

Imperialism and Revolution



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The war of independence of 1895-1898

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By Charles McKelvey

In last week's episode of *Imperialism and Revolution*, we saw that the Cuban émigré intellectual José Martí emerged to leadership of the Cuban revolutionary project with a vision of a nation independent from Spain and from the imperialist intentions of the United States, a nation forged through the unification of the diverse popular sectors on the basis of the promise of a republic created by all and for the good of all.

The war of independence was launched in 1895, but Martí was killed in battle early in the war, and his loss would have considerable repercussions for the future of Cuba. Tomás Estrada Palma assumed the direction of the Cuban Revolutionary Party, which during the war functioned as a government outside the country. Estrada Palma is described by Jesús Arboleya, as having been an "obscure but respected figure" who had participated in the independence struggle since 1868. However, he did not share the anti-imperialist perspective of Martí, and he considered that once the Cuban people attained its independence

from Spain, annexation by the USA would be an acceptable democratic option.

Generals Máximo Gómez and Antonio Maceo were the military leaders of the war of independence. They adopted a strategy of burning the sugar fields in order to destroy the production and commerce that sustained the colonial regime. Responding to this strategy, the colonial government placed the rural population in concentration camps in towns and cities, resulting in the death of 200,000 persons from malnutrition and disease. The war had high military casualties, with one-third of the Spanish soldiers and one-fifth of the revolutionary troops killed in battle. By 1898, Spain could not continue the war, as a result of popular opposition in Spain, provoked by the high level of casualties; escalating government debts caused by the war; and the destruction of the Cuban economy. Cuban troops had taken control of the countryside, and the Spanish army controlled only the most important population centers, which were under siege by Cuban forces. The Cuban revolution was approaching military triumph.

As the Cuban revolutionary forces advanced, many members of the Cuban national bourgeoisie abandoned the country and pressured Estrada Palma to support a U.S. military intervention, which was being proposed by some sectors in the USA, because of the threat that the triumph of a popular revolution posed to US imperialist intentions. When Estrada Palma arrived to support U.S. intervention, he insisted neither on representation by the Cuban people nor guarantees of the role of the Cuban revolutionary military forces in an independent Cuba.

Cuban scholars refer to the conflict that U.S. historians call the Spanish-American War as the Spanish-Cuban-American War. Cuban historians emphasize the Cuban military advances prior to the U.S. intervention, and the indispensable support of the Cuban forces for the U.S. taking of Santiago de Cuba, the only bastion of importance in which U.S. interventionist forces were able to attain control. In the subsequent peace treaty, negotiated without Cuban participation, Spain ceded Cuba to the USA. The treaty prohibited the entrance of Cuban troops into the cities, and it contained no terms for the transfer of power to the Cuban revolutionary forces. Estrada Palma supported the treaty and persuaded the revolutionary military chiefs to accept it, presenting the USA as an ally of the Cuban revolutionary movement.

In this historic moment characterized by U.S. maneuvering in pursuit of imperialist interests, with the collusion of Estrada Palma and the Cuban national bourgeoisie, the absence of the advanced understanding of Martí was a critical factor. Máximo Gómez wrote in his diary, "Now Martí would have been able to serve the country; this was his moment." Also of critical importance was the death in combat in 1898 of Antonio Maceo, who unified the most radical sectors of the Revolution. Maceo was held in enormous prestige by Cuban popular sectors, as a result of his refusal to accept the Pact of Zanjón in 1878 and his launching of continued political-military resistance that sought to attain the 1868 goals of independence and the total abolition of slavery; and because of his personal physical courage and his military victories in the war of 1895 to 1898.

The U.S. interventionist government was established on January 1, 1899. In order for the United States to establish a republic in Cuba under its control, it was necessary to dismantle the three principal Cuban revolutionary institutions: first, the Cuban Revolutionary Party, which Martí had established in 1892 in order to unify the revolutionary organizations; secondly, the Representative Assembly, which had been elected in zones controlled by the Government in Arms, and which constituted the civilian authority of the revolution; and thirdly, the Liberation Army, directed by General Máximo Gómez. In accordance with U.S. interests, Tomás Estrada Palma dissolved the Cuban Revolutionary Party on December 21, 1898. At the same time, the authority of the Assembly was not recognized by the military government of the United States, and the Assembly lost the confidence of the people by seeking to dismiss Máximo Gómez from the position of Chief of the Army of Liberation. Having neither external nor internal support, the Representative Assembly dissolved itself on April 4, 1899. Meanwhile, Gómez kept the army quartered, rather than demobilizing, maintaining that Cuba had not yet attained independence. Gómez considered the possibility of mobilizing the Cuban Liberation Army, in spite of possible negative consequences, such

as an expanded U.S. occupation or a U.S. annexation of Cuba. However, in light of divisions and distrust between Gómez and the civilian leaders, as well as the absence of consensus to continue the armed struggle, Gómez concluded that mobilization was not a viable option. The Army of Liberation was demobilized, and the soldiers received compensation through funds donated by the U.S. government.

On July 25, 1900, the U.S. military governor convoked elections for a Constitutional Assembly. Suffrage was limited to men who had financial resources, who were literate, or who had served in the Liberation Army, thus excluding two-thirds of adult men and all women. The elections were held on September 15, 1900; thirty-one delegates from three recently formed political parties were elected. Inasmuch as the revolutionary institutions had ceased to exist, the development of a revolutionary plan of action with respect to the Constitutional Assembly did not emerge. Political games were played, and candidates without commitment to Cuban self-determination vis-à-vis U.S. imperialist intentions presented themselves as independentistas, or advocates of full Cuban independence. The Constitutional Assembly was a confusing mix, with ideological divisions within parties and alliances across parties. In addition, there was the pressure established by the U.S. threat of a permanent military presence, if the results were not in accordance with U.S. interests. Because of these dynamics, the Constitution did not reflect the experiences of the Cuban national liberation struggle, and it had a “made in the USA” character. As Jesús Arboleya writes, “The Constitutional Assembly was the burial of the Republic of Martí. It created a government whose structure copied in its fundamentals the North American model. . . . Nothing was said in relation to social rights, nor of the obligations of the state in the economy and in the protection and aid of citizens, nor of the strategy that ought to be followed with respect to foreign capital, the monopolies or the large estates.”

The US government, however, was not satisfied with the results. It insisted that the Constitutional Assembly approve an amendment that would grant the USA the right to intervene in Cuba. The United States insisted upon the Platt Amendment, as it would be called, in order to demonstrate to European powers, especially Great Britain, its determination to establish economic control over Latin America, and to show to U.S. corporations its political will to protect their investments from foreign competition. The Constitutional Assembly approved the Platt Amendment on June 12, 1901 by a vote of 16 to 11, with four abstentions.

In this confusing context, which represented an immense disappointment to revolutionary hopes, the Republic of Cuba was established. It would not be a sovereign Republic, but a neocolonial republic under U.S. direction, as we will explore in our next episode of Imperialism and Revolution.

This is Charles McKelvey, speaking from Cuba, the heart and soul of a global socialist revolution that struggles for a more just, democratic, and sustainable world.

Sources

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