

Cuban Revisionist Interpretations of Cuba's Struggle for Independence

BY DUVON C. CORBITT*

AS LATE AS 1927 history texts in use in Cuban schools were still presenting the island's struggles for independence in much the same manner as they were treated in history textbooks in this country; that is, (1) early plots, conspiracies, and attempts at invasion down to about 1865 which aimed at cutting Cuba loose from Spain (often thought of as aiming at annexation to the United States); (2) the reformist movement of the late Fifties and Sixties when Cubans hoped for freedom within the Spanish connection; (3) the failure of the reformist efforts followed by the first war for independence, known as the Ten Years' War, 1868-78; (4) the Guerra Chiquita of 1878-80 led by Cuban generals who refused to accept the Peace of Zanjón; (5) the autonomist movement once more aiming at liberty within the Spanish Empire; (6) its failure followed by the War for Independence, 1895-98; and, finally, La Guerra Hispanoamericana in 1898 (Cuban texts still used the Spanish version of "Spanish-American War,"¹ which term has since become anathema to Cuba historians as well as politicians).

Most school texts as well as larger histories had good words for the administration of General Leonard Wood² during the First Intervention (1899-1902), saying little about his predecessor in that position, General John R. Brooke. There were expressions of regret and even resentment over the failure of the United States government to recognize the government of the "República en Armas" which had directed Cuban efforts in the War for Independence, but for the most part, criticism of this policy was soft-pedaled, censure being reserved for the imposition of the Platt Amendment and later inter-

* The author is Professor of History at Asbury College. This paper was read at the Southern Historical Association meeting in Miami Beach in November, 1962.

¹ The most widely used text on Cuban history in the elementary schools at the time was Vidal Morales, *Nociones de historia de Cuba* (published in many editions by Cultural S.A.). It had a chapter with the title "La Guerra Hispano-Americana."

² The praise accorded to Wood in the Vidal Morales text, for instance, might easily have been written by an author in the United States.

ventions and meddling in Cuban affairs under the Amendment. Charles E. Magoon, the United States governor during the Second Intervention, was a favorite target, charged with having, by precept and example, instructed Cuban politicians in the ways of graft and other forms of corruption.

This is not to insinuate that historical revisionism had no advocates among the scholars of the island. From 1910 the Academy of History (organized after the models of those of France and Spain) was a center through which such intellectuals as Fernando Ortiz, Enrique José Varona, Raimundo Cabrera, Rafael Fernández de Castro, José Miró Argenter, Juan Miguel Dihigo, Enrique Collazo, Francisco de Paula Coronado, Tomás Justiz, Emeterio S. Santovenia, and Carlos M. Trelles, promoted investigation. Since most of them had been participants in one or more phases of the independence efforts, it is understandable that their historical work was directed in great part toward clarifying and interpreting the events that had led to the separation from Spain and the establishment of the Republic. Much of what they did was necessarily revisionist in nature, but was carried out in the best tradition of scientific historians who seek the facts and present them with as little conscious bias as possible.

More nearly revisionist in the early years of the Republic was a group that gathered around Dr. Fernando Ortiz, long time member of the Academy of History and for a while its president. Primarily interested in problems of sociology, anthropology, archeology, and folklore, Dr. Ortiz, nevertheless formed a nucleus for younger scholars to whom he lent inspiration. Once a week they lunched together and exchanged intellectual findings. One of the number later characterized the members of this circle as *inconformes*. The writer had the pleasure of attending one of these *almuerzos* in December of 1959.

The member of the *inconformes* who is perhaps best known of any of the revisionists in this country is Herminio Portell Vilá, who has refused to become fixed in any one school and has remained pretty much of a free lance as a historical writer as he has in politics, journalism, and radio and television newscasting. As a result he has often been dubbed anti-United States in this country and pro-United States in his own.

In 1930 Dr. Portell Vilá published the first of his three volume definitive study on *Narciso López y su época*. Although the other two volumes did not appear until 1952 and 1959 respectively,³ the first was sufficient to make clear the author's thesis (announced two

³ The volumes were printed in editions of 1000 copies each by different printing establishments in Havana: I by Cultural S.A.; II by Compañía Editora de Libros y Folletos; III by Jesús Montero, Editora.

years earlier in his history of his home town of Cárdenas)⁴ that López was an advocate of complete independence for Cuba and not of annexation to the United States. This volume also gave its author a high rating, both in and out of Cuba, as a careful, painstaking investigator and able writer, and paved the way for a Guggenheim fellowship that enabled him to continue his studies during his exile from the Machado dictatorship which came close upon the heels of this publication. This opportunity he used (with the cooperation of his wife) to explore archives and other sources in the United States for material on the whole story of the relations between this country and Cuba, as well as to gather further data on López. The result is perhaps the most thorough piece of revisionist historical writing yet to come from a Cuban—the four volume *Historia de Cuba en sus relaciones con los Estados Unidos y España*.⁵

This valuable work should have been published in English as well as Spanish, and then distributed by some foundation in such a manner as to make it available to all historical writers and teachers in this country, particularly those who produce our textbooks. Dr. Portell Vilá is a fearless writer and speaker, and has never hesitated to express unpopular views whether he was dealing with the policies of the United States or with the politicians of his own country. This is not always a safe line to follow, and on more than one occasion he has been imprisoned, threatened with execution, and exiled. The last time that I saw him (December of 1959) he told me that Raúl Castro had ordered his television news commentary cut off in the middle of a speech one evening with orders that he not be permitted to broadcast again. His treatment of Cuban-United States relations in the work mentioned is well documented and frank, and of course not always flattering to this country or its agents. These sordid facts needed to be exposed, but unfortunately the wrong people read the work. Our people, our leaders, our historians, needed badly to be told these things, but they have been buried in the Spanish language. They have been read in Cuba, where all too often isolated statements have been lifted out of context, or have been slanted to support the particular anti-United States feeling of an extremist, rather than to promote a better understanding of the fundamental relations of the two countries. The good of both demands a mutual understanding.

Considerably before Dr. Portell Vilá achieved prominence as a historian, the man who was destined to become the center around which the revisionists were to gather, had already made a name for himself in a number of fields of writing. In 1912, at the age of 23, Emilio

⁴ *Historia de Cárdenas*, La Habana, 1928.

⁵ Habana, Jesús Montero, 1939-41.

Roig de Leuchsenring of Habana won first prize in a *costumbrista* contest with his near classic *¿Se puede vivir en la Habana sin un centavo?*⁶ His later writings on the history of Havana and Cuban folklore are among the best on the subjects. But without losing interest in his first love, Dr. Roig turned more and more to broader topics of history, including the impact of United States influence in Cuban affairs. In 1922 he published a volume entitled *La enmienda Platt, su interpretación primitiva y sus aplicaciones posteriores hasta 1921*, followed the next year by his *Análisis y consecuencias de la intervención norteamericana en los asuntos interiores de Cuba*. Two years later came his pamphlet with the significant title, *La colonia superviva. Cuba a los veintidós años de la República*,⁷ the contents of which foreshadowed later assertions by the same author and other revisionists that Cuba's battle for independence did not end in 1898, nor even in 1902, but that in later years it only entered into another phase with the United States as the enemy of Cuban independence instead of Spain.

It was in 1927 that Dr. Roig first entered the field that was to make it possible for him to assume dynamic leadership of most of Cuba's revisionist historians. In that year the mayor of Havana placed him in charge of historical studies of the city with the title of *comisionado municipal*, which position he used to promote a series of studies in the city's archives on Havana under Spain. Radical changes in Havana's administration by the dictator Machado forced Dr. Roig from this position in 1931 and eventually into exile, but after Machado's fall in 1933 he returned to the city hall with the new title of *Historiador de la Ciudad de la Habana*, which he held continuously until the present upheaval, and which office he organized and expanded into a center of historical investigation and interpretation that has rivaled the Academy of History, although that was not his original intention, for Dr. Roig was one of the inner circle of the Academy until he resigned from it in the late Thirties.

He had scarcely taken possession of the Office of City Historian when from it he launched a series of historical conferences, adult education courses on historical exposition open to the public, and sponsored several series of historical publications including one of the colonial records of the municipality under the title *Actas Capitulares del Ayuntamiento de la Habana*, the *Colección Histórica Cubana y Americana*, and the more popular *Cuadernos de Historia Habanera*. By 1959 more than one hundred volumes of historical studies had

⁶ Published in *El Figaro*, 1912.

⁷ These three works were all printed in Havana by "El Siglo XX," in the following years respectively: 1922; 1923; and 1925.

been published by the Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad de la Habana.⁸

To such a center historically minded persons naturally gravitated. In 1940, in conjunction with a number of them, Dr. Roig launched the Sociedad Cubana de Estudios Históricos e Internacionales, broadly based so as to admit all those interested in historical studies—for he and many others thought of the Academy as too exclusive, and too conservative. Two years later this society and the office of the City Historian joined in promoting the First National Historical Congress of Cuba, the Thirteenth of which met in February of 1960. It was intended that the Congresses should be annual affairs, and they were until 1952, after which the political situation under Dictator Batista became impropitious for such meetings since they were invariably forums for some very plain-spoken opinions on such matters as dictatorship, imperialism, and colonialism. The papers presented to these historical congresses, the addresses actually delivered, and especially the resolutions and recommendations approved, are among the best sources of information on the revisionist interpretations of Cuban history.

The papers and discussions at the first such congress (1942) covered a wide variety of subjects on the history of all of the Americas as well as that of Cuba itself. Those touching on Cuban independence movements were only mildly revisionist—with one exception, that written by Dr. Roig himself, entitled *Revaloración de la Guerra Libertadora Cubana de 1895*. This did not appear in the published report of the congress,⁹ but was left for separate printing. Actually Dr. Roig used it as a stepping stone to a number of studies on the whole independence movement which have set the tone for the revisionists. The most significant of these works are: *La Guerra Libertadora Cubana de los Treinta Años, 1868-98*; *La lucha cubana por la república, contra la anexión y la Enmienda Platt, 1899-1902*; *Juan Gualberto Gómez, paladín de la independencia de Cuba*; and *La Guerra Hispano-Cubanoamericana fue ganado por el Lugarteniente General del Ejército Libertador Calixto García Iníiguez* (all from the Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad de la Habana, the first two in 1952 and the others in 1954 and 1955 respectively). In all of them Dr. Roig insisted that the struggle for independence was not a series of

⁸ A complete list of these collections with titles of other publications down to 1960 is found in No. 72 of the *Cuadernos de Historia Habanera*, (La Habana, Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad de la Habana, 1960). See also Duvon C. Corbitt "Historical Publications of the Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad de la Habana," *HAHR*, vol. XXXV, No. 4, November, 1955, pp. 498 for comments on those down to 1955.

⁹ 2 vols. La Habana, "El Siglo XX," 1943.

wars but one continuous struggle of thirty years' duration; that there were never lacking in the United States friends of Cuban freedom, but that our government was consistently opposed to Cuban independence. He further insisted that the entry of the United States into the struggle in 1898 was not necessary for Cuban victory, because the Cuban patriots had the mother country defeated by that time; furthermore, after entering the war the United States found it necessary to use Cuban plans of strategy and Cuban forces to win the Santiago campaign; that Spanish defeat did not bring Cuban freedom but simply turned the struggle into a new phase with the United States as the opponent.

Much of this had been foreshadowed in Dr. Roig's publications of 1921-22, and 1924, already cited. In these later works he documented heavily his statements about the incapacity of General Shafter, his discourtesy to Calixto García and to other Cuban officers during the Santiago campaign, and particularly about Shafter's refusal to permit García to share in the surrender negotiations or in the surrender ceremonies, after having used his battle plans, his leadership, and his army to achieve victory. Objection was made to the name, "The Spanish-American War" because the Cubans were given no credit. As opposed to this the revisionists for their part suggested a variety of more acceptable names, finally obtaining from the Cuban Congress a law officially adopting that of "Guerra Hispano-Cubanoamericana."¹⁰ The revisionists assert that the war was won before the United States entered and robbed them of the fruits of victory.

Dr. Roig, along with others of his persuasion, praises Senator Teller for insisting that the United States announce to the world a guarantee that it was entering the Cuban struggle to obtain freedom for the island instead of to annex it. They also praise General John R. Brooke, the first governor under the Intervention, for his efforts in behalf of Cuban independence, but severely condemn Elihu Root, President McKinley, Leonard Wood, and Theodore Roosevelt as rabid imperialists seeking to annex the island. The following quotation from the resolutions of the Ninth Historical Congress of 1950¹¹ will make the contentions of the revisionists clear:

Cuba does not owe its independence to the United States of North America, but to the efforts of its own people, in their firm, unbreakable will to put an end to the injustices, biases, discriminations, and exploitations that they suffered under the despotic colonial regime, and to conquer liberty, democracy,

¹⁰ *Gaceta Oficial de la República de Cuba*, May 22, 1945.

¹¹ *Cuadernos de Historia Habanera*, No. 48.

justice, culture, and civilization. Convinced that it was impossible to obtain these things under Spanish sovereignty, they decided to win them by means of revolution and after numerous conspiracies and expeditions, a national consciousness was developed. Then broke out the great *Thirty Years War of Liberation* which in its final phase (1895-98) had the support of the majority of the people of the island, of the groups of Cuban exiles on the Continent, and, through the power of the Liberating Army, due to the superior military capacity of its leaders and the spirit of discipline, heroism, disinterestedness, and sacrifice of its soldiers, was able to destroy the economic and military power of Spain and defeat the best of its military forces, although it had against it at times the indifference, and at others the hostility of the North American State; having brought about even before the intervention of the United States in the Cuban-Spanish conflict the complete exhaustion of Spain's "last man and last peseta," the limit indicated by the leaders of her political factions in Spain as the extreme to which it could go in the battle against the Cuban Liberating Revolution.

The North American State was always the enemy of Cuban independence and hindered and annulled the work of the Cuban patriots directed toward sending to the island expeditions, medicines, and war material, and contumaciously opposed the recognition of belligerency, offering, instead, on various occasions, material support to Spain to help keep the island under her dominion, and even to recover it, if she came to lose it. This attitude was in evident contrast to the sympathies, demonstrated at all times in favor of Cuban independence, by the North American people, who gave decided cooperation to the revolutionary efforts developed in territory of the Union, many of its citizens taking part in the revolutionary armies and some of whom gave their lives for Cuban liberty. Finally in 1898 there existed in the United States a state of opinion in favor not only of the right of the Cubans to liberty and independence, but also to the recognition the Republic organized in the field of battle, but this popular desire was ignored by the United States government by suppressing the Joint Resolution voted by Congress on April 19, 1898, and approved by the President on the 20th, having already been approved by the Senate.

This was little more than a restatement in more positive form of the resolution on the same subject adopted by the Eighth Congress the year before; in fact it had been foreshadowed in the resolutions of the First Congress in 1942.¹²

While the most conservative historians in Cuba agreed with a number of these assertions, there have not been lacking scholars who rejected them in whole or in part. Noteworthy are two works by "The Grand Old Man" of Cuban history and diplomacy, Cosme de la Torriente. In his *Fin de la dominación de España en Cuba*¹³ and *Calixto García cooperó con las fuerzas armadas de los Estados Unidos en 1898, cumpliendo órdenes del gobierno cubano*,¹⁴ Torriente admitted the crudity of Shafter, but contended that this did not represent the studied policy of the United States or its leaders, pointing out the effort of General Nelson A. Miles to make amends. Torriente also expressed doubts (and he was García's chief of staff) about the ability of the Cuban army to defeat the Spanish forces without the assistance of the United States navy. This view is also expressed in a paper read before the Cuban Academy of History by Julio Morales Coello, entitled *La importancia del poderío naval—positivo y negativo—en el desarrollo y en la independencia de Cuba*.¹⁵

Much the same conservative line was followed in the ten volume *Historia de la Nación Cubana*,¹⁶ prepared in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Republic. This was a cooperative effort of many scholars, drawn in great part from the Academy group. Nearly all of these writers are well known in Hispanic American circles in this country. The directors of the project were Emeterio S. Santovenia, Ramiro Guerra, Juan J. Remos, and José María Pérez Cabrera. While the list of contributors contained such revisionists' names as Enrique Gay-Calbó, Julio le Riverend, and other collaborators with Dr. Roig in the work of the Sociedad Cubana de Estudios Cubanos e Internacionales, the majority leaned more toward the conservative school. In dealing with United States' participation in the Cuban independence movements, Dr. Remos contributed a section under the traditional title "La Guerra Hispano-Americana," already condemned as heretical and anti-patriotic by the revisionists; in fact, it was technically illegal since the Cuban Congress had passed a law in May of 1945 (in conformity with a recommendation from the Historical Congresses in question) making official the name "La Guerra Hispano-Cubanoamericana."¹⁷

¹² *Ibid.*, No. 45.

¹³ La Habana, "El Siglo XX," 1948.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1950.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1950.

¹⁶ La Habana, *Historia de la Nación Cubana*, S.A., 1952.

¹⁷ See note 10 above.

I myself heard caustic criticism of the editorial policy of the directors of the *Historia de la Nación Cubana* and their sponsors, largely on account of their conservatism and traditionalism, and because the Cuban government of the hour contributed to the costs of publication and was suspected of dictating the tone. This is highly improbable for the scholars who produced this history were (and are) among the best prepared, the most objective, and the most scientific historians of Cuba, comparable in ability to the best in any country in the world; in fact, their objectivity and their inclination toward conservatism were two of their strong points, but the revisionists were neither in a conservative nor an objective mood. They had been impatiently striving for a generation to correct what they considered false interpretations of their country's history. While the traditionalists were accepted in this country both in historical and diplomatic circles, the revisionists were often frowned upon, even to the extent of being considered communists.

There were some grounds for this point of view. At the National Historical Congress of 1952 (meeting in Havana and Cárdenas) one of the invited speakers was the "President of the Government of Santo Domingo in Exile," and at the banquet one of the guests was the "foreign minister of the Puerto Rican Republic in Exile," who recited Puerto Rican problems and the "sins" of the United States to those near him.

Freedom of thought is one of our great privileges, the basis of human liberty, but unfortunately, while the revisionist historians were exercising their rights, and recapitulating their just grievances against the United States, they were, unwittingly, preparing the ground in which would thrive most abundantly the anti-United States propaganda of our communist rivals. The proceedings of the Thirteenth Historical Congress, which met in February, 1960, revealed the extent to which the revisionists went over to the Castro program. I did not get to attend this meeting, but I was in Havana a month before while the preparations for it were being made. Most of the revisionist historians saw in the rise of Castro the realization of their dreams of complete Cuban independence. There was noticeable at the time a ground swell of cautiously expressed doubt. Already a number of the more conservative scholars were in exile or under suspicion, as were some of the revisionists, one of whom informed me that he was threatened for daring to suggest that all was not well. Nevertheless, the prevalent feeling at the Thirteenth Congress was one of rejoicing that Cuba was at last free, a harp of ten strings on which the Castro administration played deftly. In the

welcoming address to the *Congresistas*¹⁸ Dr. Roig reviewed his previous interpretation of the independence movements with emphasis on the frustration of Cuban liberty by the United States. He called on the group to rejoice that through the new Revolution Cuba was at last free from the tyranny of Batista, and from dictators forced upon it by Washington and Wall Street, and that it had entered a new era in which American imperialism was banished from the island forever.

A similar note was sounded by Professor Fernando Portuondo of the University of Havana, long among the revisionist historians attending the Congresses, and now president of the Thirteenth.¹⁹ Paper after paper repeated the theme, and at the principal banquet of the Congress, prepared on one of the government-sponsored cooperative farms, bearded officials echoed the refrain that the political, social, and economic millenium had come to Cuba. Thus the Castro Revolution had completed the unfinished work of 1898 when the battle for freedom had shifted from a struggle against Spain to one against the United States and the "exploiters" who had entered the island under its auspices. This became the official claim of the Castro government, so stated on numerous occasions and at great length by the hero himself, and is clearly expressed in the official elementary school geography by Antonio Núñez Jiménez entitled *Así es mi país. Geografía de Cuba para los niños*, printed at the government press in 1961:

The children of Revolutionary Cuba should know well what Imperialism is and what it has meant for our Country. The word Imperialism comes from the word Empire and an empire is a system through which the evil interests of one group of very rich and powerful men, by means of well-equipped armies, dominate other weaker and smaller people which they convert into colonies, although they call them deceptively Free and Independent Republics. The imperialists invest their capital in these countries to control the communications, the railroads, the telephone system, the land, the mines, and all the national wealth. In this way they remove and put in "governments," as they did in Cuba until the triumph of the Rebel Army and the Cuban people, commanded by Fidel Castro, on January 1, 1959, the true date of liberation of the fatherland of Maceo and Martí.²⁰

¹⁸ *Cuadernos de Historia Habanera*, No. 72, pp. 37-42.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-47.

²⁰ Antonio Núñez Jiménez, *Así es mi país. Geografía de Cuba para los niños* (La Habana, Imprenta Nacional de Cuba, 1961), p. 8.

Downloaded from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1339577> by guest on 19 April 2024