the Wars of Independence which had been a protracted military conflict accompanied by social revolt, the country was generally supposed to continue its economic success. But reality belied the economic potential. Anti-Spanish sentiment had led to the expulsion of almost seven thousand Spaniards in 1827 who had taken their capital and their business with them. This exodus not also accelerated the pending economic crisis, it also made those French visible who so far had never attracted official attention. Various cases of French fearing expulsion after Mexico became independent and decided to ban its Spanish population from Mexican territory, indicate that many French had become so well assimilated as to be subjected to laws focusing on peninsular Spaniards. Their command of the language, their life styles and their names made them more Spanish than French. At this point many French individuals found it convenient to remember their French descent and sought the support of French authorities for the first time since they had arrived in America.

Independence also opened Mexico to those French who had not been in touch with the Spanish language and culture. They might have been attracted by different travel accounts whose authors marvelled at the possibilities Mexico seemed to offer after 1821, now that it

¹⁶ Cp.: Foucrier, Annick: *Le rêve californien. Migrants français sur la côte Pacifique, XVIIIe-XXe siècles*. Paris: Éditions Belin 1999, p. 49ff.

¹⁷ The “Voyages et conquêtes du capitaine Ferdinand Courtois, ès Indes occidentales” was published as early as 1588 and had been translated for this purpose from the Spanish by Guillaume Le Breton. Later works as the “Historia de la Conquista de México” by Solís were translated into French during the 18th century. Many more examples could be cited here.

was open to foreigners and to foreign investments. Especially French authors created an almost mythical image of the natural resources of Mexico which was celebrated as a country of plenty and promise, in short “the richest country of the world.” The popular and the more scientific revues of the time such as *L’Illustration* and *Le Tour du Monde* or the *Revue des Deux Mondes* and *La Revue Britannique* played an important role in creating and spreading this image.¹⁸

The Northwest of Mexico also drew special attention after 1821. It became the object of general speculation and the picturesque backdrop of fantastic and very popular adventures written by the novelists Gabriel Ferry, a.k.a. Louis Gabriel de Bellemare, Lucien Biart and Gustave Aimard a.k.a. Olivier Roux. The novels which either were published in popular magazines or as books contributed to the image of the remote, wild and proverbially rich North of Mexico with its silver and gold mines. But many French had made their way to that portion of the Mexican Republic long before the likes of Ferry and Aimard praised its possibilities.¹⁹

There are various types of documents which can be consulted here. One of the most important sources is beyond doubt the “*Registre de la Population Française au Mexique au 30 Avril 1849*” which represents the first effort of the French government to inquire about the total number, the professions and the places of residence of French citizens living in Mexico. The “*Registre*” was ordered to be made in August 1848 and was meant to be an elementary census.²⁰

In the late 20ies of the 19th century there had already been opened registers in the cities of Mexico, Veracruz and Tampico where France had established consulates. Within two years 678 French subjects had signed these registers, but the capital and the two sea-ports were in fact home to a much larger group of French immigrants. Those who had been registered were all heads of family so that women and children need to be added. We also have to include the French colonists who arrived at Coatzacoalcos between 1829 and 1831 and who numbered about 600 men and women. Most of them returned to France when the colonizing schemes failed, but some apparently stayed in the country but moved to other provinces.²¹

The *Registre* of 1849 was more ambitious as it had a broader scope and required more effort. It was no longer focused on a particular set of cities and was meant to provide more information on the French immigrants as a group. To be able to compile it, consuls, vice-consuls and the French minister plenipotentiary André Nicolas Levasseur had to work together, using the poor communication that Mexico offered at that time. The result of this project was a list of names with some additional data which in spite of the short-comings Levasseur was quick to report to the French foreign ministry, is of enormous value to present day historians. The *Registre* lists the names, the professions, the marital status, the places of

¹⁸ Cp.: Cramaussel, Chantal: “Imagen de México en los relatos de viaje franceses, 1821-1862”, in: Pérez Siller, Javier (ed.): *México- Francia. Memoria de una sensibilidad común, siglos XIX-XX*, Mexico-City 1998, p. 333-363. The articles published on travels in México by French clearly outnumbered the descriptions of travels in other parts of Spanish America.

¹⁹ Most of the authors mentioned here published articles in the *Rveue des Deux Mondes* and their novels were edited more than once. A complete study of these editions and their readers has not been done so far.

²⁰ The “*Registre*” can be consulted at the *Archives de Ministère des Affaires Étrangères*, Paris, Section Mémoires et documents, (MD): Mexique, Vol. 7. It has recently been translated into Spanish and been published in Mexico by Javier Pérez Siller. Important references to this document are: Meyer, Jean: “Les Français au Mexique au XIXe siècle”, in: *Cahiers des Amériques Latines*, No. 9-10, 1974, pp. 43-86; Barker, Nancy Nichols: *The French Experience in Mexico, 1821-1861. A History of Constant Misunderstanding*. Chapel Hill, NC: the University of North Carolina Press 1979, pp. 123-131. Barker characterizes the summary made by Meyer as “brief and inaccurate” (see p. 223) and there are in fact some figures that are not correct. A Spanish translation of this article appeared in the Mexican historic review *Relaciones* vol. no.2 in 1980 as “Los franceses en México”, pp.5-54.

²¹ Barker, *op.cit.*, p. 17.

residence and the places of birth of the men and women who had signed this document. It only sheds light on a very limited span of time, of course, and it fails at representing the cycles in which the French would arrive in Mexico and leave again. We know that a great percentage of the French who came to Mexico tried to enrich themselves as quickly as possible and then return to their home-country, as the French consul Adrien Cochelet observed as early as 1830.²² This phenomenon called “*migration viagère*” or circular migration in which migrants leave one place to work, reside for some time in another and finally return to their place of origin, would be characteristic of the French migration to Mexico all through the 19th century. Living conditions and family sentiments apparently weighted more than economic potential.

The *Registre* misses this important trait. It was a canvass of French nationals across the country and an attempt at knowing exactly how many and what kind of subjects formed the French colony in Mexico at mid-century. Although it has to be completed with other archival material to render a more reliable picture, the *Registre* is a extremely valuable source as we shall see.²³

The *Registre* revealed that of the 1810 French who had signed up almost 42% were craftsmen while another 40% declared that they were living in Mexico as merchants, that is that they were either wholesalers or retailers. Their assistants, the *commis*, formed the next largest group whereas only 9% were doctors, teachers and dentists, while only 6% declared that they had worked in agriculture before leaving France for Mexico. Of all the individuals registered in 1849, about 3% had signed up in the register as artists and only one person had declared himself a *rentier*. On the whole, Mexico seems to have received only very few lower class migrants from France, although the accurateness of the *Registre* in this respect can be questioned. Unskilled workers or day labourers accounted for less than one percent of the whole number of French registered. One of them was Pierre Henry Laporte from Bordeaux who was living in Matamoros, was unmarried and was described as being without profession.²⁴

The *Registre* furthermore stresses the French preference for the capital, where the greatest number of immigrants lived. They apparently were quite successful from an economic point of view and they also were able to develop an interesting cultural life. This included many different activities and the publication of a French newspaper, the *Trait d'Union* which started publication in 1849.²⁵ This paper was a way of keeping in touch with the mother tongue and those topics which would not be covered by Mexican national newspapers.

Many of the individuals who were listed in the *Registre* were naturalized Mexicans and some had become nationals of the United States. The individuals registered were all heads of families and therefore adult males, with the exception of eight widows and two unmarried women who were counted as heads. Servants had been included in the count and were considered to form part of the family which must have included children and women who are seldom mentioned in the *Registre*. In twenty-three instances the register makes mention of a wife left in France or of children left in Europe as is the case with a widower who lived with or was married to a local woman and had three children in France and three children living

²² 15.1.1830, Adrien Cochelet to the Department of Foreign Affairs in Paris; Correspondance Consulaire: Mexique, vol. 2, no. 2, f. 567-571.

²³ See: May 5th 1849, Levasseur to Department of Foreign Affairs in Paris, *Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères*, Paris, AMAE, CC: Mexico, vol. 6, no. 5.

²⁴ A special entry adds some meagre information on Laporte who apparently was insane. The special observation pinned down behind his name says: “Il est fou”.

²⁵ The paper stopped publication in 1874. See Covo, Jaqueline: “Le Trait d'Union, periódico francés de la ciudad de México, entre la Reforma y la Intervención”, in: *Historia Mexicana*, Vol. XXXV, No 3, 1986, pp. 461-476. For a collection of articles from that newspaper see: Masson, René: *Le trait d'union: journal français universel*. México: UNAM 1998.

with him in Mexico. According to French laws these children would be French and had to be counted as members of the French colony.

For the Mexican Northwest the *Registre* recorded French in the Mexican states of Baja California, Chihuahua, Durango, Sinaloa and Sonora. The largest French colony by far was to be found in the port of Mazatlán, Sinaloa, where we find a high percentage of wholesalers (*négociants*) but also retailers and their assistants as well as bakers, cooks, sailors, tailors, owners of restaurants, and among others, the owner of a small hotel, a carpenter, a mason, a pharmacist and a doctor. A total of 56 Frenchmen were recorded to be living in Mazatlán, and we know that the number must have been much higher. The same is valid for the state of Sonora where according to the *Registre* only six French were living in 1849. They were recorded in the cities of Alamos, Cosala and Ures while, surprisingly enough, Guaymas is missing.

Yet this city was home to various French because its port on the gulf coast enabled the wholesalers and retailers to participate in the important trade along the coast of the Pacific which went all the way down to El Callao, the port of the city of Lima in Peru, and Valparaiso, Chile. This Sonoran city was undeniably of commercial interest as the French consular agent Dous pointed out in 1834. According to Dous the French merchants of San Blas, Mazatlán and Guaymas were forced to entrust the sum of one million pesos to English ships as French gun boats hardly ever sailed down this coast.²⁶ In 1829 the city also had a French *alcalde*, mayor, named André Desse who had been a sailor. He was married to a Mexican woman and lived in rather poor conditions.²⁷ Neither he nor the other French subjects who were living in Guaymas at that time are recorded in the *Registre*. Families like the Camou who had established themselves in the most important cities of Sonora and played an important role in the trade with Europe and other Spanish-American republics are also missing. This may be due to the fact that the Camous, just like other French nationals, were well assimilated and although they were known to be French immigrants hardly ever sought the support of their consular agent. After naturalization they furthermore might have considered it improper to ask for French assistance although we know that they would speak French at home and make a point of sending their children to France to study. The same is true of the state of Chihuahua and of Durango whose French families simply are not recorded in the *Registre*.

It is then necessary to complement the *Registre* with information that can be found in the works of French travellers who made a point of mentioning their fellow countrymen and with Mexican sources, especially with material from regional archives. They will enable historians to trace these French, especially those that formed a group of merchants which a German historian so appropriately has called the “trade conquistadors”. Even though we are talking about only a few wholesalers and retailers they were able to acquire between 1821 and 1855 an influence which was very much disproportionate to their numbers.²⁸ They also opened up new spaces for other non-Mexicans who would fill in the gaps. Thus French, German and British individuals who commanded a considerable investment capital quickly came to dominate money lending, mining and wholesale trading even though they represented only a very small fraction of society. They used their command of foreign languages and their family networks to introduce this part of Mexico into the markets and trade routes of their time and they played a vital role in developing this region; a role which has not been studied in depth.

²⁶ Cp: Penot, Jacques: *Primeros contactos diplomáticos entre México y Francia, 1808-1830*. México: SRE 1975, p. 102.

²⁷ See Combier, Cyprien de: *Voyage au golfe de Californie. Nuits de la zone torride*. Paris: Arthus Bertrand 1864.

²⁸ Bernecker, Walther L.: *Die Handelskonquistadoren. Europäische Interessen und mexikanischer Staat, 1821-1867*, Stuttgart: 1986, passim.

Conclusion

Although the number of foreigners living in Mexico grew considerably after Independence, the foreign communities remained small. The importance of the foreign communities was nevertheless considerable as their members tended to occupy important economic and social spaces.

The French colony of the Mexican Northwest in the 18th and 19th centuries was in many respects a mirror image of the French colony in general. For the 18th century especially Spanish sources are important, and even though they may only allow us to look at particular French subjects, we can assume that there were many more who lived in similar conditions. For the 19th century there are more archival sources at our disposal which have to be combined with a variety of other sources such as travel descriptions to render a more complete picture. In spite of all the shortcomings of these sources, they make it possible to trace the steps of many French in a region which merits a closer look in order to be able to write a history of French presence in Mexico before French intervention.