

Student Opposition

Introduction

Most university students, including University of Havana's student government, looked favorably upon Machado's administration and supported his second term in office. Contrary to common understandings of this period, it was only much later, well into Machado's second term, that significant student opposition to Machado emerged. Of course there is always an exception to the rule, and there was a very small group of motivated revolutionaries even before Machado organized a bid for a second term in office.

The earliest student opposition movements that sprang up in Cuba in the 1920s and 1930s were inspired by the Revolutions in Russia (1917), Mexico (1911-1920), and the Cordoba (Argentina) Reform Movement. The "Grupo Minorista" published a document in 1923 condemning corrupt government and calling for major social and political reforms. Luminaries such as Jorge Mañach, Ruben Martinez Villena and Juan Marinello established this group. In 1922, perhaps even before Machado contemplated his first term as president of Cuba, university students known as "The Group of 13" left a meeting because one of President Zayas' cabinet members was in attendance and they opposed his inclusion because he represented a corrupt government. Their "Protest of the Thirteen" condemned the "corrupted politicians." In 1923 Julio Antonio Mella led a student take over of the University of Havana demanding the dismissal of professors and the right to reconstruct the university government. President Zayas responded by granting government sanctioned legitimacy to the newly formed *Federacion Estudiantil Universitaria (FEU)* and at their October 1923 convention they adopted the name "National Revolutionary

Student Congress." ^{1,2} Student activism in Cuba was a function of events and trends far larger than events in Cuba. The general student body at the University of Havana in 1927 were benignly supportive of Machado's government.

Cuban Communist Party -- 1923-1924

Prominently featured in written accounts of Cuba's past as a prime example of students rebelling against Machado, Julio Antonio Mella began his rebellious career before Machado was first elected in 1924, and did not have the general backing of the student population. Youthful opposition was often led by "communists" such as Mella who became active long before 1928. Mella participated in demonstrations against President Zayas, formed the leftist Congress of Cuban Students in 1923, and continually called for "class struggle."³ In August 1925, Mella,⁴ a student at the University of Havana, co-founded the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) with a handful of other young Marxists. Mella and his compatriots organized opposition to Machado even before he was inaugurated calling him a "tropical Mussolini." More committed to violent revolution than to the peaceful construction of Cuban society, they would continue their violent activities under Grau's government in spite of widespread support for and participation in that regime.

¹Luis Aguilar, "Reform and Radical Impulses in the Generation of the 30's," Robert Freeman Smith, editor, Background to Revolution: The Development of Modern Cuba, Revised Edition, (Huntington, New York: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1979), 161-168.

²Jaime Suchlicki, University Students and Revolution in Cuba, (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1969), 22.

³As quoted in Jaime Suchlicki, Cuba: From Columbus to Castro, (Washington: Pergamon, 1986), 96-97.

⁴Mella was murdered in Mexico in 1929 shortly after being expelled from the Mexican Communist Party. Though some accuse Machado of assassinating him, others point to an intra-party rivalry -- he was accused of misappropriating funds, and it seems a lover's quarrel was also involved.

DEU - 1927

A fractious minority of students at the University of Havana chose to oppose Machado in 1927 when he was running for re-election. In 1927, the *Directorio Estudiantil Universitario* (DEU) was organized as a separate voice of students because the regular student body was favored by the Machado government.⁵ The leaders were expelled from the University by the University Council. Finally in 1930 they re-organized, and initiated the student demonstration which resulted in the death of one of their leaders, Raphael Trejo.

Ala Izquierda -- 1931

In 1931, *Ala Izquierda Estudiantil* split from the DEU because they felt they were not sufficiently revolutionary and wished to go beyond the DEU's aims of removing Machado from office. Among the founding members was Aureliano Sanchez Arango, whose memories have been enshrined and experiences used to construct the common story of Cuba.⁶ University of Miami Professor Jaime Suchlicki argues that *Ala Izquierda* was merely a tool for the Cuban Communist Party, along with the Anti-Imperialist League, in which case, their opposition to Machado was inevitable, regardless of his political or human rights record.

⁵Interview with Aureliano Sanchez Arango, Miami, Florida, April 15, 16, 1967, as told by Jaime Suchlicki, *Students*, 25.

⁶Justo Carrillo, *Cuba 1933: Students, Yankees, and Soldiers*, (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1994).

Eduardo Chibas and the ABC

Eduardo Chibas, later to represent the ideals of the Generation of 1933, was an early leader of the DEU and maintained close contact with the ABC. The ABC was organized and led by educated middle class residents of Havana (not university students) and used bombings and terrorism to undermine Machado's government. The ABC used young people, especially university students, to carry out the risky and adventurous bombings and acts of violence.

In late 1932, the ABC plotted the overthrow of the Cuban government by assassinating a majority of Machado's administration in one fell swoop. To accomplish this goal, they plotted to murder a prominent government official, hoping the majority of other government officials would attend his funeral. When the administration officials would gather in one spot to memorialize the dead, members of the ABC planned on blowing up and killing all the government officials with previously buried explosives. The ABC began to implement this plan by assassinating Clemente Vazquez Bello, President of the Cuban Senate, who was murdered in a hail of bullets on September 28, 1932. Appropriately, a funeral was planned and a burial prepared at a cemetery. The ABC knew ahead of time where Vazquez Bello would be buried probably because his tomb had been purchased in advance, next to other family members. This foreknowledge may have been a factor in choosing the target as well as Vazquez Bello's prominent position in the Cuban Senate. The plot collapsed when a cemetery gardener unexpectedly discovered the explosives hidden in the cemetery. Machado and the police reacted with a vengeance against these domestic terrorists and killed many without a trial or legal proceedings.

Machado's Tolerance for the University and Students

If Machado's longest lasting opponents were out of office politicians, it was students from the University of Havana that have attracted the most historical notice for their opposition to government policies. Machado had problems with university students in 1931, and closed the campus temporarily. Machado reopened the campus and allowed the students to meet freely. They seized the moment by attacking the administration building and then marched downtown to incite high school students against Machado. Along the way, armed students shot and killed a policeman. No student injuries were reported.⁷ Despite this violence, Machado went forward with his plans to grant autonomy to the University of Havana in order to meet the wishes of the students and faculty.⁸

Only when Machado's efforts to repress the ABC resulted in the murder of growing numbers of university students did Machado lose the public relations war with Havana's middle class and university students. The ABC was a cell based terrorist organization that recruited college students to carry out the the most risky forays into violence. The radical organizations of the 1920s and 1930s would oppose all political organizations based on liberal and constitutional capitalism such as that represented in Cuba from 1901 to 1959.

Conclusion

⁷ Guggenheim to Secretary of State, December 4, 1930, FRUS-1933, Vol. II, p. 667.

⁸ Guggenheim to Secretary of State, December 1, 1930, *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 666.

The student revolutionaries sought a social revolution and were fundamentally influenced by the revolutions in Argentina, Russia, and Mexico. This idealism was used by Mendieta and Menocal to undermine a president already weakened by the worldwide economic depression. It is apparent, especially in the government of Grau San Martin in 1933-34, that they were not able to implement a government stable enough to implement workable alternatives to any of Cuba's problems.

Machado's government and his second term were secondary issues at best when looking for the revolutionary impulse surrounding the students of 1933. Student leaders in the early 1920s were inspired by global revolutionary activity and events compounded by the effects of the Great Depression. Once Machado began to crack down on a small core of student and adult opposition groups (including the ABC, and a splinter faction of the DEU called "a la Izquierda"), sympathy for the rebels swelled. Machado was unable to simultaneously quell the violent rebels, sate the demands of his traditional political foes, and provide the middle class with a robust economy in the early 1930s, nor could any president have done all those things at once.

In the long run, perhaps, the failure to bomb Machado's administration at the cemetery actually worked to the benefit of the revolutionaries. Since no one died at the cemetery, they could not be considered mass murderers or assassins. Yet, they provoked an aggressive reaction from the police and Machado's government that would in the long run do more to turn the tide of Havana's opinion against Machado than the loss of all the cabinet officials.

