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# THE PRESIDIO AND THE BORDERLANDS:

## *A Case Study*

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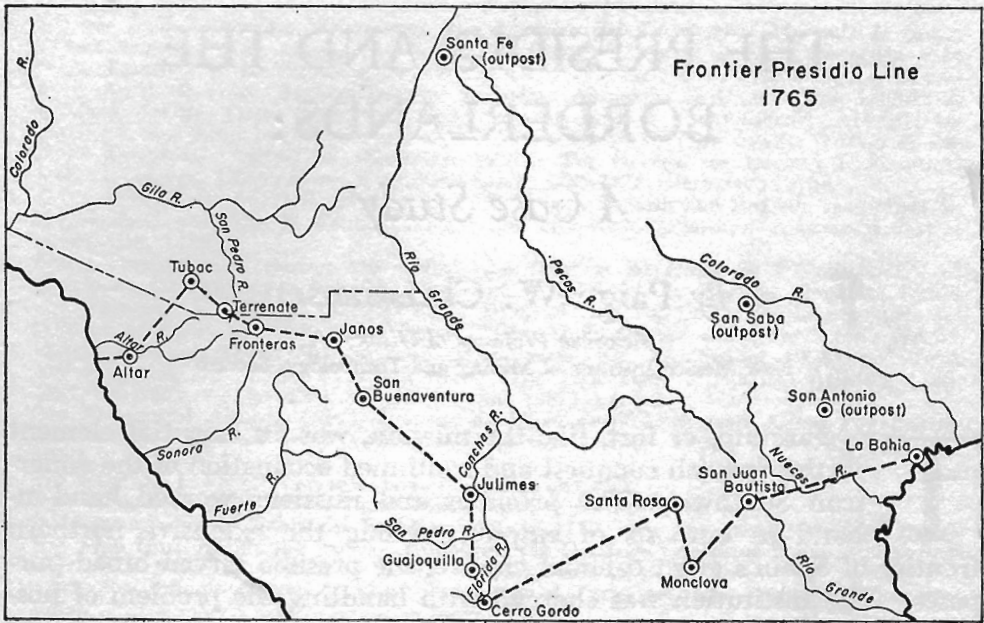
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THE PRESIDIO, or fort, like the mission, was an essential element in the Spanish conquest and continued occupation of the American Southwest. The presidios and missions worked hand-in-hand as outposts of empire. Along the extensive northern frontier of Spain's great colonial empire, the presidio served broad purposes. The institution was charged with handling the problem of hostile, nomadic Indian tribes, tribes not susceptible to the missionary efforts of the Roman Church. It was also charged with the responsibility of preventing other European powers from penetrating Spanish holdings along the borderlands. And finally, because of the difficulties of frontier life, colonists were often reluctant to remain on the frontier and the troops of the presidios were frequently used to keep settlers in frontier communities. To know Spanish policy regarding her frontier presidios and to know the character and conditions of the presidios themselves is a vital part of the history of the Southwest.

In the middle decades of the eighteenth century, the presidios of the borderlands faced their greatest challenge. The Apache, who had blocked Spanish expansion northward, began a vicious and sustained offensive against Spanish and Indian communities and missions of Sonora, Chihuahua, Texas, and New Mexico. So successful were the Indians that many prosperous ranching and mining areas were completely depopulated and many established towns were either totally destroyed or at least vastly reduced in size. But the Indian was not the only problem generated in this, the last century of Spanish greatness, for in Alaska in the North Pacific, growing activity seemed to indicate a continuing threat of Russian expansion into North America. At the same time, British and French fur traders were slowly pushing into the western watersheds of the Mississippi Valley and, like the Russians, threatened Spanish holdings in North America. In addition, the hardships of the frontier, low living standards, and constant Indian threats made

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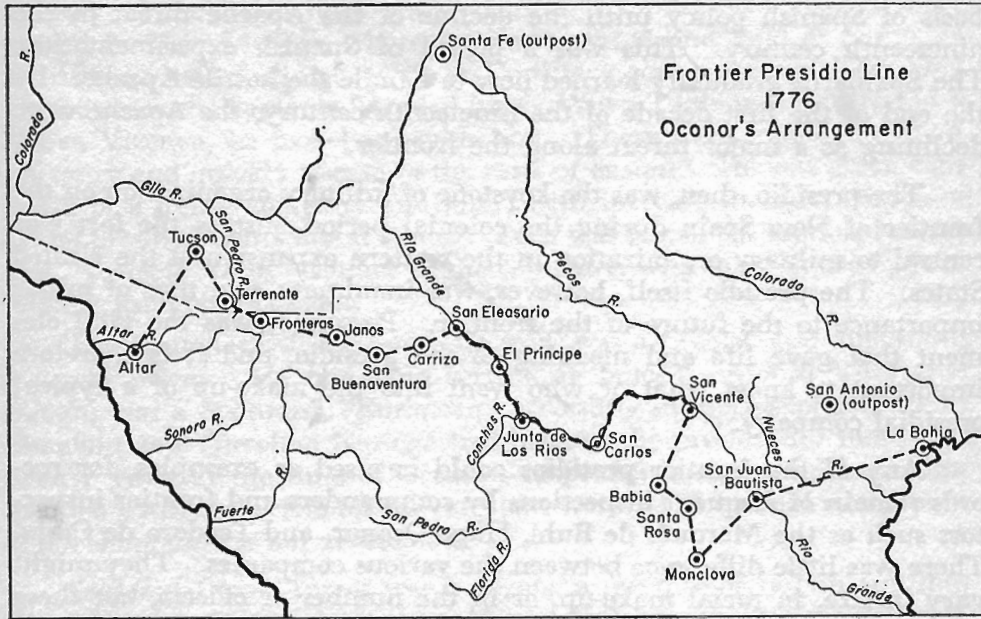
it difficult to keep colonists in the borderlands. And colonists were necessary to the Spanish effort to hold and expand their empire. The soldiery connected with the presidios maintained the colonies, by force, when necessary.

From earliest Spanish penetration into the Southwest in the seventeenth century, the presidios were an important force for conquest, but they reached the peak of their importance and effectiveness in the last decades of the eighteenth century. The problems of the frontier (hostile Indians, European incursion, recalcitrant colonists, a failing mission system) had reached such proportions by 1765 that a general reë appraisal of frontier military policy was forced upon Spanish colonial officials. This new policy, a part of the general colonial overhaul commonly known as the "Bourbon reforms," was formalized and put into effect between 1766 and 1773.

Of several official inspections of the frontier presidios made during the eighteenth century, the one made by the Marqués de Rubí is the most important. Don Cayetano María Pignatelly y de Rubí, Marqués de Rubí, was commissioned in 1766 to make an inspection of the presidios on the northern frontier of New Spain. He submitted detailed reports of this investigation, accompanied by recommendations as to needed changes and reforms.<sup>1</sup> Rubí traveled to nearly every corner of the Southwest, covering some 7,600 miles in the process. Nicolás de Lafora, his cartographer, was able to locate and map the frontier forts.<sup>2</sup> For the first time, the whole frontier was seen in perspective, and a



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crude line of forts became evident (see map). At the time Rubí visited the presidios, he found many were poorly manned and equipped and were located so as to offer minimum security for royal holdings. Rubí suggested sweeping changes, both in presidio location and in the administration of the military forces on the frontier. As result, the Royal Regulations for Presidios was issued in September, 1772. These regulations envisioned a unified line of forts stretching from the Gulf of California to the Gulf of Mexico, not the haphazard, decentralized line that existed before. All the presidios were to be under the command of a single officer, rather than each presidio commander acting alone on his own authority.

Initial responsibility for the establishment of the new policy was placed in the hands of a red-headed Irishman, Hugo Oconor. Don Hugo Oconor was appointed Commandant Inspector of the Internal Provinces of New Spain in 1773. His main charge was to carry out the recommendations of Rubí, as stated in the Royal Regulations for Presidios. He was to see that a line of presidios was constructed across the frontier from Sonora to Texas. The forts were to be supplied with men and equipment suitable to create a defense against the Apache and to serve as bases of military offensives into Apache lands. Oconor, like Rubí, inspected the entire frontier, covering several areas more than once. In all, he traveled some 10,500 miles through the American Southwest and the north Mexican States.<sup>3</sup> Because of the line of forts he built and the centralization he achieved, Spanish efforts against the Apache began to bear fruit. The unity concept and the line of forts continued to be the

basis of Spanish policy until the decline of the Apache threat in the nineteenth century. This was a period of Spanish experimentation. The Spaniards gradually learned how to handle the hostile Apache. By the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century, the Apache were declining as a major threat along the frontier.

The presidio, then, was the keystone of military organization on the frontier of New Spain during the colonial period, just as the fort was central to military organization in the western expansion of the United States. The presidio itself, however, was inanimate, and thus of minor importance to the future of the frontier. Personnel was the vital element that gave life and meaning to the presidio, and it is therefore important to know what or who went into the make-up of a typical presidial company.

Any of the frontier presidios could be used as examples, for records remain of frequent inspections by commanders and frontier inspectors such as the Marqués de Rubí, Hugo Oconor, and Teodoro de Croix. There was little difference between the various companies. They might vary in size, in racial make-up, or in the number of officers, but these variations did not make substantial differences. Because of its central location and its age, the Presidio of Janos was selected as a typical frontier presidio.

Janos, founded in 1690 as a part of a general program to strengthen defenses, was located on a tributary of the Casas Grandes River in northwestern Nueva Vizcaya. It had been placed so as to control a route of entry traditionally used by the Gileño Apache<sup>4</sup> when entering the province to raid. Because of its favorable location, Janos had long been considered one of the critical presidios on the northern frontier.<sup>5</sup> It was one of the few not moved in the general reorganization ordered by the Royal Regulations for Presidios.

An interesting and intimate glimpse of Janos is found in the reports of Hugo Oconor that deal with his inspection of the presidio in January, 1774. His reports included a survey of supplies (arms, clothing, riding gear) and records of each soldier covering his home, racial background, general health, age, and length of service in the Spanish armies. This information was incorporated into statistical tables and charts and forwarded to royal officials.<sup>6</sup>

Janos had a captain, lieutenant, *alferez* (ensign), chaplain, sergeant, three corporals, and thirty-nine soldiers, a very standard presidial company.<sup>7</sup> Some of the larger forts, such as San Antonio or Santa Fé might have more officers, non-commissioned officers, or more men, but the difference lay in quantity, not in function or administration.

The commander at Janos was Captain Juan Bautista Perú, a Frenchman who came to the Spanish colonies from French Canada, probably

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by way of the Mississippi and Arkansas River Valleys. He first appeared in New Mexico, where he was arrested and held at Santa Fé. While imprisoned, the governor and military commander of New Mexico, Bustamente Tagle, befriended him. When Tagle was transferred to Nueva Vizcaya, he took Perú with him. There Perú joined the Spanish army and quickly rose to the rank of ensign.<sup>8</sup> He was given command of a flying company and later, with increase in rank, command of the presidial company at Janos.<sup>9</sup> Perú was joined by another Frenchman, Ygnacio Vigil, a soldier of the company, who came to the Spanish colonies from New Orleans.

The lieutenant, José Camilo Chacón, was a Creole<sup>10</sup> and apparently a career officer. He had long service at Janos.<sup>11</sup> Alonso Villaverde, ensign, was a Spaniard, "European" according to the inspection report. Chaplain José Ancelmo Noriega had been at the presidio for more than twenty years at the time of Oconor's inspection and he had been commended by his superiors for his excellent work.<sup>12</sup> The racial background of the chaplain was not mentioned.

Sergeant Diego Torres was a *coyote*, a mixture of Indian and mestizo. He was forty-seven years old and had been in the royal service for twenty-nine years.<sup>13</sup> Three corporals were classified as *color quebrado*. No definition of this term could be found; it was not in common use throughout the Spanish colonies but was, apparently, a frontier term used to designate mixed bloods of unknown racial background.

The make-up of the soldiery was revealing and showed the real character of the company. Their ages, length of service, place of origin, and racial backgrounds were carefully recorded by Oconor. Ages among the soldiers varied greatly. The oldest soldier on the post was fifty-eight years and had thirty-six years of service in the Spanish army. Only two others were more than fifty. There were three men who were twenty, the youngest age represented. These had less than one year of service each. The average age of the enlisted personnel at Janos was just under thirty-four. Service in the armed forces averaged ten years and ranged from four months to thirty-six years.<sup>14</sup>

The Janos company had been recruited on the frontier, which was standard policy in local colonial areas. Most of the personnel of the presidio came from the community of Janos or adjacent areas. Specifically, seventeen were natives of Janos, seven were from El Paso, six from Sonora, five from Casas Grandes, four from San Buenaventura, one from New Orleans, and one from San Juan del Río. With the exception of the Frenchman from New Orleans, all the enlisted personnel were frontiersmen and their homes were relatively close to Janos.<sup>15</sup> Including the officers, chaplain, and enlisted personnel, only five men of the forty-seven-man complement were not frontiersmen. The situation was not unique to Janos but was true of all frontier presidios. Almost

every presidial company was made up of local inhabitants, for rarely did common soldiers come a great distance to serve in frontier armies. Attractions were not such that men from more settled and civilized areas wanted to risk their lives in a frontier company.

The population on the northern frontier of New Spain was composed primarily of mixed bloods, and the racial distribution evident among men of Janos was fairly typical of frontier society. Only the captain, lieutenant, ensign, and possibly the chaplain were of European extraction, unmixed with the native races or with the Negro. Among the soldiers, twenty-seven were classed as *color quebrado*, a proportion that would probably hold true for the whole frontier. These twenty-seven were more than likely Indian mixtures with some Spanish blood. Eight of the company were classed as mulattoes.<sup>16</sup> The Negro blood in the mulatto class came from the substantial number of Negroes who had been imported in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to work in the mines of Durango and Chihuahua. The failure of the *encomienda* system and later of the *repartimiento* labor to supply the mines adequately with labor resulted in an attempt by the mine owners to use Negro labor. The Negro was not brought in as a slave but as free labor and therefore had ample opportunity to mingle with the Indian and Spanish. The development of a free labor system in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries brought about a decline in the importation of Negro blood. The result was that by the late eighteenth century, there were few pure Negroes in the northern provinces, but large numbers of the population had some Negro blood.

Only three soldiers could definitely class themselves as mestizos.<sup>17</sup> It is not surprising that so few mestizos were found. According to eighteenth-century definitions, a mestizo was a strict mixture, not the general mixture that the term connotes in the twentieth century. There were few pure Spaniards on the frontier at any time to supply the necessary one-half of the mestizo mixture (one-half Spanish, one-half Indian). Two of the soldiers were *coyotes* (one-half Indian, one-half Mestizo), a fairly common frontier mixture. Finally, there was the Frenchman from New Orleans, who was probably of mixed blood, and one other soldier classed *español*.<sup>18</sup> This latter term did not mean pure Spaniard. According to names used during the late eighteenth century for the many and varied blood mixtures, an *español* was the offspring of a *castizo* (child of a mestizo and a pure Spanish woman) and a Spanish woman.<sup>19</sup> That a mixture of this type could be found at the presidio of Janos, and in a common soldier, was unusual.

Inspection of a presidio involved more than the men and their homes. It also included a survey of the kind and quality of equipment the soldier possessed. Equipment meant more than arms; it included clothing. In reporting the condition of the presidio of Janos, Oconor recorded what each man had in the way of clothing and the condition



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in which he found it. Each item was classified as good (*buenos*), medium (*medianos*), or useless (*inútiles*). The list included cloaks, hats, jackets, trousers, shirts, stockings, and shoes.<sup>20</sup>

Statistical charts left by Oconor showed the following information regarding apparel: Each man had one cloak, most of which were in moderately good condition; one hat, again the majority of medium quality. The jackets were all of good quality except four, which were medium. Every soldier had one jacket. Statistics on trousers showed a rather strange situation. Of those represented in the figures, forty-one had one pair of trousers. The unusual fact was that Salvador Rosas had three pairs, while Ygnacio Vigil, the Frenchman, had none. Perhaps normal pay-day gambling around the company area was beyond the comprehension of Vigil, and he lost more than his shirt. How the Frenchman compensated for his lack of trousers during campaigns was not recorded.

Everyone in the company had at least one shirt, and twenty-nine of the men had two. Most shirts ranged from medium to useless in quality, according to Oconor. Stockings, like shirts, were more common. Eighteen men had one pair, twenty-three had two pairs, two soldiers had none. Each man had one pair of shoes in fair condition.<sup>21</sup>

On the basis of the statistics on clothing, Janos certainly was not a well-dressed military group; in fact, it is doubtful that it was even adequately clothed. This was also the opinion of Oconor in his assessment of the uniforming of the presidio. The statistics, when converted to percentages, showed the following: forty-six percent of all items of clothing was only in medium or fair condition; thirty-six percent was in good condition; and fifteen percent was all but useless.

Clothing supply was one of the most difficult problems faced by the frontier presidios. There was little local production of the type needed to supply a presidial force; therefore, most items had to be shipped from the central valley of Mexico, a difficult and expensive operation. It was particularly hard when the pressing needs were always arms and ammunition, which took priority when caravans were assembled to move to the frontier. Clothing could be ignored, but powder, lead, and other items of armament could not. In fact, it was more than the central authorities could do to keep a bare minimum of powder at the presidios.

The presidial company at Janos was a mounted one, and therefore the condition of its riding gear was important to its survival. Unfortunately, the company was poorly equipped. All men had saddles, bridles, and spurs, but these were of poor quality or badly in need of repair. Of the enlisted men at Janos, two were without saddles. How these two managed was not indicated. Thirty-two of the saddles were in fair condition, while only eight were in good condition. Bridles and spurs were rated about the same as saddles.<sup>22</sup>



Although the riding equipment was barely serviceable, the men of Janos were well mounted.<sup>23</sup> There was a total of 233 horses in the presidial herd. There were no mules at Janos when Oconor inspected the fort, though each man was supposed to have one. Oconor rated 228 horses in excellent condition and five as useless. According to regulations, each man was to have a string of six horses, but this was seldom the case at most of the presidios. Janos, however, was in particularly good condition, for only one man had as few as two horses and most of the men had six. The average was five per man. This was quite remarkable considering the seriousness of Apache attacks during the early 1770's in northern Nueva Vizcaya. Most of the presidial herds had been hard hit by Indian raids, and in many instances there was not a sufficient number of mounts necessary to send out parties to chase the raiders to recover the stolen mounts.

Finally, the most important part of a soldier's gear, his arms. Looking at the bare statistics, it would seem that the soldiers of Janos were well armed, at least in terms of eighteenth-century standards. Each man had a muzzle-loading rifle (smoothbore), a pistol, a lance, a leather shield (*adarga*), and a leather jacket that served as armor (*cuera*).<sup>24</sup> It was from the leather jackets that the troops of Janos took their name, "*Soldados de Cuera*," literally, soldiers of the leather jackets. This name was not unique to the troops of Janos but was commonly given to regular presidial (generally cavalry) troops on the frontier. The term *dragoon*, also common on the frontier, was applied to mounted troops that were trained to fight as infantry.

Although the *Soldados de Cuera* of Janos seemed well armed, they actually were not. Most of the rifles in the company were in very poor condition. They were poorly made and replacement parts were nearly impossible to obtain. The pistols and lances were in a similar state. The shields and leather armor were nearly useless.<sup>25</sup> It would have been quite difficult for the company to launch an effective offensive in the condition in which Oconor found it. The presidio could not be counted upon for its full strength simply because of the lack of basic military necessities, although a small force could have been put in the field, fully equipped.

The troops at Janos reflected the condition of Spanish armed forces along the entire frontier of New Spain. Inspections of other companies showed a compounding of the problems faced by Janos. Still, these were the men and this was the equipment with which the Spanish hoped to destroy the Apache menace and to insure the frontier of New Spain against foreign intrusion.

With all their problems — shortages, Indian raids, poor armament, poor management — the presidios were able to exert a powerful stabilizing influence on the frontier, and it was because of them, because of men like those in the company at Janos, that the frontier was held at all.

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### NOTES

1. For a short survey of the Rubí Inspection, see Marion Haskell, "A Review of Rubí's Inspection of the Frontier Presidios of New Spain, 1766-1768," Historical Society of Southern California, *Annual*, Vol. XI (1918), pp. 33-44. The most significant work on Rubí and particularly on Nicolás de Lafora is Lawrence Kinnaird, *THE FRONTIERS OF NEW SPAIN: Nicolás de Lafora's Description, 1766-1768* (Berkeley: Quivira Society Publications, 1958), Vol. XIII. The inside rear cover has an excellent and very readable reproduction of the Lafora map.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.
3. On Oconor, see Paige W. Christiansen, "Hugo Oconor: Spanish-Apache Relations on the Frontiers of New Spain, 1771-1776," unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1959, *Passim*. See also, Paige W. Christiansen, "Hugo Oconor's Inspection of Nueva Vizcaya and Coahuila, 1773," *Louisiana Studies*, Vol. II (Fall, 1963), pp. 157-175.
4. The term "Gileño Apache" was generally applied by the Spanish to the tribes that lived in the Gila River drainage in western New Mexico and in Arizona. The classification did not include the Chiricahua, however.
5. Lafora diary, in Kinnaird, *Frontiers of New Spain*, pp. 75-76; for a sketch of the presidio and the surrounding country, see Bartlett, *PERSONAL NARRATIVE*, Vol. I, opposite 340.
6. Hugo Oconor, Extracto y demas estados concernientes a la revista de ynspección pasada a la compania de cavalleria que quarnece el Real Presidio de Janos el día 15 de enero de 1774, Archivo General de Indias, Sevilla, (hereinafter AGI), Ramo de la Audiencia de Guadalajara (hereinafter Guad.), p. 513. The Oconor report will hereinafter be cited as *Revista de ynspección . . . de Janos*, with mention of particular parts where necessary.
7. *Ibid.*, Summary analysis of statistics. In some instances, a lieutenant was the commanding officer of a presidial company, but generally a captain was in charge. The highest rank in the frontier military hierarchy in 1774 was that of colonel. Two men had reached this level: Hugo Oconor, Commandant Inspector of the frontier, and Jacobo Ugarte y Loyola, military commander and Governor of Coahuila.
8. Kinnaird, *Frontiers of New Spain*, pp. 1-12.
9. *Revista de ynspección . . . de Janos*, Summary analysis of statistics.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Hugo Oconor to Teodoro de Croix, Mexico, July 22, 1777, Copias del papel instructivo que pasó al Comandante Gral. de provincias internas D. Teodoro De Croix, el Brigadier D. Hugo Oconor, Comandante Inspector que fué de ellas (hereinafter cited as Oconor, Informe, with appropriate paragraph number), AGI, Guad., p. 516. The Informe was published in *Informe de Hugo de Oconor sobre el estado de las provincias internas del norte, 1771-1766*, texto original con prólogo del Lic. Enrique Gonzales Flores, anotaciones por Francisco Almada, Mexico, 1952. The published version was missing the last two paragraphs and four pages of statistical material. The copy in AGI was complete.
12. *Revista de ynspección . . . de Janos*, Summary analysis of statistics.
13. Pie de lista de la tropa que quarnece dho. presidio, con expresio con expresión de sus calidades, nombres, edad, sus procederes, cavallos, y mulas, que cada individua vene con distinción de los buenos, medianos, e inútiles, in *Revista de ynspección . . . de Janos*.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Lista de los soldados re dha, compania con distinción de nombres, edad, patria, calidad y circunstancia de cada uno, in revista de ynspección . . . de Janos.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Lista de los soldados . . . in revista de ynspección . . . de Janos.
18. *Ibid.*
19. For a good discussion of the various classifications worked out by the Spaniards in the eighteenth century for the numerous mixtures, see Angel Rosenblat, *La población indígena y el mestizaje en America*, Buenos Aires, 1954, 2 Vols., *passim*.
20. Estado que manifesta las prendas de vestuario armamento y mondura que vienen los sargentos, cavos, y soldados que quarnecen este presidio con expresion de lo bueno, mediano, e inuútil, in revista de ynspección . . . de Janos.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Revista de ynspección . . . de Janos*. Summary analysis of statistics.
24. Estado que manifesta las prendas de vestuario . . . , in *Revista de ynspección . . . de Janos*.
25. *Ibid.*