

Old Guard Opposition

Revolt of Mendieta and Menocal

In August 1931, General Menocal and Colonel Mendieta¹ and thirty others left Havana on a yacht headed for the Cuban naval vessel "Blair." Upon boarding the Blair, they were to sail to Oriente, link up with disaffected members of the military and initiate an armed revolt against the government. Armed revolt was a traditional form of Cuban protest against incumbent administrations and their mimicked other rebellions or threats of rebellion in 1906, 1912, 1917, 1920 and 1924. Even if they failed to overturn the government, they could at least hope for US military intervention. The plot was discovered and authorities prevented the commander of the Blair from leaving port. Despite this setback, Menocal, Mendieta, and their forces headed for Oriente anyway. Upon landing, some of them were immediately captured by the Army and sent back to Havana. Those that escaped holed up in a swamp until they were discovered by some local residents who informed two local soldiers. The soldiers apparently had no trouble pinning them down and held them until a larger army unit arrived. This group was also shipped back to Havana. Meanwhile, co-conspirator and future president Colonel Aurelio Hevia was arrested in Colon where he sought refuge. Other leaders were also captured.

¹ Their military titles represented past service and did not represent current authority in the armed forces.

Additional rebel forces arrived from the United States and occupied the town of Gibara after killing a rural guard. Within hours a larger government force arrived and the town was retaken.

This forty day adventure ended with little consequence to the rebels. Machado ordered most of the rebels to be set free, with some of them encouraged to go into exile. The leaders were kept in jail while Machado requested that Congress pass a law granting the leaders amnesty. On January 9, 1932, Machado released Menocal and Mendieta from Cabanas Fortress where they had been in confinement from the previous August and soon after other enemies of Machado were soon released to their normal lives.² An American Army officer noted “the release of these two men virtually clears the prisons of all the real leaders of the Opposition.” He added that “there seems to be no real reason why the Opposition should not now enter into the spirit of cordiality which the Government, especially through the preachings of Ambassador [Orestes] Ferrarra, has been trying to spread . . .”³ In only one case, were rebel forces fired upon and killed, and that in a night raid where the rebels refused a chance at surrender by firing upon government forces.⁴

All political prisoners detained by Machado’s government received treatment more favorable than the general inmates: their stays were brief, they were served special food and allowed to use the sports facilities. They were also allowed to

² Machado Collection, Box 1, Folder 8, VI-42.

³ J.J. O’Hare, Major, General Staff Military Attaché, to Department of State, G-2 Report, January 20, 1932, 837.00/3226.

⁴ Machado MSS, Box 1, Folder 8, VI-41. The rebel force was lead by General Peraza, who had hoped to connect with a larger body of rebel forces.

receive visitors, and were not subjected to the usual prison conditions and rules.

Attempts of the Nationalist Union to rally the forces of the opposition included sending out their wives as demonstrators in front of the National Palace. Shouting, displaying placards they marched up to the gates and verbally abused the guards. Machado ordered that they be left to scream as loud as they pleased. They repeated this adventure the following evening, and while supporters of the Nationalist Union looked on, a group of working class women came out from the market and physically dispersed the “fine ladies.”⁵

Free Press

It is indicative of widespread support for Machado that very little editorial content opposed him up until 1930. Ironically, Machado’s most bitter opponent in the press was a member of his own party -- El Pais was owned by a Liberal Congressman. The press in Cuba was very active, open, competitive, and vocal during Machado’s administration and openly critical when they wanted to be. As press sensationalism and yellow journalism grew in a brutal quest to increase newspaper circulation while commercial advertising revenues kept declining in the general depression, a group of independent newspaper editors banded together to bring some self-regulation to their bids to outscandalize each other.⁶

⁵ Machado Collection, Box 1, Folder 8, VI-39.

⁶ Machado Collection, Box 1, Folder 8, VI-38.

Conclusion

Machado remained popular and widely supported at least until 1930, as the effects of the Great Depression began to settle in. His initial opponents were politicians so unpopular that they could not get nominated for the offices they desired or get elected in the general elections. Machado's treatment of them, despite their military insurrection, was relatively lax.