

Imperialism and Revolution



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Program #15

The Cuban war of independence of 1868

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By Charles McKelvey

We have seen in our last episode, that the development in Cuba of sugar and coffee plantations on a foundation of African slavery from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries created the underdevelopment of Cuba, with high levels of poverty and low levels of manufacturing. Even relatively privileged sectors, such as tobacco farmers, tobacco manufacturers, and the urban middle class, found that their interests were constrained, as a result of the imposition by Spanish colonial authorities of taxes and compulsory government trading posts, and the incapacity of Spain to provide markets for Cuban products or capital for investment.

These conditions gave rise to an independence movement in Cuba, which is the theme of today's episode. I have drawn from four books in preparing the content, all published in Spanish by Cuban publishing companies. Translating their titles into English, the books are the following: A volume by María del Carmen García, Gloria García and Eduardo Torres-Cuevas, published in 1996, entitled *History of Cuba: The Colony: Socio-economic evolution and national formation from the origins to 1867*; a book by Francisco López Segrera, published in 1972, entitled *Cuba: Dependent Capitalism and*

Underdevelopment (1510-1959); a book by Jesús Arboleya, published in 2008, *The Revolution of the Other World: A Historic Analysis of the Cuban Revolution*; and a book by Cintio Vitier, published in 2006, entitled *That Sun of the Moral World*. Which is to say that what I am trying to convey is what Cubans scholars understand about Cuban history.

These scholars write that slave rebellions and other forms of slave resistance were an important part of the political landscape of Cuba since the beginnings of the slave plantation system. However, the conditions during slavery of extreme and brutal repression made impossible the development of a social movement, able to form organizations and formulate programs and ideologies. Nonetheless, slave resistance was an important expression of a spirit of rebellion that emerged as an integral part of Afro-Cuban culture. And because of the high degree of cultural and ethnic integration in Cuba, the Afro-Cuban cultural characteristic of courage and spontaneous rebellion would become an important influence on the Cuban movement of national liberation during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, there emerged in Cuba a number of intellectuals whose writings and teachings provided the foundation for Cuban national consciousness and identity, which as it evolved would unite two critical ideas: the independence of Cuba and the abolition of slavery. The most outstanding of these intellectuals was Father Felix Varela, a professor at San Carlos Seminary in Havana. In general, Catholic priests, many of whom were from families of the Cuban estate bourgeoisie, played an important role in the development of progressive Cuban political thought. The emerging Cuban nation, however, did not join in the Latin American independence movements of the early nineteenth century. Cuban landholders feared that an independence movement would unleash uncontrollable forces from below, as had occurred in Haiti from 1789 to 1805.

Nonetheless, a Cuban ethic, integrally tied to social and political movement, continued to evolve, an ethic that sought Cuban autonomy in accordance with universal human values. On this moral and spiritual foundation, the Cuban Revolution was launched on October 10, 1868, when Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, a landholder and slaveholder in the Eastern province of Oriente, declared, at his plantation La Demajagua, the independence of Cuba and the freedom of his slaves, a gesture followed by other slaveholders. Not wanting to alienate Western landholders, whose support for the independence cause was needed, Céspedes called for the gradual and compensated abolition of slavery, rather than immediate abolition.

Subsequently, landholders from the central provinces of Camaguey and Las Tunas joined the insurrection. And on April 10, 1869, the Republic of Cuba in Arms was established in the town of Guáimaro in Camaguey. Its Constitution declared the abolition of slavery.

The Cuban anti-colonial revolution of 1868 had contradictory dynamics. In the colonial situation in general, the elite within the colony has an interest in substituting its rule for that of the colonial power, but in preventing a popular revolution that would place the newly independent nation under the control of the popular classes. The case of nineteenth Cuba was consistent with this general pattern. The Cuban plantation owners (or the estate bourgeoisie) had an interest in eliminating the parasitic role of colonial Spain, thus establishing itself as an elite in a semi-colonial republic, with popular interests and demands contained, which was a common pattern in the Latin American republics of the nineteenth century. In contrast, the Cuban popular classes and sectors (workers, peasants, slaves, free blacks and mulattos, and professionals and small business owners, or the petit bourgeoisie) had an interest in a political and social transformation that would place the popular classes and sectors in power, creating the possibility for severing the exploitative core-peripheral economic relation with the colonial power, thereby establishing real possibilities for autonomous economic development.

As a consequence of these contradictory dynamics, the independence war of 1868 failed to attain its goals. The 1878 Pact of Zanjón ended the war without conceding the independence of Cuba, and it granted liberty only to those slaves who had fought in the insurrectionist ranks. Various factors

contributed to the failure of the Ten Years' War: the opposition to the struggle on the part of the Western landholders, who feared that the unfolding forces would unleash an uncontrollable revolution from below; divisions between the executive and legislative branches of the Republic in Arms, which led to the destitution of Céspedes as president in 1873; the deaths of Céspedes in 1874 and Ignacio Agramonte in 1873, the two principal leaders of the revolution; and a tendency toward regional divisions and loyalty to local military chiefs in the revolutionary army.

In sum, the independence war of 1868 was a revolution of national liberation and a democratic anti-slavery revolution. Although it was led by Eastern landholders, it inspired the popular sectors to active participation, including the rural and urban middle classes, revolutionary intellectuals, an emerging proletariat, artisans, slaves in the liberated zones, and free white, black, and mulatto farmers. It forged a common struggle, uniting popular sectors, overcoming divisions of class and race. It failed to achieve its objectives, as a result of disunity among the leadership, and as a result of the premature deaths of two of its principal leaders.

So began the Cuban Revolution. Since the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, Fidel has taught that the Cuban Revolution is a single continuous revolution, beginning in 1868.

Following the Pact of Zanjón, José Martí emerged to bring the Cuban Revolution to its next stage, which we will discuss 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.

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