

PUERTO RICO: SHOWCASE OF OPPRESSION

JOURNEY TO IDENTITY

the Historical Evolution of Puerto Rico



Lorenzo Homar

BOOK I

SOME HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

How to treat of 450 years of exceptionally rich history in the scope of a few pages? Our decision was to choose a number of quotes, eight brief texts from the past, and let them stand together with our own equally brief explana-

tory notes as guideposts along the road.

They are just illustrations, brief flashes of illumination, but essential for any understanding of the struggle going on today in Puerto Rico, showcase of oppression.

* * *

First Genocide in Hemisphere

The destruction of the whole Taino Indian nation in Santo Domingo, Cuba, and Puerto Rico was the first act of genocide in the Western hemisphere. Of a total population of 40,000, none survived the impact of colonization. The Indians fought to the bitter end and many committed suicide rather than be held in slavery. This is how the white man launched the horrendous slaughter:

On his second voyage (1493) Columbus stopped for water at an island he named San Juan Bautista. After the conquest of Santo Domingo (today, the Dominican Republic), an expedition was sent to conquer San Juan

Bautista, and this Island was added to the Spanish Empire. Because the peaceful Taino Indians who inhabited the islands could not long endure the treatment they received, in 1511 war broke out.

But it was no contest. The Spaniards massacred the Tainos. Those who were not exterminated died from lack of immunity against diseases brought by the Conquistadores. After this, the Spanish rulers began to import African slaves.

The words of Charles V and Don Juan Lopez de Melgarejo below give testimony of the hard times men of color suffered in those early days of Puerto Rico's history.

* * *

Indian Slaves Freed

Therefore, we are certain that the greed of some of our subjects is a well known fact. Subjecting the Indians to work in the gold mines, pearl fisheries and farms; not giving said Indians enough food, clothing and shelter, treating them with cruelty and hate, worse than if they were slaves—all this has been the cause of a great number of deaths.

Therefore, after having consulted the Council of the Indies we have agreed to issue this letter. It is our command, that now and hereafter they be treated as free men.

Charles V.
King of Spain
Emperor 1526

Blacks Requested

On the valley of this river many cattle and pigs are raised but since there are no blacks to extract the gold and work the fields, many haciendas [large farms] have been abandoned as well as the mines. The Guayanes [a river valley on the northern coast] which is almost as large as the Toa, is depopulated and studded with the abandoned haciendas of Indian times. Another river called Fajardo, rich in gold, would yield great amounts if there were blacks to work it.

A sugar mill in Loiza has been raided three times by the Caribe Indians. The Indians came up the river at night in their canoes. Once they carried away twenty five blacks and killed the master sugarmaker.

Farming has practically stopped for lack of Indians and the high price of blacks. The few that come this way pass with their masters on their way to New Spain [Mexico and Central America].

If your majesty were so merciful as to send a thousand black slaves here and sell them to the residents, in a short time they would be paid for, the inhabitants rich, and the royal coffers, greatly enchanced.

Don Juan Lopez de Melgarejo
Royal Inspector General 1582

Emergence of the Jibaro

The 17th and 18th centuries witnessed the decay of the Spanish Empire, and Puerto Rico was left pretty much on its own. During this time the inhabitants had to defend themselves from frequent pirate raids, from the Caribe Indians (who ate prisoners), and from the French, Dutch and British who frequently invaded or tried to invade the island.

All of this led to the creation of the immense forts, the civilian militia, and the rule of the island by martial law at the hands of the Captains General, who came to be known as the "little Caesars." Isolation and self-dependency brought about the fusion and confusion of mestizos (persons of mixed Indian and Spanish blood), blacks and

Spaniards into a people.

The "Jibaro" or Puerto Rican with a personality and culture distinct from the Spanish, came into existence in the humid, green mountains. "Jibaro" is an old Spanish word meaning wild, untamed, uncultured, etc. The name was applied perjoratively to the farmers and "peons." Slowly "Jibaro" music, poetry, wit and beliefs cemented the Puerto Rican culture. Today Puerto Ricans proudly refer to themselves as Jibaros.

When the wars for independence championed by Bolivar, Hidalgo, San Martin and Sucre started on the South American mainland the Volunteer Militia, which had defended the island so gallantly in the past, refused to fight.

* * *

Anonymous Manifesto 1864

Puerto Ricans: A regiment of the "Puertorrican Volunteers" has been taken by force to murder their brothers in Santo Domingo. We have already made our opposition known in different ways. Many of our countrymen are now dispersed in the mountains and some have committed suicide before consenting to kill our brothers. And should we be taken by force, as has happened to others, let us go to the side of our Dominican brothers. They will receive us with open arms as they have done already with our countrymen who have abandoned the Spanish Army and showered them with blessings. The "Jibaros" of Puerto Rico, sons of Agueybana the Brave, have not yet lost their honor. Let us prove to our oppressors, as the brave Dominicans are now doing, that though we are easy to govern when we think justice is being done to us, we will not suffer abuse without resistance.

* * *

Conflict in Attitudes

Prim's decree and Betances' letter to his sister clearly put forth the conflicting attitudes of the Spaniards and the Puerto Ricans in regard to slavery.

The Haitian Revolution (1799) marked the beginning of the end of slavery on the Caribbean Islands, and abolition finally came about in Puerto Rico in 1872. A period of constitutional government in Spain marked by see-saw conflict between liberals and conservatives enabled the liberals, autonomists, and independentistas to obtain abolition.

Although several slave revolts had taken place and were bloodily put down, slavery was ended by law, without a final struggle, and the slave owners were reimbursed for the "property" in gold.

You know, being a woman of the world, the preoccupation there is with color in some circles. That, I feel, is enough, since you and I are darker than most, for these people to stay away from us. No Betances, who has had common sense, has ever denied his African Blood.

Ramon Emeterio Betances
Doctor, abolitionist, patriot,
Father of the First Puertorrican Republic,
Exiled leader of the Lares revolt.

Decree by Don Juan Prim, Count of Reus,
Governor of the Island of Puerto Rico. May 31, 1848.

Article 1: From the publication of this decree, any crimes committed by members of the African race will be subject to court-martial. No other court will intervene.

Article 2: Any individual of the African race, slave or free, who uses a weapon against white people, even though the aggression be justified, will be:

If slave, put to death

If free, his right hand will be cut off

If the white person is injured, put to death.

Article 3: Should anyone of the African race, slave or free, threaten, abuse by word, or make clear his intention to offend white people he shall:

If slave, be condemned to five years imprisonment.

If free, to a penalty in accordance with the circumstance.

Article 4: The owners of slaves are hereby authorized to correct and punish their slaves for minor infractions without the intervention of any official. The judgment of conduct by the master towards his slave will be under my sole jurisdiction.

Article 5: Although not to be expected, should any slave rebel against his master, the master is authorized to kill the slave immediately. This swift punishment will keep others from following example.

* * *

Toward Independence

The independence movement was necessarily an underground operation because the least suspicion of participation merited a trip to the dungeons and torture chambers of the "El Morro" fortress. Hanging or exile was the usual punishment.

The Lares revolt of 1868, the most serious of several uprisings during the 19th century, constituted the successful part of an ultimately abortive attempt at insurrection. Forced to act early after the Spanish army had been alerted to the plans by a traitor, the "independentistas" took Lares, proclaimed the First Republic, and celebrated a Mass. Betances, who was in Santo Domingo collecting men and arms, was not able to return in time with aid. The "independentistas," defeated when they tried to take San Sebastian, were hunted down mercilessly. Many died in the dungeons.

Political repression continued for the rest of the century and worsened in 1887 with the governorship of Palacios, who instituted the "composte" reign of terror.

The Autonomous Charter constituted a significant improvement in the state of things. By virtue of the said charter, Puerto Rico could elect delegates with votes to the "cortes" [Spanish congress]. There also was established in the Chamber of Representatives of the island, which was elected by popular vote, an Administrative Council of fifteen members, of which Puerto Rico elected eight. Spain would continue naming the governor and he would name the other seven members of the council. The powers of the governor were greatly curtailed as the result of the newly granted power of the Puerto Rican Legislature. The governor could still proclaim martial law and refer laws and legislation to the Spanish Council of Ministers if he thought it necessary. The Puerto Rican Legislature was given power to handle every important island issue such as taxes and budget. All trade agreements made by Spain that affected Puerto Rico had to be approved by the Puerto Rican legislature.

Report by a joint commission of the United States and Puerto Rico on the status of Puerto Rico. August 1966.

Autonomous Movement Formed

The Autonomous Movement, which began about 1870, was the road chosen by many Puerto Ricans who considered themselves Spaniards but wanted an end to perpetual martial law and government by decree. Many joined out of disillusionment with the lack of success of the independence movement and thought that a gradual process of self-government could be worked out in time.

Even with their liberal stance the Autonomists suffered much. The struggle between liberals and conservatives in Spain, which went on with both sides alternating power by elections or civil war, determined the ups and downs of the Autonomists. Their adversaries were the members of

the "Unconditional Party", rich Spaniards who saw any change as a menace to their economic power. Though small, the Unconditional party had great power and influence. In 1897 the Spanish offered autonomy to both Cuba and Puerto Rico in the hope of using governmental reform to end civil war in Cuba. The Cubans, under Marti, Maceo and Gomez, would settle for nothing less than independence. In Puerto Rico, the Autonomists, who under Munoz Rivera had won the elections, accepted. The Autonomist Charter had barely begun functioning when it was invalidated by the American invasion of July 25, 1898.

U.S. Enters as 'Good Guy'

United States interest in the Caribbean islands began very early in the 19th century. Several unsuccessful attempts to annex Cuba, Santo Domingo and Puerto Rico failed, as did purchase. The Spanish wouldn't sell.

The United States was too occupied in consolidating former Mexican and Indian territories to gather forces for a Caribbean expedition until the 1890's. In 1898, the "Maine" conveniently exploded in Havana harbor, and war began.

In 1897 the United States was consuming 80% of Puerto Rico's sugar; yet it needed more. Thus, disregarding the fact that it was more profitable to Puerto Ricans to produce coffee than sugar, increased sugar production

was one aim of the occupation. Another U.S. motive, related to its growing black population, was hidden to the Puerto Ricans at this point, though it is very clear in the War Department letter to General Miles. The general's proclamation to the Puerto Rican people exemplifies his efficiency and his obedience to the intentions of the McKinley administration.

The July, 1898, invasion came off smoothly because the United States government was seen as liberal, in contrast to the Spanish monarchy. Accordingly, the U.S. was well received, and the population breathed a sigh of relief as the Spanish flag came down.

* * *

Proclamation by the General-In-Chief

Puerto Rico 'Refuge' for Blacks

In regard to Puerto Rico, this is an acquisition that we must make and keep, which should not be too difficult, because the change in sovereignty will bring more gain than loss to created interests there, since these are more cosmopolitan than Spanish.

For this conquest the necessary methods are relatively easy, proclaim carefully the fulfillment of all laws between civilized and Christian nations, and only in extreme cases should the fortified cities be shelled. To avoid conflict our troops will land on the unpopulated areas of the southern coast. The lives and property of the civilian population shall be respected.

I strongly recommend that you take special action to secure by all means possible the good will of the races of color with two ends: the first to secure their help in case of a plebiscite for annexation. The second, keeping in mind that the principal motive and objective of the expansion of the United States in the Antilles is to solve rapidly and efficiently our racial problems that grow worse daily by the expansion of blacks, who, once convinced of the advantages of the West Indies, will go there.

Private document sent to General Miles by the Undersecretary of War in 1898.

To the inhabitants of Puerto Rico: In the continuation of the war against the Spanish kingdom by the people of the United States, in the cause of freedom, justice and humanity, its military forces have come to occupy the island of Puerto Rico. They come bearing the banner of freedom, inspired by the noble purpose of seeking the enemies of our country and capturing those that present armed resistance. They bring you the strong arm of a nation of free people, whose greatest strength is justice and humanity towards all those that live in its community. Therefore, the first effect of this occupation will be the immediate break of your past political relations, and, we hope, a warm acceptance of the government of the United States. The principal objective of the American military forces will be the dismantling of Spain's armed authority and giving to the people of your beautiful island the greatest measure of freedom possible that is compatible with military occupation. We have not come to make war against the people of a country that has been oppressed for centuries, on the contrary, we have come to bring our protection, not only to your persons but also to your property, to promote your prosperity and bring to you the privileges and blessings of the liberal institutions of our government. It is not our purpose to interfere with any of the laws and customs present which are good and beneficial to our people, as long as they are in accordance with the norms of military administration, order and justice.

This is not a war of devastation, rather one that seeks to give to all those under control of army and naval forces the advantages and blessings of an enlightened civilization.

Nelson A. Miles
Major-General Commander, Army of the United States 1898.

'Savior's' Motives Questioned

A numbing shock took hold of the entire island as the real motives of the U.S. became clear. It became apparent that the new "saviors" had their own ideas as to what should be done in Puerto Rico. Although military government ended after two years, the presidentially appointed governors retained almost all power.

The popularly elected members of the Chamber of Delegates opposed the Jones Act as inadequate as far as self-government was concerned, and then opposed the arbitrary imposition of American citizenship on Puerto Ricans.

While politicians fought legal battles, men of the

stature of De Diego and Baldorioty kept the independence movement alive, and Munoz Rivera maintained the aim of autonomy, large American sugar companies were buying the land of farmers ruined by the new tariff laws that permitted commerce only with the United States and an exchange of currency in which Puerto Ricans lost 40% per peso.

The impoverished farmers became the "peons" of the sugar mills. The following chart illustrates the quantitative changes that came about, while the excerpt from Governor Hunt's little known letter to the president is eloquent in stating what could be wrung out of Puerto Rico.

* * *

1897	1898	1933
<p>1. Forty-one percent of all cultivated area was in coffee farms of nine "cuerdas"* average, 197,031 "cuerdas" total. There were 21,698 small farms owned and used for subsistence.</p>	<p>1. Credit and savings ruined by exchange of currency (to U.S. dollars) at 40% loss.</p>	<p>1. Coffee production stagnant. Farmers migrate to cities or become "peons" of the sugar plantation, whose workers average income is 37 cents a day.</p>
<p>2. Ninety per cent of exported coffee sold to Spain, France, Germany and Italy.</p>	<p>2. Coffee market ruined by monopoly of exportations to the U.S.</p>	<p>2. All commerce done only with U.S.</p>
<p>3. Total area of sugar farms, 63,400 acres.</p>	<p>3. Coming of the large absentee-owned sugar companies.</p>	<p>3. Total area of sugar plantations, 314,000 acres.</p>
<p>4. Autonomous government under Spanish rule. Trade agreements with other countries and Spain: Puerto Rican citizenship, currency, civil service, mail system.</p>	<p>4. Military government.</p>	<p>4. Jones Act, presidentially appointed governor, house of representatives with little power. Civil services, armed forces, police, mail, citizenship, trade agreements, schools, and New Deal programs under American supervision.</p>

* Cuerda = 4,810 square yards

Governor William Hunt:
 "Not only could it [the island] comfortably keep the one million inhabitants we now have, but five times that number."
 Governor's Report, 1901