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# THE BUTCHER AND THE ARSON: HOW SPAIN'S GENERALS LOST HER EMPIRE AND DESTROYED HER CROWN JEWEL

*Daniel Brennan*

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Over five centuries Cuba's freedom has been serially denied, usurped, and stifled by Imperial Spain, the United States, and the Soviet Union. Beset in turn by imperial control, neocolonial paternalism, and a demeaning communist patronage inimical to freedom, the Cuban people have long struggled to attain an independent nation and cohesive national identity. The dedicated student of Cuban history may tragically, but with good reason, conclude that the story of Cuba's relationship to the world is a series of abortive attempts to achieve dignified self-determination.

The following article is excerpted from a longer work and recounts one climactic episode in that story: the near-victory of Spanish colonial forces over Cuba's Liberation Army in the waning months of 1897 and the disastrous policy of Reconcentration in which hundreds of thousands of Cubans were evacuated from the island's rural interior. The longer work provided a cursory history of the origins of the Cuban independence movement, while also tracing the history of Cuba's agricultural and economic development. After outlining Cuba's distinct regional characteristics and their strategic implications, I introduced Weyler and Gómez as figures uniquely suited to command the scorched-earth strategies each eventually pursued. I then explored the immediate context of Reconcentration: the tenures of Governors General Emilio Calleja and Martinez Campos, chronic lawlessness and banditry in the Cuban countryside, failures of reform in Madrid, and the unbalanced relationship between the insurgency's

military and political leadership. This discussion underscores the earlier findings that Weyler and Gómez were each committed to strategies of economic attrition but shows how Weyler's political support was tenuous compared to that of Gómez.

This article examines government issued orders as well as Weyler's own personal correspondence to explain the mechanics of Reconcentration and why it was poorly suited to the war in Cuba. It concludes that even though Reconcentration was able to deliver considerable tactical and operational victories for Weyler, the humanitarian cost of these victories—and the international condemnation they drew—ultimately served to weaken Spain's position in Cuba. The article ends as Weyler is relieved of command following the assassination of Prime Minister Cánovas and before the sinking of the USS Maine—the two events which provide the proximate causes for the Spanish-American War and Spain's eventual expulsion from Cuba.

Weyler did not mince words when he assumed command in February of 1896: the “valor, energy, and patriotism” of the loyalists had delivered Cuba in 1878 and it he was adamant that it would do so again.<sup>1</sup> He would command the war against this new insurgency with the same brutality and vehemence with which he, as a young man, had fought the old—never mind that last time Cuba had been left in smoldering ruins. Weyler correctly understood that lack of support for independence among central and western Cubans during the Ten Years War had hamstrung the insurgency. Regional differences in racial composition, economic organization, and proximity to Spanish-dominated cities had effectively divided the island into east and west, turning what might have been a swift and unifying revolution into a long and protracted civil war. In the decades since the Ten Years War José Martí's rhetoric had bolstered the intellectual and emotional case for Cuban independence but western Cubans continued to fear the consequences that independence would spell for Cuba's economic and racial order. For all of the work Martí had done in

the interwar years writing in support of a free and democratic Cuba, his egalitarian racial vision for Cuba's future mattered little to the wealthy white factions of the colony's west who stood to lose the most from economic and racial rebalancing.

Máximo Gómez understood this self-interested line of thinking and devised a strategy to win over Western support—or to at least deprive Spain of such support—by attacking the planter property which formed the basis of plantation society. In the early months of their campaign Gómez and Maceo drove westward torching sugarcane fields and destroying refineries. Gómez's theory of victory was simple but brutal: if Spain valued Cuba as a colony because of the value it produced for the metropole, then independence would come once that which produced value for Spain had been destroyed. This approach had the benefit of removing race relations from the center of the revolutionary project—something which had hobbled Manuel de Cespedes—and allowed the focus of insurrectionist efforts to directly target the source of Spain's economic and political strength on the island: Cuba's planter elite.

Gómez had thus taken on a strategy of 19th century economic warfare. "Blessed is the torch" he wrote in 1897, extolling the virtues of the insurrection's most efficacious weapon.<sup>2</sup> The damages were staggering. By August, 1897 Spanish officials found that in Santa Clara alone over 400 hundred farms had been burned by insurgents at a cost of nearly half a million pesos in farm property and crop value.<sup>3</sup> Gómez's scorched earth campaign was so effective at destroying the west's agricultural base because of how impossible it was to defend against. Late in the season, when the sugar stalks' leafy husks were at their driest, all that was needed to set a field ablaze was a few torches lighting up the corner of a given field. Therefore, even Weyler's reinforced army could do little to protect all of the Cuban sugar latifundia against Gómez's dedicated irregulars.

Sugar burning was not a wholly new phenomenon in the Cuban countryside. In 1869 once the initial energy of his revo-

lutionary moment had dissipated Cespedes had sanctified the burning of sugarcane and the destruction of sugar.<sup>4</sup> However, Cespedes' forces never made it far enough east to harm any of the island's major sugar producing regions. Similarly, in the years between the two wars organized gangs of bandits ran extortion schemes in which plantation owners were obliged to pay for 'protection' from would-be arsonists, but, like Cespedes, these bandits could not operate freely in the island's west and so they inflicted limited damage.<sup>5</sup> The decision to rely on field burning in 1895 would thus seem like a predictable and not wholly unmanageable threat to Spanish rule. However, as the paucity of Spanish troops garrisoned on the island at the war's outbreak suggests, in 1895 Spanish rule was not what it once was, and a uniquely devastating set of circumstances allowed Gómez to wreak unprecedented havoc on Cuba's colonial economy.

The first and most obvious was the sheer scale of the forces now at the insurgency's disposal, and the degree to which the insurgency had penetrated into Cuba's fertile western regions prior to Spanish mobilization under Weyler. Unlike other commodity crops like wheat or rice—which are both shelf-stable once harvested—sugar requires extensive processing after harvest to deliver a durable, market-ready product. Therefore, once sugarcane is harvested, planters must race to bring their sugar to a mill lest it ferment and spoil the cane's chances of becoming sugar. Burning a sugar field alone was not sufficient to destroy its commercial value—in fact burning a sugar field is one way to prepare it for harvest. However, by removing the stalk's protective husk burning sugarcane begins the process of fermentation which invariably leads to its spoilage. If sugarcane is not harvested and milled within eight to ten days of being burnt it will not yield sugar.<sup>6</sup> However, as long as plantation owners could rely on their workers to complete the harvest and authorities could be trusted to provide public safety so the crop can get to market a burnt field need not spell ruin. As a consequence, the small-scale hit and run arsons carried out

by insurgent guerilla forces during the Ten Years War made no discernable impact on the production of sugar—and by extension Cuba's value as a colonial dominion. In fact Cuban sugar output rose in 1870, the year after Cespedes had called upon his disorganized guerillas to burn the island's cane fields.<sup>7</sup>

Gómez energetically pursued the direct assault on Spanish sugar which Cespedes had only reluctantly sanctioned. Moreover, whereas Cespedes' revolution had waited seven years to stumble across the Juraco-Maron trocha to strike at the pro-Spanish west, Gómez ordered his two-column invasion of the west within six months of arriving in Cuba. Once Gómez and Maceo rode out of the east they avoided pitched battles with Spanish regulars and instead directed their forces' energy towards the destruction of plantation land, sugar mills, and whatever other infrastructure was of value to the Spanish colonial apparatus. By seizing the initiative and taking advantage of Campos' ineptitude Gómez had thrown the weight of an organized military force behind the brutal tactics of bandits. During the Ten Years War only small disorganized insurgent parties managed to cross the Juraco-Moron trocha and could only harry the fringes of Cuba's sugar regions. Small in number and limited in reach they could neither destroy enough fields nor sow enough disorder to prevent the salvaging of burnt crops by responsive planters largely protected by Spanish authorities. However, by 1895 the calculus had shifted squarely in the insurgent's favor. Not only were Gómez and Maceo moving deeper into the west and with more men, but they faced little in the way of organized opposition.

Thus, the second and most consequential feature of the new insurgent campaign had nothing to do with Gómez's military acumen or Martí's oratorical genius, but rather with Spanish imperial decline. Cuba's rural regions had grown so lawless in the interwar period that by 1895 it was difficult for leaders in Havana to know if the increasing unrest in the east was revolution or just more banditry. Gómez had not anticipat-

ed this confusion but his expediency in assembling his forces and moving decisively into the west capitalized on it nevertheless. Time had been the enemy of the insurgents during the Ten Years War, but Gómez's early successes allowed him to sow disorder and destruction far into the west, forcing the government in Havana onto its back foot. On January 22nd 1896, five days after Campos had been recalled by Canovas and less than three weeks before Weyler would assume command, Maceo's column marched unopposed into Mantua -- a small township at the westernmost end of Pinar del Rio.<sup>8</sup> It had taken Maceo's invasion column of 1500 men just under one hundred days to travel half the length of Cuba—a distance of nearly 400 miles.

Maceo's average pace of four miles a day was slow, but speed is not necessary when one's objective is steady and comprehensive destruction. Once Gómez and Maceo had defeated and out maneuvered Spanish forces at the battle of Mal Tiempo on the 15th of December 1895, the insurgent commanders were able to progress westward unimpeded.<sup>9</sup> Since the key to insurgent victory, Gómez had reasoned, lay in showing the island's powerful planter class that the Spanish could not protect their economic interests, the invasion of the west did not aim to capture cities or to achieve a decisive military victory.<sup>10</sup> As commander of the lead invasion column Maceo's mission was to destroy everything which the planters had hoped Spain would protect and avoid the costly distractions of taking cities or holding territory. Maceo's column meandered westward through the provinces of Santa Clara, Matanzas, Havana, and Pinar del Rio burning through vast tracts of open farmland while merely singeing the edges of the well defended cities and towns. Meanwhile, by razing the foundation of Cuban economic life the insurgents were simultaneously precipitating an unemployment crisis which swelled their own ranks. Hundreds of peasants, now unable to farm their employer's burnt fields, joined the invasion column as it swept westward.<sup>11</sup> The tendency, shared by contemporaneous Span-

ish loyalists and subsequent Cuban historians, to conflate the approximately 1500 soldiers Maceo had led into the west with the hundreds (if not thousands) of Cuban peasants who would eventually join him is understandable.<sup>12</sup> The volunteers who joined Maceo west of the trocha were poorly disciplined and deserted often, and even though an estimated 40,000 would serve in the Liberation Army, at no point would Maceo or Gómez have more than a few thousand under their command.<sup>13</sup> Thus the western invasion of 1895-1896 began as a well thought out military campaign executed by commanders with a strategic vision for how to unseat Spanish rule, but slowly devolved into something resembling highly organized banditry. And while the invasion succeeded in completing the first cross-island military campaign in Cuban history as 1895 drew to a close it soon became apparent that centuries of Spanish colonialism would not be undone by one spoiled sugar harvest.

The new Spanish strategy under Weyler, while rooted in an economic calculus similar to Gómez's, depended on the inertia of Spanish rule and the willingness of the metropole to think with its heart and not with its brain. As Campos had noted in his letters to Canovas and his cabinet, the strategy of Reconcentration which he believed might deliver victory for Spain would come at an intolerable cost. While his appeals to Christian principles suggest his motivation was humanitarian, it is equally true that any policy of forced population resettlement would be incredibly costly, in terms of both blood and treasure, to the Spanish government. The financial burden of Reconcentration would arise not only from the cost of the troops required to implement and enforce such a scheme, but from the revenues lost from depopulating the regions most important to Cuba's agricultural production. However, for Spanish conservatives such as Weyler and Cánovas, the rationale for fighting over Cuba was not at all about the money but rather imperial pride. So, motivated by a desire to maintain the remnants of Spanish Empire, Wey-

ler set about implementing the Reconcentration strategy.

On the 16th of February, less than a week into his command in Havana, Weyler issued his first Reconcentration orders for the eastern provinces of Santiago de Cuba and Puerto Principe, as well as the district of Sancti-Spiritus.<sup>14</sup> The inclusion of Sancti-Spiritus—which lies on the easternmost edge of the province of Santa Clara fifty miles west of the Jucaro-Moron trocha—was a notable public admission of a Spanish defeat. Detailed in his order were directions that all Cubans “relocate themselves nearby division, brigade, column, or other army command post, and to gather in their town squares within eight days of the orders’ publication with their identification papers.”<sup>15</sup> Once relocated to the cities Cubans were not to travel back into the countryside without the express permission of their local military or civil authority.<sup>16</sup> These provisions, which would become the standard for Weyler’s subsequent orders, also entitled field commanders to make use of the resources left behind in the countryside by evacuated peasants and thus laid the foundation for more serious seizures in the future.<sup>17</sup>

Along with his Reconcentration order Weyler published a slew of additional wartime restrictions on the press and civil society. This second order criminalized a wide range of seditious activity from tampering with Spanish army rations to sending subversive messages via messenger pigeon and made civilians who violated its terms subject to the code of military justice—a move which made it easier for army units in the field to summarily execute suspected insurgents.<sup>18</sup> Given that news of Weyler’s arrival had signaled a more aggressive commitment to the Spanish war effort many Cubans might have anticipated these new measures. However, for the thousands of rural families who lived in Cuba’s far east away from telegraph lines or serviceable roads, one can only imagine that the first time they heard of Reconcentration was when Spanish soldiers came to their homes to enforce it.

In some respects, Weyler’s order had only formal-

ized a process which had already begun as a consequence of Gómez's scorched earth strategy. While many peasant farmers had joined the insurgency's invasion columns many more were left displaced and dispossessed. Unable to earn a living in a countryside which Gómez had decided would produce nothing of value, rural Cubans had already begun to flood the island's urban centers. The depopulation of the countryside by both Weyler and Gómez led to steep drops in Cuba's agricultural output. Drops in Cuban sugar and tobacco output was a serious blow to planters and the Spanish tax authority but was ultimately survivable. What was not survivable were the cuts to food production. It is a curious and consequential fact of Cuban history that despite rice being the center of the Cuban diet for centuries, Cuba has almost always relied on imports to meet domestic demand.<sup>19</sup> Thus, rural depopulation coupled with restrictions placed by both sides on the sale of foods between Spanish and insurgent held areas sent regions already vulnerable to food insecurity into full-fledged famine. Livestock, invaluable as a durable and transportable source of calories, thus became a valuable military asset. By May, 1896 Spanish authorities in Santa Clara had begun tracking the transport of cows, horses, and pigs and imposing stiff fines on farmers found to be herding without direct permission from military, as opposed to civilian, authorities.<sup>20</sup>

This squeeze on resources was exactly what Weyler had envisioned when he began Reconcentrating each Cuban province in succession. In a private, handwritten, order circulated to his military subordinates Weyler insisted that his officers, "dedicate their primary attention to the destruction of households in areas frequented by the enemy or in places where the owners do not present themselves with valid identification."<sup>21</sup> He went on, instructing that wherever Spanish units were marching they were to ensure that they left behind no livestock or crops which the insurgents could utilize. "In summary" he concluded, "what I expect [from my forces] is that they help

to take from the various provinces as quickly as possible all of the resources which the enemy can make use of, so that they might find themselves insufficiently protected and obliged, for lack of access to food, to be beaten or to surrender.”<sup>22</sup> This letter, written on the 8th of January 1897, highlighted what had become an important shift in Weyler’s strategy. In addition to Reconcentrating the island’s peasants Weyler had spent much of his first year chasing down Gómez’s and Maceo’s armies. So, while the objective of defeating the insurgent’s in battle was never far from Weyler’s mind, this letter shows that Weyler also understood the economic forces at play in this war. Indeed, just as Gómez and Maceo had calculated that their route to victory lay in starving Spain of sugar, Weyler had settled upon the similar path of starving Cuba into submission.

However, during this time there appeared a new challenge which Weyler had not appreciated, nor one which his previous service in Cuba prepared him for: pandemic. The deliberate starving of vast portions of the population and the forcible relocation of the same into hastily constructed bohios on the outskirts of major cities soon led to a truly horrendous public health crisis. The inevitable human suffering these arrangements invited remained with one Spanish soldier decades later,<sup>23</sup>

One afternoon, accompanied by other office workers, I wanted to see the real conditions of that appalling agglomeration of people all crammed together. And the shock and pity and indignation its horrendous scenes aroused in me was so intense that even now, sixty-two years later, my Christian soul still throbs with painful vibrations triggered by the same principled protests of moral indignation. That piling up of human beings was a scene out of Dante. Beaten down, weeping, half-naked, and sick for the most part; some were dying, others lacking the most essential things for survival.

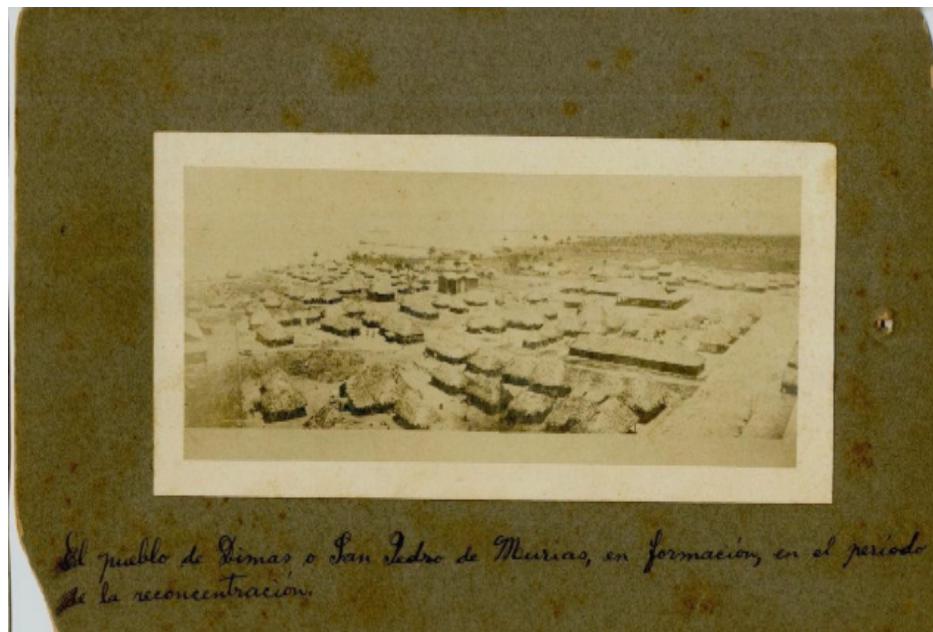


Figure 1: An aerial photograph of a reconcentrated town, presumably taken from a guard tower or similar structure.

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The caption reads, "The town of Dimas or San Pedro de Maurias, in formation, during the time of Reconcentration."

Cuban National Archives.



Figure 2: Cuban peasants pose for a photograph with their livestock in a reconcentrated town. Cuban National Archives.

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While the insurgent press-machine worked hard to deliver photographs of starved women and children to American newspapers, few photos of the Cuban Reconcentration settlements exist today. However, two photographs from archives in Havana provide modern historians with an important glimpse into life as a reconcentrado. In reconcentrated towns, humble bohios made of palm fronds and wooden planks seem to have been the predominant form of shelter. Notably absent are signs of any public above ground water infrastructure such as a canal or water tower. In an era when indoor plumbing was a luxury even in wealthy nations, the lack of such infrastructure can reasonably be understood to imply an absence of any system of public water supply or drainage.<sup>26</sup> A second photo which lacked any identifying notes or description, simply captured a ground-level view of a group of reconcentrados. Accompanying the reconcentrados are two large cows, pointing to another hidden horror of Reconcentration: the untold thousands of animals that must have accompanied the reconcentrados into the camps. Small farmers, uprooted and forced to leave their farms, would have brought with them their most valuable transportable assets, livestock.

While these animals were incredibly valuable as stores of food in regions which had ceased producing food for Spaniards and Cubans alike, the concentrating of so many animals in such close proximity created health hazards which only exacerbated the already unfolding crisis.<sup>27</sup> The best evidence for this comes in the form of direct orders Weyler issued to loyalist civil authorities via pro-Spanish newspapers. In December of 1896 Weyler declared that he had “observed with disgust the insufficient maintenance of fortified towns,”<sup>28</sup> which he noted had caused “a considerable number of sicknesses among civilian population as well as among the soldiers who guard and pass through the town.” His order went on to, among other things, penalize the public discarding of animal carcasses within residential areas, and to prohibit bathing upstream from

where drinking water is drawn. Even more telling is an order which was issued just over two weeks before Weyler's by the Mayor of Havana Antonio Quesada banning the bathing of horses and mules in the city's freshwater streams.<sup>29</sup> The uncleanliness of such practices is readily apparent, even before one considers the roughly 50 pounds of urine and manure a single horse produces daily.<sup>30</sup> These orders—troubling because they reveal what basic acts of sanitation were not being done—also reveal the difficulties the Spanish were facing as a ruling regime responsible for ensuring the public welfare. That the most senior Spanish official on the island, and the Mayor of the island's largest city were forced to involve themselves in order to remedy basic public health issues, speaks to the ineptitude of the Spanish law and authority at the most local level.

Hungry and immunocompromised farmers living in close proximity with their draft animals soon fell ill from dysentery and similar gastro-intestinal illnesses.<sup>31</sup> The transmission of typhus also surged in the reconcentrados where close quarters and Weyler's restrictions on the sale of fresh clothing worked in tandem to aid the spread of the lice-born malady.<sup>32</sup> However, it was the inability to counter the spread of yellow fever—known as 'the black vomit' to Spanish soldiers for the dark bloody mucus produced by terminal patients—which might be considered the most deadly consequence of Weyler's Reconcentration policy.<sup>33</sup> By the time Weyler assumed command in Havana the Cuban physician Dr. Carlos Finlay had known for almost fifteen years that the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito was likely responsible for the transmission of the yellow fever.<sup>34</sup> In experiments which he began in 1881 Dr. Finlay had successfully used the *aegypti* mosquito to infect willing Jesuit priests with the yellow fever virus which had demonstrated that mosquitoes, and not the bloody excretions of patients, were the primary vectors of transmission.<sup>35</sup> However Dr. Finlay's findings were not widely published in 1896 and he did not offer his services to the Spanish government. Instead, once

hostilities between Spain and the United States had erupted in 1898, he would go on share his findings with Major Walter Reed of the U.S. Army Medical Corps.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, both the reconcentrados and Spanish in garrison suffered grievous losses to a disease they could neither cure nor comprehend.

The effect of disease on Spanish soldiers guarding Cuba's towns and cities is worth additional emphasis. The loss of tens of thousands of Cuban reconcentrados to illness was not inherently disastrous to a Governor General who had already committed himself to a policy of starving Cubans into submission.<sup>37</sup> The deaths of tens of thousands of Spanish soldiers and the incapacitation of thousands more posed a great risk to Weyler's strength as Reconcentration moved into effect. Reconcentration, which was a theoretically sound if inhumane strategy, thus struggled immensely under the weight of the conditions which it itself had created.

Weyler had conceived of Reconcentration as a strategy to deny the insurgency the material support of the populace, but he had not anticipated that the burden of relocating and guarding the island's civilians would nearly break the forces under his command. From the spring of 1895 to the summer of 1898 Spain sent over 200,000 soldiers to Cuba, of whom one fifth to one fourth perished from disease.<sup>38</sup> Poorly rationed and underequipped, as time wore on the Spanish Army in Cuba began to look more and more like the reconcentrados they were guarding. Spanish army hospitals located in the same diseased towns as the Cubans and their farm animals soon became focal points of disease themselves. Ignorance of the *aedes aegypti* mosquito's role in viral transmission meant that soldiers suffering from malaria or yellow fever were not separated from other patients, nor were precautions taken to reduce mosquito populations—such as draining nearby bodies standing water. A soldier who had been treated for dysentery in a Spanish hospital and discharged as healthy might have returned to his post only to succumb to yellow fever a few

days later, thereby exposing the rest of his unit to infection. It is important to stress that this was a problem particular to and endemic in the Spanish army as a consequence of Weyler's Reconcentration policy and Spanish army incompetence, and not simply a consequence of late 19th century tropical warfare. Neither the insurgent forces nor the American forces who fought in Cuba during the war experienced fatalities to disease at anywhere near the 20% to 25% the Spanish suffered. The insurgents only operated where they could, beyond the reach of Spanish authorities and therefore well away from the disease-ridden reconcentrados. Moreover, the insurgent strategy of sugarcane and plantation destruction necessarily meant that Maceo and Gómez's forces were constantly on the move and were never exposed to potentially infected populations for long periods of time. Finally, the insurgency was overwhelmingly made up of native-born Cubans and consisted of disproportionately more Afro-Cubans, whose populations have greater resistance to yellow fever and malaria.<sup>39</sup> However naturally occurring resistance to tropical disease was not a necessary condition for armies hoping to avoid massive loss of life. Thanks to a proactive command attentive to the risk of outbreak, the well-resourced and disciplined American forces in Cuba lost a mere 3% of their soldiers to disease.<sup>40</sup>

Reconcentration thus not only precipitated a humanitarian crisis, but also left a festering self-inflicted wound on the Spanish Army. Weyler, however, seemed undisturbed. In his memoirs of the events of late 1896—the period in which he issued his orders pertaining to public health and sanitation—the issues of living conditions in the reconcentrados are conspicuously absent. Instead, Weyler was preoccupied with seeking out, trapping, and destroying Maceo's invasion column which had been wreaking havoc in Pinar del Rio since January of that year.<sup>41</sup> Over the spring and summer of 1896 Weyler's engineers constructed a new defensive line which would bisect the island from North to South along the bor-

der of the provinces of Pinar del Rio and Havana. Spanning less than twenty miles from Mariel in the north and Majana in the south, this new trocha sealed off Pinar del Rio—and along with it Maceo and his army—from Havana and Gómez. Meanwhile, even as the heat and rain of Cuba's summer months left tens of thousands of Weyler's soldiers feverish and immobilized in garrison, Spanish forces had moved eastward from Havana pushing Gómez out of Havana and Santa Clara provinces all the way to Puerto Principe. In May of 1896 Gómez was forced back across the Juraco-Moron Trocha bringing the invasion of the west into its final stages.<sup>42</sup> By the fall of 1896 Weyler had reconstituted the Juraco-Moron Trocha and built the new Mariel-Majana Trocha with the two most skilled insurgent commanders—and the armies they commanded—held back on either side. That Weyler had managed all this while large portions of his force were incapacitated due to illness underscores the weakness of the Liberation Army several months removed from its early successes. Years later Weyler recalled how he anticipated a reinvigoration of his troops once the cooler winter arrived in late 1896,<sup>43</sup>

Once November came the rains had subsided substantially, but the heat pressed on, as did the sanitary conditions, if things have improved it has not been enough to prevent new cases of yellow fever, and we have not yet felt the northern winds which were to be our panacea, since a change in the atmospheric conditions could give a significant jolt to all operations in Pinar del Rio.

Eventually the winds came, and in early December Weyler's forces pinned down Maceo's trapped invasion column and killed the Bronze Titan himself, scattering his troops, and dealing the greatest blow to the insurgency yet.

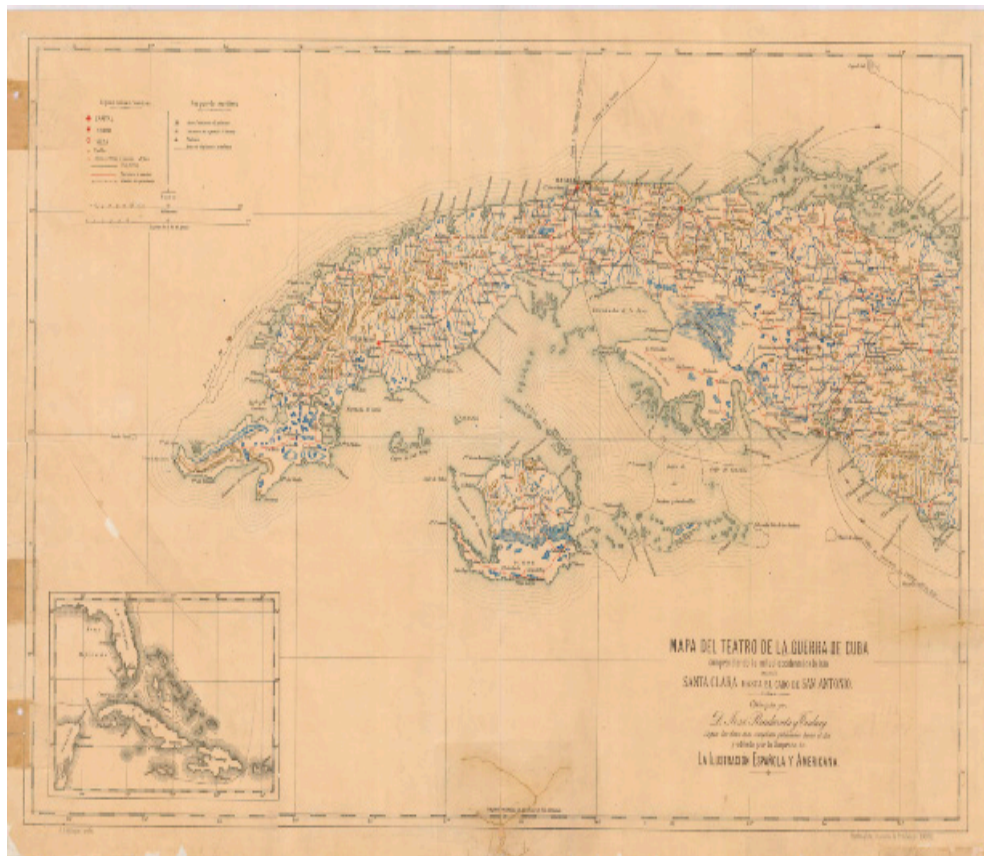


Figure 3: A Spanish military map depicting the province of Pinar del Río. Weyler's new trocha spanned the province's Eastern border with the province of Havana. Cuban National Archives.

With Maceo dead and his column disbanded, insurgency operations west of the Juraco-Moron trocha resembled the same low-grade agitation which had existed before the war. Gómez's army was confined to Puerto Principe and Santiago in the east and Weyler was slowly but surely positioning himself to regain control there as well. On New Year's Day 1897 Cuba looked much the same as it had 25 years before in 1872. The insurgency had demonstrated the weakness of Spain's colonial government by razing plantations from Santiago to Pinar del Río, but Gómez's strategy of total war rested on the somewhat paradoxical belief that Cubans from east to west would rally to the cause once he had destroyed their farms and liberated them of any material allegiance to Spain. Even if plantation Cubans

were not won over by banditry, by destroying everything of value to Spain in Cuba a scorched earth insurgency it was reasoned that Spain would eventually cut her losses and leave behind the ashes. Had Spain behaved rationally, Gómez's strategy might have worked, but even before the outbreak of war in 1895 it would have been unwise to bet big on Cuba, and Gómez might have fought differently had he seen why. The establishment of the first European sugar beet refineries in the early 19th century slowly began a countdown whose culmination would be the end of Spain's Cuban sugar monopoly. By 1890 beet sugar accounted for nearly half of world's supply, and even in Spain farmers were being encouraged to grow sugar beets—surely there could be no more prophetic sign of impending Cuban obsolescence than sacks of raw sugar branded with the words *Hecho en España!*<sup>44</sup> So why then would Spain bother to fight for Cuba, why pour tens of thousands of men and hundreds of millions of pesos into an island it had considered granting autonomy only three years prior?

There was no rational answer, only blinding nationalism and a lust for lost empire can explain Cánovas' obstinance and Weyler's fervor. Gómez's strategy had incorrectly assumed that his adversary would weigh the cost of war against the diminishing value of Cuba as a colony. In a letter Weyler wrote in late July 1896, he addressed the questions posed to him by Spain's foreign minister about what he expected would be necessary for the war effort. In a thirteen-page letter adorned with Weyler's flourished signature, the new Capitan General explained that a serious investment of money and men would be needed to bring the situation in Cuba back under control. "It is difficult to answer your questions precisely" he wrote, "but it is certain that in order to fund the exigencies of the current and planned campaigns the bank of this island will need (at a minimum) during this year to receive ninety-six million pesos, but that that could rise to one hundred and twelve million if an additional 40,000 men are sent."<sup>45</sup> In a

move which directly contradicted the insurgency's assumption that Spain's interests in Cuba lay with her plantations, in May of 1896 Weyler effectively requisitioned all of the grain west of Santa Clara by requiring that all farmers empty their silos and deliver the contents to the nearest Spanish garrison.<sup>46</sup> Four days later Weyler banned the export of tobacco.<sup>47</sup> These publicly issued orders should have raised concerns amongst the insurgents about the strategy of targeting Spain's export agriculture. Weyler evidently cared little about the economic justifications for future empire, as did his boss Prime Minister Cánovas who, as we have seen, was willing to wager untold lives and gold to hold onto the ever-faithful isle.

In 1897 with Gómez safely confined to the east, the most serious threat to continued Spanish rule in Cuba victory was not an organized insurgency, but an inability to see the war through. Conditions on the island were dire and a significant investment of Spanish treasure would be required to keep even the loyalists from starvation. In major Spanish controlled cities, the instability of war led to speculation in paper currency, bullion, and basic foodstuffs. As inflation skyrocketed authorities in Havana instituted a series of price controls on beef, rice, oil, soap, and more.<sup>48</sup> Weyler even issued an order mandating the usage of paper currency instead of gold in all transactions—except when paying debts to the Spanish government.<sup>49</sup> Since the insurgency had no way to prevent Spanish ships from resupplying Spanish held-areas with much needed rations, supplies, and soldiers there were little leaders like Gómez could do on their own to prevent the eventual recapturing of the insurgent-held east. American intervention against Spain was by no means certain in the Spring and Summer of 1897, and the possibility of a reconciliation and autonomy agreement with Madrid was even less likely so long as Cánovas and the conservatives remained in power. As Weyler's armies worked their way east, slowly and brutally reasserting Spanish rule, it seemed as if only an

act of God would save the insurgency from total destruction.

The author would like to thank the curatorial staff of the Cuban Nacional Archives for access to their photos and document collections. Their help and assistance in locating and digitally reproducing key primary-source documents proved invaluable to the completion of this work.

## The Butcher and the Arson

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Weyler to Cuba's Volunteers and Firefighters, 10 February 1896, AMM, CGC, caja 3382.
- <sup>2</sup> Louis Pérez, *Lords of the Mountain: Social Banditry and Peasant Protest in Cuba, 1878-1918* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 42.
- <sup>3</sup> Records of Farms Burnt by Insurgents in Santa Clara Province, August 1897, AMM, CGC, caja 3383.
- <sup>4</sup> Hugh Thomas, *Cuba, The Pursuit of Freedom* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971), 255-256.
- <sup>5</sup> Pérez, *Lords of the Mountain*, 30.
- <sup>6</sup> Thomas, *Cuba*, 256.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 256.
- <sup>8</sup> Tone, *War and Genocide in Cuba*, 150.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 137.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 57-59.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 150.
- <sup>12</sup> Pérez, *Lords of the Mountain*; Tone, *War and Genocide in Cuba*, 92.
- <sup>13</sup> Tone, *War and Genocide in Cuba*, 91-95.
- <sup>14</sup> Weyler's Reconcentration Order for the Provinces of Puerto Principe and Santiago de Cuba, 16 February 1896, AMM, CGC, caja 3382.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> Weyler's Order Outlining Seditious Acts, 16 February 1896, AMM, CGC, caja 3382.
- <sup>19</sup> Louis Pérez, *Rice in the time of sugar: the political economy of food in Cuba* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 19-23.
- <sup>20</sup> Order Issuing Livestock Controls in Santa Clara, 13 May 1896, AMM, CGC, caja 3382.
- <sup>21</sup> Weyler to Operational Commanders in Cuba, 8 January 1897, AMM, CGC, exp. 5798.50.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> Josep Conangla i Fontanilles, *Memoir of My Youth in Cuba: a Soldier in the Spanish Army during the Separatist War, 1895-1898*, ed. Roy

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Joaquín, trans. D. J. Walker (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2017))

<sup>24</sup> Photo of a reconcentrated town, date unknown, ANC, Sección de Fotografía.

<sup>25</sup> Photo of a reconcentrados, date unknown, ANC, Sección de Fotografía..

<sup>26</sup> It is worth mentioning that even though this photograph appears to have been taken from an elevated platform raised well above the town, it is this author's opinion that this structure is unlikely to have been a water tower. Instead it is more likely that the photo was taken by a Spanish military block tower, buildings which according to architectural plans found in the General Military Archive in Madrid were commonly built around defensive positions.

<sup>27</sup> The repeated inclusion of rules pertaining to the sale, transport, and consumption of livestock in Spanish government orders points to the significance of livestock as a strategic resource over which Spanish authorities believed they could gain decisive control.

<sup>28</sup> Weyler's Order on Cleanliness, 1 December 1896, AMM, CGC, caja 3382.

<sup>29</sup> Havana Mayor's Prohibition on Bathing Livestock, 21 November 1896, AMM, CGC, caja 3382.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Westendorf, "Horses and Manure," Rutgers University: New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station (Equine Science Center, February 16, 2004), [https://esc.rutgers.edu/fact\\_sheet/horses-and-manure/](https://esc.rutgers.edu/fact_sheet/horses-and-manure/)

<sup>31</sup> Tone, War and Genocide in Cuba, 192.

<sup>32</sup> Weyler's Order on Supplies, 1 January 1897, AMM, CGC, caja 3383.

<sup>33</sup> Tone, War and Genocide in Cuba, 99.

<sup>34</sup> "Carlos Juan Finlay." In World of Health. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2006. Gale In Context: Biography (accessed February 8, 2020). [https://link-gale-com.proxy.library.upenn.edu/apps/doc/K2191100123/BIC?u=upenn\\_main&sid=BIC&xid=230695e4](https://link-gale-com.proxy.library.upenn.edu/apps/doc/K2191100123/BIC?u=upenn_main&sid=BIC&xid=230695e4).

<sup>35</sup> Tone, War and Genocide in Cuba, 99.

<sup>36</sup> "Carlos Juan Finlay." In World of Health. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2006. Gale In Context: Biography (accessed February 8, 2020). [https://link-gale-com.proxy.library.upenn.edu/apps/doc/K2191100123/BIC?u=upenn\\_main&sid=BIC&xid=230695e4](https://link-gale-com.proxy.library.upenn.edu/apps/doc/K2191100123/BIC?u=upenn_main&sid=BIC&xid=230695e4).

<sup>37</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter the total number of Cubans who died under Reconcentration is subject to ongoing discussion and consid-

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erable variation. However, given that both Tone and Thomas find that well over 40,000 Spanish Soldiers of a force of over 200,000 died from disease, it is plausible if not certain that tens of thousands of the 180,000 estimated Cuban deaths were due to disease.

<sup>38</sup> Tone, *War and Genocide in Cuba*, 97; Thomas, *Cuba*, 414.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 94-95.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 97.

<sup>41</sup> Valeriano Weyler, *Mi Mando en Cuba: Historia Militar y Política de la Última Guerra Separatista Durante Dicho Mando* (Madrid: Casa Editorial de Felipe González, 1910), 3:5-24.

<sup>42</sup> Tone, *War and Genocide in Cuba*, 94-95.

<sup>43</sup> Weyler, *Mi Mando en Cuba*, 3:5.

<sup>44</sup> Tone, *War and Genocide in Cuba*, 26-27.

<sup>45</sup> Weyler to the Foreign Minister, 25 July 1896, AMM, CGC, exp. 5763.5.

<sup>46</sup> Weyler's Order on Corn, 14 May 1896, AMM, CGC, caja 3382.

<sup>47</sup> Weyler's Order Banning Tobacco, 16 May 1896, AMM, CGC, caja 3382.

<sup>48</sup> Orders Establishing Price Controls, 24 May 1898, AMM, CGC, caja 3383.

<sup>49</sup> Weyler's Order Mandating the Use of Paper Currency, 28 August 1896, AMM, CGC, caja 3382.