

The Campaign of Conquest in the Estuary of the Rio de la Plata (1536)

Abstract

From Habsburg Spain, numerous conquistadores launched campaigns of conquest in “Spanish America,” that is, more precisely, in the areas increasingly subjugated by military expeditions. Ulrich Schmidel (c. 1510-c. 1580), the son of a Straubing patrician, participated as a mercenary in a promising – from the conquerors’ viewpoint – and well-equipped campaign of conquest under the command of Pedro de Mendoza (Granada, c. 1487-1539) in the estuarial area of the Rio de la Plata (today’s Argentina), and spent almost twenty years in Latin America (1536-1553). The fleet, which included fourteen ships with more than 2,500 seamen and soldiers, was financed in part by the Welsers. The force advanced up the river in 1535; the approximately 3,000 Querandí residents shared food with them. Relations deteriorated rapidly, however, and the indigenous people left. The Europeans put up a fort that they called Buenos Aires and sent a partially mounted expedition armed with guns. They lost a battle against the Querandí, but killed 1,000 of them. Long-running martial conflicts followed.

Ulrich Schmidel had, it seems, decided in favor of permanent immigration. He lived with one (or more) native women and had several children. Only when news of his half-brother’s death, and a substantial inheritance, reached him did he return to Straubing in 1554. He became a well-to-do councilman there, but had to move to Regensburg in 1562 on account of religious conflicts.

His travel report was repeatedly published from 1567 on and was translated into five languages. Unlike Nikolaus Federmann, Schmidel scarcely went into the lifestyle of the indigenous peoples, instead reporting about the conquest and the soldiers’ everyday life. He was witness to the founding of Fort Buenos Aires. For that reason, his report, one of the few narrative attestations to the campaign of conquest, has played an important role in Argentina’s nation-building process since the nineteenth century. The military expedition serves as evidence for the initial stage of a long immigration movement into the Southern Cone. Those inhabiting the land before the arrival of the European mercenaries have been excluded from the myth of the nation’s founding. Especially the copperplate prints are repeatedly cited as the earliest pictures of the later capital of the Rio de la Plata viceroyalty, particularly as little is otherwise known about the first years. The fortified settlement had to be abandoned in 1541; only in 1560 was it built in another form farther up the river. The pictures are not original to Schmid’s accounts and only appeared in later editions, for example in the 1602 Nuremberg edition selected here.

Source

Chapter 7: On the city of Buenos Aires and the Querandis

Now we have built a city, which was called Buenos Aires, that is, in English, “Good Winds”. But we had also brought 72 horses and mares on the ship with us from Hispania. In this land we found a small village; in it are Indian people named Querandis, about 2,000 men and their wives and children, who, like the Charruas, are dressed from the navel to the knees. They brought us fish and meat to eat. These Querandis do not have their own dwellings, but move around in the country like the Gypsies do at home. If they travel in the summertime, they

sometimes travel over thirty miles away on dry land without finding a drop of water to drink. And if they perhaps come across a deer or some other wildlife, they drink its blood. They sometimes find a root called “cardes”; they eat it for thirst. But they only drink blood because they have no water at all or anything else to drink, and they would otherwise die of thirst.

These Querandis shared their paltry supply of fish and meat with us daily for fourteen days and brought it into camp, only missing one day on which they did not come to us at all. Our commander, Don Pedro Mendoza, right away sent a judge called Juan Pavon together with two servants to them, for this people, the Querandis, were staying five miles away from our camp; but when they [the Spaniards] got to them, they [the Querandis] treated them such that all three were beaten black and blue and then sent home.

However, when our commander, Don Pedro Mendoza, became aware of this after it was revealed by the judge, who started a commotion in the camp, he sent his own brother, Don Diego Mendoza, with 300 mercenaries – I was one of them – and 30 well-equipped horses to confront them with the order to capture and kill the Indian Querandis named, and to occupy their small villages. But when we got to them, they had 4,000 men, because they had called together their friends.

[...]

Chapter 9: How the city of Buenos Aires was built, and about the starvation we suffered.

When we got back to our camp again, the people were separated from each other, for everyone was used according to whether fit for battle or fit for work. A city was built there, with an earthen wall a half spear and a half-spear high around it, and with a strong house in it for our commander. The earthen wall around it was three shoes wide, and what was built today, collapsed again tomorrow. The people had nothing to eat, suffered from great poverty, and starved. It finally got to the point where the horses no longer were able to function. It caused such poverty and starvation that neither rats nor mice, neither snakes nor other vermin were present in sufficient quantity to satisfy this huge, miserable hunger and this unspeakable poverty; even shoes and other leather, everything, had to be eaten.

It happened that three Spaniards absconded with a horse and secretly ate it, and when people found out about it, the men were caught and questioned while subjected to great pain. When they confessed, they were sentenced to the gallows and hanged. In the same night, three other Spaniards joined together and went to the three men who had been hanged on the gallows. They hacked their shanks from their bodies and cut large pieces of flesh from them to satisfy their great hunger. In similar manner, a Spaniard, out of immense hunger, ate his brother, who had died in the city of Buenos Aires.

[...]

Source: Ulrich Schmidel, *Vierte Schiffart. Warhafftige Historien. Einer Wunderbaren Schiffahrt/welche Ulrich Schmidel von Straubing von Anno 1534. biß Anno 1554, in Americam oder Neuwelt/bey Brasilia vnd Rio della Plata gethan* [...], 2nd ed. Nuremberg, 1602. Reprint, Graz, 1962, p. 7f., 10.

Translation: Kathleen Dell'Orto

Further Reading:

Mark Häberlein, *Schmidl, Ulrich*, in *Neue Deutsche Biographie* 23 (2007), p. 161f.

Wolfgang Neuber, *Fremde Welt im europäischen Horizont. Zur Topik der deutschen Amerika-Reiseberichte der frühen Neuzeit*. Berlin, 1991.

Ulrich Schmidel, *Wahrhaftige Historie einer wunderbaren Schifffahrt welche Ulrich Schmidel von Straubing von 1534 bis 1554 in Amerika oder Neue Welt bei Brasilia oder Rio Della Plata getan*, edited by Fernando Amado Aymoré. Wiesbaden, 2010, p. 52f., 58f. [Version in modernized German].

Recommended Citation: The Campaign of Conquest in the Estuary of the Rio de la Plata (1536), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/migration/ghis:document-71>> [April 23, 2024].