

**NATIONAL COMMITTEE TO FREE PUERTO RICAN
POLITICAL PRISONERS & PRISONERS OF WAR
3543 - 18th STREET, BOX 12
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US Colonialism in Puerto Rico 1898-



Las Aguilas Blancas, shown here flying the Puerto Rican flag, were one of the armed groups which fought Spanish colonialism and resisted the U.S. invasion and occupation in 1898. The U.S. imposed martial law for several years to suppress the guerrilla resistance.

1. What is colonialism?

Colonialism is the practice by one nation of controlling another nation's economy, social structure, and defense through the use of force. Puerto Rico has been on the United Nations Decolonization Committee's list of colonies since 1973. The U.N. proclaims each year that Puerto Rico has the "right to self-determination and independence."

2. What is the history of colonialism in Puerto Rico?

Puerto Rico was a colony of Spain from roughly 1500-1900. In the late 1800's Spain was declining as a world colonial power. Anti-colonial forces in Puerto Rico realized this and forced Spain to grant the island autonomy in 1897. But the United States also perceived Spain's weakness and in 1898, war broke out between them. In a period of expansion, the US easily defeated Spain and took control of Cuba, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico at the signing of the Treaty of Paris. When the US took control, it changed the Puerto Rican economy to serve US interests. First a one-crop economy was developed based on sugar cane. Then in the 1950's "Operation Bootstrap" encouraged light industry. In the 60's when it became apparent that "heavy" industry was more profitable, highly polluting electronic, chemical, and pharmaceutical plants were built. This type of development has not benefitted Puerto Ricans, nor was it meant to. Millions of Puerto Ricans were forced to migrate to the US in search of work, because the industrialization provided few jobs.

3. Why is Puerto Rico so important to the United States?

Puerto Rico is strategically located at the mouth of the Caribbean, controlling sea lanes to Africa and the Middle East. It has many natural resources including copper, nickel and off-shore oil. The island is perfectly situated for military strikes against other Caribbean islands and Central America. For example, the invasion of Grenada was launched from Puerto Rico. Thirteen percent of all the island's arable land is taken up by US military bases including Roosevelt Roads, the largest naval base in the Western hemisphere.



4. What are the effects of US colonialism on the Puerto Rican people on the island and here in the US?

- *40% unemployment
- *65% are under the poverty level
- *75% receive food stamps
- * highly polluted water and air
- * drug traffic amounting to millions of dollars annually
- * violent attacks and armed robberies up 270% over the past 5 years
- * 83,000 heroin addicts and 800,000 alcoholics in Puerto Rico
- * 60% drop-out rate from public schools
- * highest suicide rate in the world
- * 40% of women and 25% of men are sterilized
- * 75% growth in crime rate in last 10 years

These are some results of colonialism. Others are not as obvious. Colonial mentality, when a colonized people views itself as inferior and dependent on the colonizer is a hideous condition of colonialism. The US has encouraged this development by undermining the attitude of Puerto Ricans towards themselves, their culture and their heritage. Puerto Ricans are told that George Washington is the father of their country and it is illegal to fly the Puerto Rican flag without the US flag next to it.

5. What is Puerto Rico's current status?

The US presently refers to Puerto Rico as a commonwealth. Historically, this government has classified Puerto Rico in many terms. In 1917, the US Congress passed the Jones Act which imposed US citizenship on the Puerto Rican people.

This act gave the US formal control of the "protection" and economy of the island and enabled the US to draft Puerto Ricans to fight in WWI. This "relationship" stayed the same until 1952 when the US Congress approved Public Law 600. This "permitted" Puerto Ricans to draft their own constitution within "certain" guidelines. These guidelines were the same as the Jones Act which maintains US control of defense and international economic—political relationships. Now the Puerto Rican people elect who serves Washington D.C.. Public Law 600 made it appear that Puerto Rico was more of a partner in the "relationship." But as Representative Joseph Mahoney stated at the time, "The US Constitution gives the US Congress complete control, and nothing in the Puerto Rican Constitution could affect or amend or alter that right." Today the US wants to change Puerto Rico's status and is looking for a way to "wash its hands" of the economic problems and keep US military bases on the island.

6. Many ask "What would the Puerto Rican people do without our help?"

Puerto Rico was a self-sufficient nation before the US invaded in 1898. It could be self-sufficient if the US were to return Puerto Rico to the Puerto Rican people. Food stamps and other welfare programs are a continuation of the dependent relationship in which the US places Puerto Rico. The US's economic policy of industrialization and destruction of agriculture created the "need" for welfare programs. Food stamps are one of many things that perpetuates the myth that Puerto Rico could not survive without US support.

7. What has been the response of the Puerto Rican people?

Puerto Ricans have always opposed Spanish and US colonialism. Resistance takes shape in many forms. In the 1930's, the Nationalist Party led by Don Pedro Abizu Campos, led a mass movement for independence against US control and economic exploitation of Puerto Rico. The Nationalist struggle for independence culminated in the Jayuya uprising

of 1950. In this uprising, the Nationalists and supporters seized the mountain town of Jayuya along with neighboring towns where they proclaimed the 2nd Republic of Puerto Rico. Five days later, the Puerto Rican National Guard and the US Air Force quashed the insurrection. Many people were killed and thousands imprisoned. In the 60's and 70's, independentistas led opposition against ROTC and military recruitment. Presently, on the island there are community groups confronting the environmental destruction and US military presence,

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as well as clandestine organizations such as the *Macheteros* on the island and the *FALN* on the mainland that wage armed struggle against their colonizer. These forces are building a movement to get the US out.

8. Why is the Puerto Rican independence movement in this country?

Because the independence movement is part of the Puerto Rican nation forced to emigrate due to US colonialism. Puerto Ricans find only low paying jobs, racism and urban poverty when they arrive in the US. The US is not their home. One never hears the term Puerto Rican-American because Puerto Ricans do not think of themselves as "American." They are Puerto Rican. This belief in themselves and their nation has enabled them to confront the US in this country. The Puerto Rican independence movement plays a leading role in educating people in this country and offers an alternative to colonialism.



9. Why should North Americans oppose colonialism in Puerto Rico?

The US will not willingly give up Puerto Rico because of its economic and military importance. What will force the US off the island is a strong and defiant movement that challenges this government. It is our country that is colonizing another. We have a responsibility to make our government accountable for what it is doing. As North Americans, we can speak out and take a stand against colonialism and support a peoples fight for self-determination and independence.

Free Puerto Rico! Committee is a national organization that works to develop understanding and support for the struggle of the Puerto Rican people—invaded and seized by the US military in 1898—to liberate their nation and to establish an independent socialist society. We have written material, slide and film programs on such topics as the 2020 Plan, the history of Puerto Rico, and the independence movement. Please write or call the chapter nearest you to obtain an audiovisual brochure, or to set up a program and discussion.

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