

WHO WERE THE VOLUNTEERS?
A SPANISH REVOLUTIONARY AND WANDERER
IN ARGENTINA, 1857-1860

¿Quiénes fueron los voluntarios? Revolucionario
español errante en Argentina, 1857-1860

STEPHEN JACOBSON

Universitat Pompeu Fabra

stephen.jacobson@upf.edu

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Abstract

The history of revolutionary volunteerism begins with the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars and continues with the Latin American and Greek Wars of Independence, the French invasion of Algeria, and the civil wars of the Iberian Peninsula and the Río de la Plata. In the aftermath of the European revolutions of 1848 and the Spain's Progressive Biennium (1854-1856), many ex-revolutionaries, exiles, demobilized soldiers, and ordinary immigrants continued this tradition. They volunteered for wars in favor of democracy and national unification, and for liberal campaigns of conquest in the name of civilization. A blossoming academic literature has analyzed this phenomenon. All the same, little is known about ordinary volunteers who did not write memoirs or become the protagonists of romanticized biographies. This microhistory traces the wanderings of Claudio Feliu, a struggling artisan and militiaman from Barcelona who participated in the failed revolution of 1856 and then traveled to Argentina for political and personal reasons where he

volunteered for a campaign against the Indians (1857-58) and then a naval attack in what was then called the “War of National Unification” (1859). In addition to helping understand the ordinary experiences of volunteers, his life offers a window into analyzing the interconnections between the Río de la Plata and the Mediterranean, and popular democratic internationalism in the mid nineteenth century.

Keywords

Volunteers; Progressive Biennium; Buenos Aires; Barcelona; democratic internationalism.

Resumen

La historia de los voluntarios revolucionarios empieza con las guerras revolucionarias y napoleónicas en Francia, y continúa con las guerras de independencia en Grecia y Latinoamérica, con la invasión francesa de Argelia y con las guerras civiles en la península ibérica y en el Río de la Plata. Al terminar las revoluciones europeas de 1848 y el Bienio Progresista en España (1854-1856), muchos exrevolucionarios, exiliados, soldados desmovilizados e inmigrantes continuaron esta tradición. Se alistaron como voluntarios en guerras a favor de la democracia y de la unificación nacional y en campañas liberales de conquista en el nombre de la civilización. Una literatura académica en ciernes se ha ocupado de este fenómeno. Sin embargo, poco se conoce de los voluntarios que no escribieron memorias o que no se convirtieron en protagonistas de biografías romantizadas. Esta microhistoria traza las peripecias de Claudio Feliu, artesano de poca fortuna y miliciano barcelonés que participó en la revolución fallida de 1856 y después viajó a Argentina por razones políticas y personales. Allí tomó parte en una campaña contra los indios (1857-1858) y en un ataque naval en lo que entonces se llamó la “Guerra de Unificación Nacional” (1859). Además de ayudarnos a entender las experiencias de los voluntarios corrientes, su vida nos ofrece una ventana para analizar las interconexiones entre el Río de la Plata y el Mediterráneo, así como el internacionalismo popular democrático de mediados del siglo XIX.

Palabras clave

Voluntarios; Bienio Progresista; Buenos Aires; España; internacionalismo democrático.

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I. INTRODUCTION

One of the notable successes of European social history was to identify the profiles and motivations of ordinary men and women with democratic instincts who participated in the great episodes of revolution during the nineteenth century. In the past decades, the “global turn” has led historians to explore the interconnections between revolutions, and, as a consequence, to pay increasing attention to a specific genus of revolutionary. The foreign “volunteer” —often a “legionnaire”— did not merely occupy public spaces, defy authorities, man barricades, or take to the hills in their own cities, towns, and regions. Rather, he or she crossed borders, and sometimes mountains and oceans, to join armies in foreign conflicts on behalf of perceived universal principles. These “transnational patriots”¹ incited revolutions, fought in wars of liberation (or occupation), and defended (or helped topple) regimes in nearby and faraway lands. While intellectual and military elite coordinated political networks, volunteer soldiers also spread ideas, ideologies, and revolution².

Global microhistory focusses on interconnections over space (as opposed to changes over time), and, for this reason, is a useful methodology to explore volunteerism³ Within the literature, scholars have peppered their work with vignettes of men, and on occasion women dressed as men, to enhance their narratives⁴. Spies, double agents, conmen, entrepreneurs, utopian colonizers, bandit heroes, and idealistic aristocrats are some of the most colorful and recurrent characters. Mythical figures, such as Byron or Garibaldi, became subjects of semi-fictional romanticized biographies and autobiographies, and

¹ For this expression, see Zanou (2018).

² For overviews, see Krüger and Levsen (2010); Arielli and Collins (2013a), and Arieli (2018).

³ De Vito and Gerritsen (2018).

⁴ For an example of the vast bibliography on this latter subject, see Blanton and Cook (2002) and Füssel (2018).

even appeared as characters in novels. Their enemies, in contrast, demonized them with equally hyperbolic accounts of their vices, corruptions, and crimes. Other literate officers wrote memoirs, often embellishing or inventing accounts, to sell books⁵. In Spain, the most famous adventurer was Juan Van Halen (1788-1864) whose political and military activities brought him from the dungeons of the Spanish Inquisition to the Caucasus, Cuba, and Philadelphia. His entertaining memoirs were translated into various languages, and were later novelized by Pío Baroja⁶. However, there is a danger of giving privileged status to such extraordinary lives. One poignant critique of global microhistory is that such compelling tales often feature “unusually cosmopolitan individuals”. Instead of using microhistory as a microscope that helps understand large processes or opens new lines of inquiry as advocated by Giovanni Levi, the narration of such lives can distort the historical record, or, to be fair, portray eccentric or elite circles outside the mainstream⁷.

This microhistory will focus on the adventures and wanderings of a more typical and flawed individual, a man named Claudio Feliu i Fontanills. His biography lacks the romance of famous volunteers from Van Halen to Byron to Garibaldi. However, its very banality is revealing of ordinary experience. To summarize, he was born in Barcelona to a family of well-off artisans. He failed at a number of callings, became “proletarianized,” and ended up working in an iron foundry. During Spain’s Progressive Biennium (1854-56), he became radicalized, joined the National Militia, opened fire in the failed revolution of 1856, spent a brief spell in jail, and emigrated to the Río de la Plata. In 1857, he volunteered for the Army of the State of Buenos Aires in a campaign against the Indians. In 1859, he joined the armed forces of the rival Confederation of Argentina (with its capital in Paraná), then at war with Buenos Aires. He participated in naval operations preceding the Battle of Cepeda in which the Confederation prevailed, bringing about the unification of Argentina. Along the way, he lost jobs, joined a theater company, fell in love, got into trouble, and enjoyed drinking in taverns and chatting in barber shops. His is a biography of a rather ordinary revolutionary volunteer that has been lacking from a literature dominated by romantic (and sometimes gothic)

⁵ For the industry surrounding Garibaldi’s biographies and memoirs, see Riall (2008: 154-161, 194-203). For “anti-myths” surrounding his persona, see Granito and Rossi (2008). For the highly fictional nature and lucrative business of military memoirs, see Greig (2021). For the need to read first-person accounts of officers with care, see Cañas Díez (2015).

⁶ Van Halen (1828) and Baroja (1933).

⁷ de Vries (2019) and Levi (1991).

exploits of famous adventurers with their prison escapes, heroic actions, personal sacrifices, sexual appeals, and iron wills.

Like many such microhistories, it is possible to gather such information because of a remarkable occurrence. In 1861, a man claiming to be Claudio Fontanellas, the long-lost son of a distinguished banking family in Barcelona, was thrown in jail and convicted of imposture. He was said to be Claudio Feliu i Fontanills, who had returned to Barcelona after having spent four years as a soldier in Argentina. Public opinion never reached a consensus on whether the accused was Claudio Feliu, Claudio Fontanellas, or someone else. This microhistory will not discuss the imposter case, the subject of a book-in-progress⁸. Rather, it will take advantage of the information that the courts and lawyers compiled on Claudio Feliu, which in turn leads to the archives of Argentina. Even if Claudio Feliu became an imposter, this would not have made his previous experience exceptional. If he became an imposter, the fraud was probably meant to convince a boat captain to take him home, which then ballooned into a *cause célèbre* upon arrival in Barcelona. To be sure, assuming such a false identity, like committing petty theft was, in many respects, part of the myriad of experiences of volunteers who mixed ideals with survival.

II. VOLUNTEERS IN EUROPE, THE AMERICAS, AND SPAIN

The birth of the “volunteer” can be traced to the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. In these intensely ideological conflicts, the world’s largest armies, assembled from universal conscription, boosted their ranks with domestic and foreign sympathizers. Illustratively, the Grande Armée crossed into Russia in 1812 with Poles, Italians, Germans, Spaniards, and other foreigners comprising half of its ranks. The volunteer, in theory, enlisted in a foreign army, propelled by patriotism or ideology. As such, he replaced the Old-Regime “mercenary” who pursued money or material reward. Not all volunteers were truly voluntary. Some were coerced, and others were prisoners-of-war or just prisoners. What is more, many were induced by the promises of wages, land, uniforms, guns, romance, or adventure. Others joined expeditions to escape repression, the police, creditors, or bad marriages. Nor did mercenaries cease to exist. However, the term “mercenary” acquired a pejorative connotation, making it necessary to cloak foreign fighters, many with mixed motives, in the robes of international solidarity⁹.

⁸ For more on this case, see Jacobson (2003) and Sánchez (2017).

⁹ Arielli and Collins (2013b).

It is helpful to distinguish two types of volunteers. The first were “expeditionary volunteers” who fled into exile or abandoned their homelands with the intention to join foreign legions or armies. Convinced by pamphlets, peers, and propaganda, they often boarded boats with hundreds of their comrades in financed expeditions. Such expeditions were common in the decades following the Napoleonic Wars when the Latin American and Greek wars of independence, and the Spanish and Portuguese civil wars, attracted royalists and liberals alike¹⁰. The second were “immigrant volunteers” who initially settled in foreign lands for a mixture of personal, economic, and political reasons; once there, they chose to enlist in foreign legions or the regular army. The first major conflict to rely on such volunteers was the civil war or the *Guerra Grande* of the Estado Oriental (later Uruguay) from where Giuseppe Garibaldi emerged as a budding “hero of the two worlds”. Its capital Montevideo had a population of 31,000 souls in 1843, which included a majority of foreigners. In 1843, the *Blanco* leader Manuel Oribe, allied with the Argentine *caudillo* José Manuel de Rosas, laid siege to the city. This, in turn, provoked a French-British blockade of Buenos Aires. The Europeans lifted the blockade in 1849, but the siege lasted until 1851. During the siege, loosely assembled foreign militias reorganized into foreign legions, which then extended recruitment networks back across the Atlantic to Europe¹¹.

The US Civil War (1861-1865) was the other major conflict to rely heavily on immigrant volunteers. Roughly one in four of the 2.2 million soldiers of the Union Army had immigrated to the United States. Some served in the regular army and others in the “Garibaldi Guard”, comprised of eleven companies (four German, two Hungarian, one French, one Italian, one Spanish, and one Swiss)¹². The defense of Montevideo and the United States Civil War were the most well-known of many post-independence conflicts in the Americas that attracted volunteers from the Old World. However, volunteers also traveled to Mexico to defend the country during wars with the United States (1846-1848) and France (1861-65). In the Río de la Plata, the subject of this microhistory, Claudio Feliu, fought in campaigns against the Indians and in wars of Argentine unification that took place following the fall of Rosas in 1852. Foreign legions also featured in the Paraguayan War (1864-1870) between Paraguay and a triple alliance of Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay¹³.

¹⁰ This body of literature is immense. Some notable contributions include: Brown (2006); St. Clair (2008); Rodriguez (2009); Stites (2014); Bron (2016), and Bonvini (2022).

¹¹ For the foreign legions in Montevideo, see Etchechury Barrera (2012, 2017).

¹² Doyle (2015: 170).

¹³ Taylor Hansen (1987) and Etchechury Barrera (2016).

Although many foreign fighters joined nationalist movements in which oppressed peoples clamored for popular sovereignty to liberate themselves from the shackles of absolutist empires, volunteers also joined imperial campaigns. Even before the advent of the Grande Armée, Napoleon assembled an ill-fated Polish Legion in his failed attempt to recover, and reestablish slavery in, Haiti in 1802. In 1831, Orleánist France revived this imperial tradition with the French Foreign Legion. Aside from its military purposes, it provided work for hundreds of refugees who had descended on Paris in the wake of the July Revolution but whose precarious situations and dangerous appearances had unnerved much of (chauvinistic) bourgeois society. Integrated into the Armée d’Afrique in Algeria, the Legion was also deployed in foreign conflicts during the Carlist War in Spain (1836-1839), the Crimean War (1853-1856), the Italian War of Independence of 1859, and the occupation of Mexico (1861-1865)¹⁴. In a like manner, the British assembled foreign legions for the Crimean War, although they did not turn them into a permanent corps for fear that veteran legionnaires could stir up trouble on the British Isles¹⁵.

Volunteers provoked wildly contradictory opinions. On the one hand, supporters showered them in praise as an international brotherhood dedicated to the spread of liberalism, civilization, and Christianity. Within transatlantic liberal and democratic political culture, the Manichaeic struggle of “civilization against barbarism” evoked a global military campaign that included the fight against absolutism in Iberia or Italy, *caudillismo* in the Americas, Islamic despotism in Greece and Crimea, and Bedouin hordes and Indian savages in the Magreb, the Pampa, and the Great Plains¹⁶. On the other hand, critics depicted them as criminals, soldiers of fortune, mutineers, filibusterers, chancers, brigands, and mercenaries who drank heavily, were prone to violence, and preyed on local populations. Another criticism was that they often deserted or switched sides, either infected by enemy ideology or seduced by women and drink. Most famously, the Irish *San Patricios* fought for the United States in the Mexican War (1846-1848) but switched sides after realizing their affinities with a Catholic country then being invaded by Protestant power¹⁷. In some campaigns, a blurry line distinguished a volunteer battalion from a guerrilla band. Depending on the conflict, volunteers were accused of sequestering women, living with concubines and slaves,

¹⁴ Koller (2013).

¹⁵ Bayley (1977).

¹⁶ Bonvini and Jacobson (2022).

¹⁷ Stevens (1999).

stealing food and horses, celebrating victories with orgies and rapes, and engaging in duels and brawls. Although most accounts solely describe the participation of men, women sometimes undertook washing, cleaning, prostitution, and military activities in a battalion¹⁸.

On one level, the history of volunteerism in Spain reads similar to that of other countries. More than 40,000 Spaniards (some voluntary and some not) of the José Bonaparte Regiment took part the invasion of Russia. Interestingly, Tsar Alexander I, who initially recognized the Constitution of 1812, assembled the Alejandro Regiment consisting of 1800 Spanish prisoners-of-war. In 1813, they traveled to Spain to fight against Napoleon where they remained together and kept their name¹⁹. Spanish volunteers, although not very numerous, also joined expeditions to Greece, Gran Columbia, and Portugal²⁰. In Montevideo, Spanish volunteers (as well as economic migrants from the Canary islands) enlisted in the French and Italian legions as well as the regular army²¹. Spaniards volunteered for the French Foreign Legion to such an extent that they were given their own battalion in 1832. To be sure, the participation of Spaniards in the Legion and early colonization of Algeria was similar that of other nationalities who had formed a plurality of volunteers in foreign conflicts, such as the Polish in the Napoleonic invasion of Haiti; the British and Irish in Gran Colombia; the Germans in Greece, Brazil, and the United States; or the French and Italians in Spain, Portugal and Montevideo²².

The history of Spanish volunteerism, like that of other countries, was complicated. For Spain was both a “destination” and a “supplier” of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary volunteers. To be sure, exiles and volunteers from Spain formed part of what historians have called a “Liberal International”. However, many more Carlist refugees volunteered for what has been termed a “White International”. Foreign legions came to Spain to defend liberalism from the invasion of the 100,000 Sons of St. Louis in 1823 and to fight on behalf of constitutionalism during the Carlist Wars (1833-1839). Yet, from the end of the First Carlist War in 1839 to the outbreak of the Second in 1872, Spanish counter-revolutionary exiles often fought in foreign wars across the Pyrenees or the Atlantic²³. During the siege of Montevideo, Basque Carlists constituted the nucleus of the Battalion of the Galant

¹⁸ Brown (2005) and Puliafito (2006: 113, 114, 133).

¹⁹ Stites (2014): 55-56. In addition to Russian sources, he cites: Schop Soler (1975).

²⁰ St. Clair (2008: 66) and Brown (2006: 27).

²¹ Etchechury Barrera (2015, 2017).

²² Díaz (2015: 198).

²³ Cañas Díez and Viguera Ruiz (2019).

(Batallón de Agueridos) in 1842. It dissolved a few months after forming when a majority of its soldiers switched sides to join the Battalion of the Volunteers for Oribe, a Spanish-Basque foreign legion that fought on behalf of the Blancos in the civil war²⁴. During the Mexican War (1846-48), United States diplomats claimed that Spain and France channeled Carlist refugees to Mexico to foment royalism in the Americas²⁵. During the wars of Italian unification, Spanish Carlists volunteered on behalf of the Bourbons in Naples and the Pope in Rome. When a second Carlist War broke out in Spain in 1872, foreign volunteers from this White International, some of whom had fought in Italy and in the Franco-Prussian War, came to Spain in defense of throne and alter²⁶.

Claudio Feliu, for his part, participated in what could be termed a “Democratic International”²⁷. In many respects, this was a continuation of the “Liberal International” that had emerged in the wake of the 1820 revolutions in Spain, Naples, Piedmont, Sicily, and Portugal. In the aftermath of the defeat of these constitutionalist regimes, Spanish exiles gathered around Lord Holland in London, while Italian Risorgimento elite constituted an authentic diaspora throughout Mediterranean and Atlantic cities²⁸. By the 1850s, Giuseppe Mazzini had centered operations of a Democratic International in London. Instead of relying on secret societies and military conspiracies, he advocated spreading ideas and exporting revolution through the press, theatre, opera, poetry, novels, and political-literary associations. Inspired by Mazzini, romantic elite formed groups such as “Young Italy,” “Young Argentina,” or “Young Bengal”²⁹. In the meanwhile, ordinary people gathered in taverns, stores, flats, and shops. New consumption habits, rising wages, increased literacy, and rapid communications fomented public and private political sociability, and allowed news and rumor to travel quickly across borders³⁰.

The ensuing microhistory of Claudio Feliu helps understand the experience of ordinary (subaltern) immigrant volunteers who participated in revolutionary milieus and fought in foreign wars. Additionally, it illustrates the interconnections between the Mediterranean and the Río de la Plata, while

²⁴ Etchechury Barrera (2015: 132-133).

²⁵ Swenson (2021: 322-330).

²⁶ Sarlin (2009); Cañas Díez (2017), and Dupont (2021).

²⁷ Florencia Peyrou prefers “transnational democratic culture”, while Guy Thomson has used “Democratic International”. Peyrou (2015) and Thomson (2010: 67).

²⁸ Brennecke (2002); Isabella (2009), and Simal (2016).

²⁹ Bayly and Biagini (2008)

³⁰ Thomson (2017).

demonstrating the importance of rogue or picaresque culture to transatlantic democracy. His biography is a more realistic portrayal than can be gleaned from romantic and ideologically motivated depictions of famous volunteers whose deeds were embellished or invented to sell books, spread ideas, and build reputations.

III. WHO WERE THE VOLUNTEERS? THE STORY OF CLAUDIO FELIU

Claudio Feliu i Fontanills belonged to a successful family of Barcelona artisans. He was born on 4 February 1837, the son of Joaquim Feliu and Joaquina Fontanills, the second child of a family of silversmiths who raised three children, two boys and a girl. The family lived on the middle-income street of Banyes Vells near the Cathedral. From their balcony, they chatted with their distinguished neighbor, the architect Antoni Rovira i Trias. The father also ran a tailor shop with his brothers, Ramon and Josep, on the Carrer Ample, an affluent zone where customers were in need of fine clothes. Joaquin and Joaquina led a comfortable life. They hired a wetnurse for their newborns, rented a country house in Sant Gervasi, and left on vacation in the summer³¹. In many respects, the respective fates of their two boys were typical of artisan families, who faced opportunities and pressures in a city then being massively transformed by industrialization, migration, and commercial booms and busts. Their eldest son Celestí was upwardly mobile. He developed a successful career as a currency broker (*corredor de cambio*) at the stock exchange. The younger son, Claudio, in contrast, was less fortunate³².

At first, Claudio Feliu tried his hand at brokerage with little success. As a result, his family decided to train him as a “druggist” (*droguista*) also called

³¹ In his memoirs, Conrad Roure notes that he summered with Ramon Feliu in Viladrau (Osona). I assume that if one of the brothers could summer, so could the other. Roure (1925: 172).

³² This (and much of the following) information concerning Feliu can be gathered from witness testimony in the imposter case, summarized accurately by the court reporter in: Ferrater (1865: 171-206). For documentary evidence, I consult the original documentation (and not the summary), since many of the documents come from Argentina and were not well understood by the court reporter. The full case has miraculously survived despite the destruction of all criminal cases at the Audiencia de Barcelona. Arxiu Corona d’Aragó (ACA). Real Audiencia (RA). Pleitos Criminales (PC)/2 (“Rollo de la causa formada sobre la desaparición de Claudio Fontanellas y continuada por el delito de usurpación del estado civil del mismo”), 4 vols.

a “confectioner” (*confitero*). In Barcelona, these two professions were one in the same, as the precise skills (and often ingredients) used to mix healing solutions, powders, and potions were the similar to those needed to confection sweets. His first apprenticeship took place in 1850 when he was thirteen years old. He helped out for a month with Josep Reverter on Tapineria Street near his house. In 1851 and 1852, he undertook a more formal apprenticeship with Joaquim Escalter, a friend of his father, who owned two establishments, one in the luxurious building of Porxos d'en Xifré. He later apprenticed for Antoni Coll in 1852 and 1853 on the Plaça Sant Miquel in the neighborhood of Barceloneta. Although he had been taught to read and write in Spanish, he only attended primary school for a few years³³. Many artisan families educated their children in this way. Although some foresaw the advantages of a secondary-school or higher education, most ensured that their children were literate and numerate and then sent them to apprentice at a young age. Judging from a letter, Claudio was able to make himself understood by using phonetic strategies in his writing, but his script was replete with spelling errors³⁴. He was not capable of leaving a memoir or a vivid account of his life. Claudio spoke Catalan in his daily conversations, as did practically all artisan families in Barcelona. Though he may have struggled to speak Spanish, it was the language everyone used for writing³⁵.

It is not known when Claudio Feliu became radicalized, but it likely began when he started spending his days in the working-class and seafaring neighborhood of Barceloneta in his adolescence. When he apprenticed for Antoni Coll in Barceloneta, he frequented a wine shop in the plaza and formed part of a theater company in the neighborhood that styled itself the “Cervantes Society”. Shortly after cholera hit the city in 1854, he lost his job. His father tried to help him out by sponsoring him as an agent (*comisionista*) of overseas goods (*frutos y géneros coloniales*), in which he attempted to use his contacts with druggists and other stores to supply them with rice, chocolate, sugar, and *drogas*. By 1855, Claudio was back working in Barceloneta. Again, with the help of his family, he found a salaried job at the Nuevo Vulcan iron foundry, a position that must have been difficult to secure amid the economic crisis. After a day's work, he arrived at the theater in dusty clothes. There, he helped arrange sets and benches, and occasionally performed a minor role. At night, he often gathered with his thespian friends in a flat. His proletarianization stretched to his love life. His girlfriend was María Fernández, the daughter of his wetnurse

³³ Caso (1864-65: 34).

³⁴ ACA, RA, PC/2, v.1, p. 398.

³⁵ Marfany (2001: 175-212).

and his *hermana de leche*. Her parents were a seamstress and a painter, not as well off as his family of brokers, tailors, and silversmiths. He did not spend much time at home. He became estranged from his mother. His father brought him prepared meals for breakfast and lunch³⁶.

Claudio Feliu came into his precarious adulthood during the Progressive Biennium (1854-1856). The popular classes of Barcelona initially welcomed the new regime that put an end to a decade of reactionary governments, police repression, and right-wing vigilantism under the Moderates. Progressives promised a constitution that would consecrate a free press and liberty of association in addition to ensuring judicial rights. The legalization of the Democratic Party offered hope to those excluded from a limited franchise³⁷. All the same, Barcelona was fraught with social conflict throughout the period. An outbreak of cholera, an economic crisis triggered by poor wheat harvests in the Ukraine, and Spain's first general strike in 1855 kept tensions high. In theory, the Nuevo Vulcan foundry, which built machines and steamships, was not affected by the economic crisis to the extent of the larger textile industry. In the cotton factories, workers suffered layoffs and reduced work weeks due to the import of labor-saving Arkwright "self-acting" looms (*selafactinas*) and to the reduction in demand as a result of the high price of bread and staples. The Captain General of Catalonia, Juan Zapatero, had little sympathy for the progressive regime, having been sent to Barcelona to appease conservative industrial and financial classes who feared democracy and nascent syndicalism. Following the general strike, Zapatero kept Barcelona under martial law. He dissolved the trade unions, purged the militias, conducted periodic sweeps of democrats, and sent key figures to prison and exile³⁸. One such democratic leader who fled in 1855 was the lawyer Pere Montaldo. He escaped to Italy, and later left to the United States where he volunteered for the Union armies in the United States Civil War. He lost a leg but survived the Battle of Stones River (31 December 1862-3 January 1863), one of the bloodiest of the war³⁹.

One can only imagine the conversations in the flats, shops, and theater where Claudio Feliu and his friends avoided the watchful eyes of their bosses and parents. These were the typical spaces where democracy and radicalism flourished during the Biennium, a period that offered great but ultimately fleeting

³⁶ Ferrater (1865: 171-206).

³⁷ Even in the Biennium, the electoral law limited the franchise to about 4.5 % of the population. Domínguez (1999).

³⁸ This period is studied in detail in Benet and Martí (1976). For an overview of Spain, see Kiernan (1966).

³⁹ Columbrí (1864: 157).

hope. In such places, young men and women mixed pleasure and politics, often read newspapers aloud, debated, drank and danced, and cursed the rich and the politicians. It is important not to romanticize such milieus, given that the workers of Barceloneta suffered tremendously as a result of cholera, repression, unemployment, dangerous working conditions, low salaries, and reduced hours. Yet it would be a mistake to ignore that youthful diversion, desperation, idealism, and theater mixed well with revolution⁴⁰. It was not uncommon for militias to found theater companies. The Liceu Opera house, for example, had its origins in a theater company started by members of a militia battalion in the early 1840s. They staged shows in order to raise money for guns and uniforms⁴¹.

Claudio Feliu joined the Sixth Company of the Battalion of Artillery Volunteers of the National Militia. Some thought that he served from 1854 to 1856, while others remembered that he joined only for a few months in 1856⁴². During revolutionary periods in Spain, the militia symbolized the moral conscious of the *pueblo*. To its supporters, it was a citizenry in arms that guaranteed the enforcement of revolutionary laws while ensuring that politicians remained true to their word⁴³. To its detractors, it was a source of instability, and at times criminality, representing the constant threat of radicalization and violence. Following the revolution of 1854, the centrist politician, Antonio Cánovas del Castillo, included the reestablishment of the National Militia in his Manifiesto de Manzaneres in order to garner support among the revolutionary working classes. In theory, militia commanders took orders from the Captain General, but the relationship was fraught and the chain-of-command tenuous. During the general strike of 1855, militia leaders defied Zapatero, refusing orders to aid the Army against striking workers. During the early days of the revolution of 1856, Zapatero dissolved the most radical of the militia battalions, including the Sixth Company. Feliu took active part in the uprising by manning a bell tower for seven hours at the church of Sant Miquel on the plaza. He opened fire on the Spanish army together with his fellow revolutionaries of his group of Barceloneta friends.

Claudio Feliu's active participation in the revolution of 1856 brought consequences. This failed revolution took place during the "July Days" in

⁴⁰ Such ambiances, for university students, are well-portrayed in Roure (1925: 127-33). The role of such leisure activities, popular culture, and civic festivals are recently explored in Roca Vernet (2021).

⁴¹ Radigales i Babi (1998: 27-34).

⁴² Ferrater (1865: 179-190).

⁴³ For a recent overview of the abundant literature on the National Militia, see Veiga Alonso (2020).

Barcelona and a number of other Spanish cities. It was similar to that of the “June Days” of Paris in 1848. Both were popular uprisings without visible leadership that sought to radicalize the regimes. Triggered by the fall of the Progressive government of General Espartero in Madrid, many revolutionaries wished to turn Spain into a democracy or a republic. The street fighting left 63 government troops and officers dead, and 209 injured, while the revolutionaries lost 403 and suffered countless injuries⁴⁴. In the aftermath of the revolt, Claudio Feliu spent some time in jail, and then disappeared or went into hiding for a few months⁴⁵. On 9 January 1857, he boarded a newly constructed polacre called the *Joven Conchita*, captained by his uncle’s friend. He held a false passport and traveled under the name “Juan Carreras”⁴⁶.

The motives for Claudio Feliu’s emigration were mixed. Some insisted that he fled to avoid the consequences of having taken up arms in the revolution of 1856. It is not known if any of the bullets that came from the bell tower killed or injured any of the soldiers in the Spanish Army. However, he and his friends were rumored to have threatened to kill the vicar of the parish of Sant Miquel, so he was likely a marked man during the repression⁴⁷. Even though an amnesty had been issued, Zapatero had systematically ignored it. In late January of 1857, a few weeks after Feliu departed, the Captain General undertook another roundup, so the instinct to flee may have been prescient⁴⁸. Others thought that Feliu departed for personal and economic reasons. His family was fed up with his lost jobs and dodgy associations. Another possible reason was that Feliu was eligible for the draft (*las quintas*) and wished to avoid being sent to the Army in Cuba or the Philippines where the chances of death were high. Interestingly, the municipality reported that Claudio Feliu’s name was in fact drawn. On 24 May 1857, his uncle Ramon went to city hall, explaining that his nephew had immigrated to California⁴⁹.

Claudio Feliu arrived in Buenos Aires on 5 March 1857 aboard the *Joven Conchita*⁵⁰. The ship’s name, and the fact that the journey took more than two months, raise the question of whether the vessel made a stop somewhere, perhaps

⁴⁴ Aguirre (1856: 22).

⁴⁵ This according to a report issued by city hall. ACA, RA, PC/2, v.1, p. 213.

⁴⁶ Ferrater (1865: 159-163).

⁴⁷ *El Pensamiento Español* (Madrid) 2-1-1863, 3. It cites an article published previously by the daily *Irurac-bat* (Bilbao).

⁴⁸ This roundup seems to have been directed against democrats, republicans, and members of the secret societies. Columbrí (1864: 17-18).

⁴⁹ ACA, RA, PC/2, v.1, pp. 493, 503.

⁵⁰ ACA, RA, PC/2, v.3, p. 2330.

on the west coast of Africa. A few months after the *Joven Conchita* left Barcelona, British patrols captured the Barcelona slave ship, the *Conchita*, in the Gulf of Benin and brought its crew before the International Tribunal of Sierra Leone, creating a sensation in the press⁵¹. In a novel written about the imposter case, the author tells that the fictional captain of the *Joven Conchita* had been previously engaged in the slave trade in Spanish Guinea (today Equatorial Guinea), but had abandoned it for the more lucrative “jerked beef route” (*ruta de tasajo*)⁵². In this latter route, ships sailed to the Río de la Plata to pick up jerked beef to be delivered to Cuba to be used to feed slaves. In Cuba, they bought sugar to be delivered to the United States, where cotton was loaded to supply Barcelona’s looms⁵³. It is improbable that the *Joven Conchita* was carrying slaves. If it had, it would have sailed straight to Cuba rather than heading first to the Río de la Plata. However, it is clear that when Claudio Felíu boarded the polacre, he entered the cruel and brave new world of the south Atlantic.

Claudio Felíu began a new life in a strange land, albeit he would have come across hundreds of other Spanish immigrants in a similar situation. Although less industrialized, about half the size, and not as dense as Barcelona, the hustle and bustle of the growing city would have been recognizable. In 1854, Buenos Aires had a population of more than 91,000 souls and thirty-six percent of the population had been born abroad. Most of the foreigners were European, although the city’s inhabitants included a few hundred North and South Americans and some Africans. Of this latter group, most were free though a handful were enslaved⁵⁴. The 5700 Spaniards in the city slightly outnumbered the French. The Italians, in contrast, outnumbered Spanish by a ratio of almost two to one. “National” immigration, though does not tell the entire story. Many of the Spanish and French were Basque, and most Spaniards came from the northern coast. Of the 392 Catalans, artisans were the largest single cohort⁵⁵. Catalan immigrants often gathered at the barber-shop of Mateo Viñas called “Hispano-Americana” on the Calle Piedad (today Bartolomé Mitre) where they would receive news from mariners who had docked in the port of the city. The captain of the *Joven Conchita* ran into Claudio Felíu there a couple years later⁵⁶.

⁵¹ Garcia-Balañà (2008).

⁵² Comas (1865: 262-293).

⁵³ Sluyter (2010).

⁵⁴ Lyman Johnson finds slaves among testamentary inventories as late as 1855 in Buenos Aires. Johnson and Frank (2006: 647).

⁵⁵ Yáñez Gallardo (1996: 71-119) and Moya (1998: 123-149).

⁵⁶ Ferrater (1865: 162-163).

The political ambiance of the city was also reminiscent of Spain during the Progressive Biennium, featuring a vibrant associational life and a combative press⁵⁷. Following the defeat and exile of the Juan Manuel de Rosas in February 1852, the State of Buenos Aires underwent a non-violent “September Revolution”. It seceded from the Confederation of Argentina, and then resisted a siege from September 1852 to July 1853. Particularly influential within associations and institutions, and prolific in the press, were a group of romantic intellectuals from the Unitarian wing of the “Generation of 1837”. They had formed the nucleus of “Young Argentina”, later known as the “May Association”. They had led the democratic opposition to Rosas from their exiles in Santiago de Chile and Montevideo before returning triumphant to Buenos Aires. In many respects, the State of Buenos Aires (1852-1859), though longer lasting, was comparable to European political regimes, such as the French Second Republic (1848-1850) or the Spanish Progressive Biennium (1854-56). These were idealistic regimes in which a progressive elite eventually succumbed to national and international military and diplomatic force and pressure. After losing the Battle of Cepeda (1859), the State of Buenos Aires became reincorporated into what became known as the Republic of Argentina⁵⁸.

The State of Buenos Aires differed in important ways from European democratic regimes that emerged following the revolutions of 1848. Although its republican leaders praised 1848 and loathed all forms of monarchism, they were instinctively elitist. They were weary of “democratic-socialist” policies, such as those favored by many French republicans or by Spanish democrats who had supported the Barcelona general strike of 1855 and the failed revolution of 1856⁵⁹. Moreover, the State was bellicose and expansionist, threatening to incorporate the Confederation by force. The monarchies of France, Spain, Britain, Brazil, and Piedmont formally recognized the Confederation as the only sovereign entity in Argentina, and considered the State of Buenos Aires a pariah. Occupied in the Crimean War (1853-56), Great Britain and France did not intervene in the Río de la Plata as they had in Uruguay’s *Guerra Grande*. Another factor that distinguished Buenos Aires from Europe’s 1848 governments was that it was riding an economic boom highlighted by rising salaries, which attracted many immigrants to its shores⁶⁰.

The reorganization of the Army was the single reform that affected the future of Claudio Felio. In 1855, perhaps the most influential politician and

⁵⁷ González Bernaldo (2001).

⁵⁸ Scobie (1964) and Garavaglia (2015).

⁵⁹ Halperín Donghi (2005: 56-59).

⁶⁰ Djenderedjian (2013) and Johnson and Frank (2006).

opinion shaper of the period, Bartolomé Mitre became Minister of War. A romantic intellectual and artillery specialist, Mitre was a close associate of Giovanni Battista Cuneo, the representative of Mazzinism in the Río de la Plata. Mitre strove to create what he considered a European-style army, consisting solely of volunteers dedicated to democracy and embodying the principles of the Latin American revolutions⁶¹. Its priority would be to conquer the Pampas in order to clear space for European immigrant small-holding farmers, the future bedrock of the republic. He posited that a division of 2000 soldiers could drive the Indians south of the Colorado River using the “fire of the civilizing canon”⁶². For a number of reasons, Mitre’s campaign of 1855 was a disaster. However, in 1857, the new Minister of War, José Matías Zapiola, corrected tactical errors and commenced a new effort. The goal was to capture the Llaimache stronghold of Salinas Grandes, considered the key to conquering the Pampas. The Army of the South was directed against the great cacique Calfacurá who led a loose confederation of Indian tribes who had forged a temporary alliance with the Confederation of Argentina in a defensive posture against expansionist Buenos Aires⁶³.

It is impossible to surmise how familiar Claudio Felio was with the politics of Buenos Aires, but he certainly knew upon enlisting in the Army of the South that he would be taking part in an offensive against the Indians and was joining a battalion that could theoretically be mobilized against the Confederation. In fact, Claudio Felio succeeded in passing himself off as someone of much higher standing, so he must have been conversant in the strategies of the campaign and the political struggles surrounding Argentine unification. He began his service in the Light Artillery Brigade at the Campo de Marte on 26 September 1857, six months after arriving in Buenos Aires. He enrolled as an officer trainee (*aspirante*), a position that could lead to being promoted to third lieutenant (*alférez*)⁶⁴. His militia training, also in an artillery battalion, may have allowed him to fashion himself as an army veteran. However, this alone would not have been enough to garner an appointment to the officer class. European volunteers with similar backgrounds —literate soldiers and artisans— did not enroll as officer trainees but as ordinary soldiers⁶⁵. The way his name appeared in

⁶¹ Katra (1996: 143).

⁶² Mitre (1956: 99).

⁶³ For Mitre’s reorganization of the Army and the history of the frontier during this period, see Ratto (2015: 57-100).

⁶⁴ Archivo General de la Nación de Argentina (AGN), Sala III, Contaduría Nacional, Lista de Revistas, vol. 275.

⁶⁵ For ordinary soldier enlistment sheets equipped with names and professions, see AGN, Sala III, Filiaciones, vols. 59-1-1 to 59-1-9; 59-2-1 to 59-2-6.

documents was the clearest sign that he was pretending to be someone of higher standing. The roll calls usually listed his name as “Claudio Fontanills” or “Claudio Feliu de Fontanills”, in which the “de” was meant to convey status. When he left the army on 11 April 1859, he was listed with the title “Don”⁶⁶.

The artillery brigade initially consisted of a single company of 77 soldiers and junior officers and twelve higher ranking officers (including trainees). It was a motley crew, consisting of a mix of Argentines and foreigners. Some of the foreign volunteers had revealing surnames such as Ellis, Rees, Davis, Washington, Backbourn, Zimmerman, Connelly, Stevens, Chevalier, Silva, Lapiel, Croisel, Leguelet, Chiluri, Valverdi, Becca, Croisel, Cochar, and Place⁶⁷. For example, “Jorge” Rees was twenty-four year old mariner from Hamburg; Manuel Silva, a thirty-three year old illiterate dayworker from Lisbon; Amabilis Croisel, a hairdresser from Lyon; “Eduardo” Zimmerman, a cook from Hamburg; “Juan” Washington, a soldier from the United States⁶⁸. The commanding officers were more distinguished. The company was captained by Ramón Ruiz, a Costa Rican of Mexican parentage. He fought under Garibaldi in naval operations in 1842 and 1843 before becoming captain of an artillery brigade in Montevideo. The commander of the brigade, the lieutenant coronel, was Julio de Vedia, another veteran of the artillery brigades of Montevideo and the brother-in-law of Bartolomé Mitre⁶⁹. Both Vedia and Ruiz went on to have distinguished careers, reaching the ranks of general and coronel respectively. If Claudio Feliu had experienced a successful campaign —chatting, riding, gambling, and drinking alongside the likes of Vedia, Ruiz, and other officers— he could have developed the valuable contacts needed to pave his way for success in the Río de la Plata.

At first, Claudio Feliu had success. The Army of the South left Buenos Aires on 1 or 2 October. A few days later, it arrived in Azul, a fort town along the southern frontier of the State of Buenos Aires. Upon the fall of the Rosas regime in 1852, the cacique Calfacurá had succeeded in destabilizing the frontier in an attempt to roll back the looming threat of expansion. He had orchestrated two large raids (*malones*), the first in 1853 and the second in 1855. In the first, he made away with more than 100,000 heads of cattle and sheep in the zones around Tres Arroyos, Quequén Grande, and Cristiano Muerto. In the

⁶⁶ AGN, Sala III, 35-9-31, “Libro de Altas y Bajas de los Cuerpos del Ejército que de principio en Enero de 1858”. Other officers in this book were not normally listed as “don” so the term referred to a distinguished person’s birth.

⁶⁷ AGN, Sala III, Contaduría Nacional, Lista de Revistas, vol. 275.

⁶⁸ AGN, Sala III, Filiaciones, vols. 59-1-1 to 59-1-9; 59-2-1 to 59-2-6.

⁶⁹ Archivo Histórico del Ejército, Legajo Personal, “Ramón Ruiz” and “Julio Vedia”.

second, a coordinated raid on Azul and Tandil carried away 60,000 head of cattle and 150 prisoners. Allied *caciques* launched periodic smaller raids that continued to destabilize the frontier, impede repopulation, and strike fear into the population⁷⁰. The opposition newspaper *La Reforma Pacífica* ran a series of articles in late 1856 and early 1857 chronicling the extent of the damage. With respect to the county (*partido*) of Tandil, for example, it claimed that a population of 2000 had been reduced to 60, and that most of the cattle ranches had relocated to Santa Fe. A zone that had previously exported more than 100,000 head of cattle and 40,000 hides per year had been reduced to almost nothing⁷¹.

On balance, the campaign of 1857-58 was moderately successful in so far as it repaired the damage suffered during the disastrous campaign of 1855. By 1858, Buenos Aires reestablished the frontier where it had been following the fall of Rosas, allowing depopulated zones to repopulate. The more ambitious goal of expelling the Indians from the Pampa by driving them south into Patagonia did not occur until the “conquest of the desert” of the 1870s, culminated by Julio Roca’s genocidal campaign that extended the frontier to the Colorado River in 1879. In 1857, the Army of the South successfully engaged Indians in two battles at Sol de Mayo (31 October) and Cristiano Muerto (1 November). In December, the Army began to penetrate deep into Indian territory by moving south into the gorges and ravines of the Sierra de la Ventana, where a river system emptied into the Bay of Bahía Blanca, a fort town and the second southernmost enclave of the State of Buenos Aires⁷². In February, the Army incorporated a southern division that had departed Bahía Blanca. Among its 700 troops was the Military-Agricultural Legion, an outfit of 220 European volunteers. It was commanded by the Sardinian Antonio Susini, who had led the Italian Legion in Montevideo after Garibaldi’s departure in 1848⁷³.

The key battle against the Llaimaches took place at Pigüé on 15 February 1858. In this conflict, the Army, with over 2300 troops, faced some 1500 Indians on horseback under the leadership of the caciques Calfacurá, Mauquefú, and Cañumil. The battle ended with an Indian

⁷⁰ Belloni (2007).

⁷¹ This opposition paper had incentive to exaggerate, although its assessment is broadly accurate. “Algunos partidos de frontera antes y después de las invasiones de las pampas: Tandil”, *La Reforma Pacífica* (Buenos Aires), 4-12-1856, 1-2; “La despoblación de la frontera del oeste y el Rey Midas de ‘La Tribuna’”, *La Reforma Pacífica* (Buenos Aires), 17-12-1856, 2; “Azul”, *La Reforma Pacífica* (Buenos Aires), 3-1-1857, 1.

⁷² The southernmost enclave was the fort of Carmen de Patagones.

⁷³ Crespi Valls (1955) and Puliafito (2006).

retreat, and the Buenos Aires press celebrated the victory. However, it soon became evident that reality was more complicated. Calfacurá's troops did not suffer heavy losses and his dilatory tactics allowed Llaimache families and their livestock to move west across Andes into their native Arucanía region of Chile. When the Army of the South reached Salinas Grandes, they found it abandoned. They could not hold the position. The poor quality of the pastures, lagoons, and rivers could not sustain a large army, which retired to the river system of the Sierra de la Ventana in April 1858 to camp for the winter. By the time spring came around, tensions were again heating up between Buenos Aires and the Confederation in the north, while the southern frontier with the Indians returned to unstable spells of peace and war⁷⁴.

It is difficult to imagine the emotions of Claudio Felio during this grueling campaign. No doubt, he missed the meals and chats with his fellow workers, the evenings in the theater, the nights in his friends' flats. Although there were some Spaniards in the Army, most came from the northern coast; he would have only come across a few Catalans who could speak his mother tongue. Accounts of the summer in the "desert" tell of blistering heat, cold nights, intense winds, and raging wildfires. In the autumn, violent storms of wind, rain, and hail interrupted beautiful days. He would have looked with wonderment at the "friendly Indians" of the caciques Catriel and Cachul who accompanied the Army on campaign until they deserted in the days before the battle of Pigüé. He would have eyed the herds of llamas, deer, and ostriches, which could also serve as dinner along with a steady diet of rabbit. And when gazing at the sky to view a soaring eagle or into the trees to eye a puma, he would have had to be careful not to step on a venomous snake. It is unlikely that he was one of the 250 men accompanying Coronel Emilio Conesa in the battles of Sol de Mayo and Cristiano Muerto, since Conesa brought along only one piece of artillery. He was more active at Pigüé. In June of 1858, the brigade captain, Ramón Ruiz, recommended him and two other officer trainees ("Guillermo" Ellis and Juan Ferrer) for promotion. Ruiz noted that "Claudio Fontanills" had "undertaken the campaign to Salinas where he had carried out the duties of an officer, showing unequivocal signs of valor and promise for a career in the army"⁷⁵. On 18 August 1858, while still camped out in the Valley of the Sierra de la Ventana, he was promoted to *alférez*. His salary jumped from 165 to 700 pesos a month⁷⁶.

⁷⁴ The campaign is described in detail in Monferran Monferran (1962).

⁷⁵ AGN, Sala X, Gobierno Nacional, Comandancias de Fronteras (1858), X-19-8-4

⁷⁶ AGN, Sala III, Contaduría Nacional, Lista de Revistas, v. 278.

It is tempting to end the narrative here. If it had, then his would have been a success story of an immigrant volunteer —a proletarianized artisan from Barcelona who after participating in the revolution of 1856 migrated to liberal Buenos Aires where he carried out a campaign against the Indians on the Pampa, earned a promotion, and integrated himself in a foreign society. It would have paralleled the biographies of similar volunteers who were illustrative of the revolutionary and imperial spirit in the aftermath of 1848 in which the spread of democracy justified conquest and fortified a civilizing mission against savage peoples. All the same, the microhistory does not end here. As autumn turned into winter, Feliu did not handle the cold of the Patagonian frontier well. By May of 1858, he was in a hospital bed in Bahía Blanca and did not rejoin his company on the banks of the Sauce Grande until July. After a spell with his company in the city of Buenos Aires, he returned to the encampment but was soon back in hospital. Claiming that an injury prevented him from mounting on horseback, he requested a transfer to the fort of Bahía Blanca or to Buenos Aires. His request was denied, and he was granted a discharge. His superior officer Ramón Ruiz called him “useless on campaign”. Antonio Susini, the ranking officer in Bahía Blanca, described the request as “without motive”, and upbraided his “immoral conduct”. The Commander of the Army of the South, Nicolás Granada, reiterated his “immoral conduct” and stressed that he was not worthy of continuing with an “honorable career in the Army”. Finally, the Inspector General discharged him on 9 March due to his inability to resist the “stresses of campaign” and his lamentable “public conduct”⁷⁷.

It is impossible to surmise what the officers meant when they repeated the reference to his “immoral conduct”. It may simply have been a common expression used to justify a dishonorable discharge. Most likely, they were referring to his attempt to feign an injury, shortly after his promotion, as a way of negotiating a transfer to a less-demanding military life. The campaign had plenty of near mutinous incidents in which the soldiers got drunk, threatened one another with weapons, behaved badly, and even insulted or assaulted commanding officers. Such conduct could be pardonable when transgressions were committed by men valuable on campaign⁷⁸. The general descriptions of Claudio Feliu in Barcelona and Argentina do not seem to indicate that he was unruly or dangerously violent, but rather an unreliable and gregarious chap, a fraud who often fell into trouble.

⁷⁷ AGN, Sala X, División Nacional. Sección Gobierno, Solicitudes Civiles y Militares, Leg. 1, (1859), X-19-10-03.

⁷⁸ For one such pardonable incident, see AGN, Sala X, Gobierno Nacional, Comandancias de Fronteras (1858), X-19-8-4.

It is possible to recreate the general direction of his movements following the discharge. Some merchants and mariners claimed to have seen him at a café, operated by a Catalan, at the central plaza in Rosario in June of 1859. Others spotted him at the *Peluquería Hispano-Americana* in Buenos Aires in July, and then went out drinking with him in taverns⁷⁹. By September 1859, he was in Gualeguay (the place of Garibaldi's imprisonment) in the province of Entre Ríos where he initially convinced Confederation officials to give him a high position as First Lieutenant. They assigned "Claudio Fontanillas" to the Artillery Brigade stationed in Rosario where he arrived on 30 September⁸⁰. At the time, the Confederation was preparing for the "War of National Integration" against the State of Buenos Aires, and was actively recruiting battle-hardened officers. In the end, Claudio Feliu did not permanently join the brigade in Rosario. It is possible that someone got word of his past or simply discovered that he was unqualified. He then made his way to Montevideo where the Confederation was preparing a naval attack on Buenos Aires. The last person to volunteer for the warships was "Claudio Blanco" (Claudio Feliu) who enlisted as an ordinary mariner on the steamship *Hércules*⁸¹. After successfully participating in an attack on the island of Martín García, a prelude to the Battle of Caseros (23 October 1859), Claudio Feliu was discharged from the navy⁸².

Claudio Feliu's final year in Argentina is more difficult to chart given that he left the military and disappeared from the archives. Still, one Argentine witness from the imposter case offered a believable narrative. He moved to Paraná, at the time the capital of the Confederation of Argentina. As a civilian, he befriended a policeman named Santiago O'Donnell and lived with him and his family for four months. There, he continued to be known by the name "Claudio Fontanills" or "Fontanillas" as he had in the State of Buenos Aires. In Paraná, he fell in love with a girl, robbed two to three ounces of gold, spent time in jail, and unsuccessfully attempted to start a barber shop. Depicted as a mixture between a valiant soldier and a hopeless romantic, it is possible he became involved in a duel with knives, perhaps over the heart of the girl, causing injuries to his hand. At some point in 1860, he moved to Rosario to look for work. It appears that he resided there for a few months⁸³.

⁷⁹ Ferrater (1865: 28, 163-64).

⁸⁰ ACA, RA, PC/2, v.1, p. 114.

⁸¹ AGN, Sala VII, Fondo General J.J. Urquiza, Lista de Revistas, Legajo 344, 1853-1859, v. 1806.

⁸² He unsuccessfully tried to reincorporate: ACA, RA, PC/2, v.1, p. 108.

⁸³ Ferrater (1865: 165-167).

Claudio Feliu i Fontanills —known alternatively in Argentina also as Claudio Fontanills or Claudio Fontanillas— may have returned to Barcelona by pretending to be a long-lost son of a banking family named Claudio Fontanellas. Because of the coincidence in the names, many had taken him for the banker's son and some claim that he used this false identity in Argentina. If he was the imposter, he was travelling on the Paraná River between Rosario and Paraná in November of 1860 on the Catalan brigantine, the *Puerto Rico*. He convinced the first mate, Antoni Roig, that he was the missing banker's son and that his family would pay for his return fare⁸⁴. On 5 December 1860, the Spanish consul in Rosario expedited a passport to “Claudio Fontanellas”. Although described as a “merchant”, his wardrobe consisted of little more than the clothes on his back, a tattered naval uniform from the Confederation of Argentina. The *Puerto Rico* sailed to Havana, and departed Cuba on 5 March, heading to Charleston South Carolina. The Puerto Rico left Charleston on (or around) 3 April 1861⁸⁵. About a week later, on 11 April 1861, the South Carolina Militia attacked Fort Sumter, defeating the United States Army and igniting the Civil War. If Claudio Feliu was the imposter, he probably fell into the ruse in order to find a way home.

IV. CONCLUSION

One of the challenges of a microhistory of a single person is to determine the extent to which such a life is exceptional or typical, or to borrow the words of Eduardo Grendi “exceptionally normal”⁸⁶. In the field of global history, the focus on lives has the additional advantage of bringing individual experience into the understanding of large-scale historical processes⁸⁷. Within the literature on volunteers, Claudio Feliu appears as a rather unexceptional immigrant volunteer who left Europe in the wake of the revolutions of 1848 in Europe and 1856 in Spain. He exuded all the virtues and vices associated with this diaspora. His biography mixes volunteerism with job insecurity, radicalization, diversion, revolution, petty theft, brawling, fraud, friendship, switching sides, and falling in love. He was a soldier in a campaign designed to fulfil the zealous mission of the leaders of the State of Buenos Aires. They sought to defeat the Indians to clear the southern pampas for European small-

⁸⁴ Ferrater, (1865: 32-33).

⁸⁵ ACA, RA, PC/2, v.1, p. 142.

⁸⁶ Grendi (1977: 512).

⁸⁷ Gamsa (2017: 240).

holding immigrants dedicated to implanting a Mazzinian ideal of a brotherhood of sovereign democratic nations. He was not alone. Rogue and picaresque political culture lent sustenance to a Democratic International. Indeed, it was to prove triumphant in Europe in May of 1860 when Garibaldi landed with his “thousand” in Sicily.

One way to appreciate the degree in which his experience was typical is to examine some of the “macro-historical” information of others who followed a similar path. The Archivo General de la Nación in Argentina has conserved more than 700 enlistment sheets of European soldiers who volunteered for the Army of Buenos Aires between 1852 and 1860. Among them there were at least 118 Spaniards. Most were day laborers and mariners but many were literate artisans or white-collar workers such as Feliu —blacksmiths, carpenters, clerks, tailors, students, and commercial agents. Most were from the northern coast —Galicia, Cantabria, the Basque Country and Navarre— but some were from Madrid, Barcelona, Andalusia, and the Balearic Islands. All in all, about one-third of the Spanish were skilled or white-collar, while the rest were semi- or non-skilled. About half of the Spanish were literate, while the other were illiterate⁸⁸.

It would be erroneous to portray Claudio Feliu as a typical “Spanish” volunteer. His motivations and emotions were quite different than Carlist volunteers in various foreign wars, including those of Montevideo and Argentina. The Carlists had greater military experience and had such strong ideological convictions that many preferred to become refugees rather than accepting the favorable terms of the Peace of Vergara (1839) and the accompanying amnesty offered to ordinary soldiers⁸⁹. Claudio Feliu was less representative of “Spanish” volunteers and more representative of migrants from of a Mediterranean arc of port cities that included Naples, Genoa, Nice, Marseille, and Barcelona. The late Richard Stites described this transnational space as a “highway for revolutionary ideas” in the 1820s⁹⁰. It was also one of the more common routes for boats that brought

⁸⁸ The information includes ordinary soldiers but does not include officers. Based on the ability to sign their names, the literacy rate among Spaniards in the Army of Buenos Aires was 54 %. Such volunteers consisted of unskilled workers (47 %), semi-skilled workers (20 %), skilled workers (25 %), white collar (5 %). Literacy rates were lower and the composition of skilled workers was lower for volunteers from Spain and Portugal than from Germany, France, and Italy. I compiled these statistics using: AGN, Sala III, Filiaciones, vols. 59-1-1 to 59-1-9; 59-2-1 to 59-2-6.

⁸⁹ Cañas Díez and Viguera Ruiz (2019: 24-25).

⁹⁰ Stites (2014: 19).

immigrants to the Río de la Plata⁹¹. Indeed, faceless names with similar backgrounds as Claudio Feliu in the Army of the State of Buenos Aires included men such as Bernardo Ponce, a carpenter from Mahon, who served as a soldier in Feliu's artillery brigade. Another was Luis Leal, a commercial agent from Barcelona of the Second Infantry Battalion. Ramon Astrens, a baker from Tarragona, was stationed at the fort of San Nicolás de los Arroyos. Fellow confectioners included Víctor Sanson, Victorino Susilia, and Carlos Gittardi from Cherbourg, Nice, and Milan⁹². These men and countless others had their own stories. Were they caught up in revolutions, struggling apprentices, or did they travel to the Americas in search of a fresh start in a promised land?

Another way to appreciate the representativeness of Claudio Feliu is to compare him to other militiamen. Some Barcelona revolutionaries who suffered the repression of 1856 and 1857 were convicted and forced into service in the Spanish Army in Cuba and the Philippines⁹³. More celebrated were the four companies of Catalan Volunteers, comprised of many former members of the militias from the Progressive Biennium. They fought heroically in the Battle of Tetuán (4 February 1860) during the Spanish invasion of the Rif region of Morocco known as the "War of Africa". Upon their return, 120 of these veterans left Barcelona in September of 1860 to travel to Sardinia to join the struggle for Italian unification. A few even journeyed to Havana to recruit volunteers for the annexation of the Dominican Republic (1861-1865)⁹⁴. Spaniards and Cubans also volunteered for various filibustering expeditions organized by republican exiles in New Orleans in the 1850s⁹⁵. One rumor concerning Claudio Feliu's whereabouts was that he had left to Cochín China⁹⁶. This refers to the Hispano-French invasion of Vietnam, which began on 31 August 1858. Although Feliu never stepped foot in Vietnam, the rumor likely originated because other Barcelona militiamen had volunteered for this expedition. All in all, it is possible to track a diaspora

⁹¹ To give one illustrative example, the *Compañía Transatlántica de Génova* routinely sent a ship that left Genoa and stopped in Marseille, Barcelona, Cádiz, and Rio de Janeiro before arriving in Buenos Aires. AGA, Sala Tres, Capitanía de Puerto, 97 (December 1856-March, 1857). For exile and immigration patterns in general, see Blumenthal (2019).

⁹² AGN, Sala III, Filiaciones, vols. 59-1-1 to 59-1-9; 59-2-1 to 59-2-6.

⁹³ Columbrí (1864: 252-261).

⁹⁴ Thomson (2007: 43) and Garcia-Balañà (2017).

⁹⁵ García de Paso (2022: 221-266).

⁹⁶ Ferrater (1865: 17).

of revolutionary militiamen from Catalonia and other places in Spain in various corners of the world fighting for democracy and empire.

In December of 1858, while Claudio Felio was camped out on the Sauce Grande River near the enclave of Bahía Blanca, the Spanish Democrat Emilio Castelar wrote an article for the Buenos Aires daily, *La Tribuna*. In its pages, he criticized the repression of the Democratic Party in Spain, and favorably compared Spain's impending civilizing mission in Morocco with the Argentine campaign against the Indians on the Pampa⁹⁷. Exactly a month later, *La Tribuna* published a letter from Giuseppe Mazzini in which he foresaw that a Tory-led Britain allied with Bonapartist France would impede Italian unification and could go to war in Mexico⁹⁸. At the time, European republicans such as Castelar and Mazzini regarded the State of Buenos Aires, like the Mexico of Benito Juárez, as exemplars. To be sure, elite politicians and intellectuals—Mitre, Castelar, Mazzini, and Juárez—were towering figures within a transatlantic democratic political culture. Yet below them were thousands of volunteers—the Claudio Felio of the world—who fought in foreign wars out of ideology and penury. On the one hand, republican internationalism espoused the triumph of democracy and civilization over tyranny and barbarism in Italy, Iberia, Africa, the Pampa, and the Caribbean. On the other hand, it was propelled forth by many men and women with precarious lives, radical ideas, and mixed success.

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⁹⁷ “Correspondencia de ‘La Tribuna’”, *La Tribuna*, 18 December 1858, p. 2.

⁹⁸ “Carta de Mazzini”, *La Tribuna*, 17-18 January 1859, pp. 1-2. He was partially correct. Britain initially joined France and Spain in the invasion of Mexico in 1861, albeit under Palmerston and not the Tories.

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