The Cuban War of Independence (1895–1898) was the last of three liberation wars that Cuba fought against Spain, the other two being the Ten Years' War (1868–1878) and the Little War (1879–1880). The final three months of the conflict escalated to become the Spanish–American War, with United States forces being deployed in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippine Islands against Spain. Historians disagree as to the extent that United States officials were motivated to intervene for humanitarian reasons but agree that yellow journalism exaggerated atrocities attributed to Spanish forces against Cuban civilians.

Background

During the years 1869-1888 of the so-called “Rewarding Truce”, lasting for 17 years from the end of the Ten Years' War in 1878, there were fundamental social changes in Cuban society. With the abolition of slavery in October 1886, freedmen joined the ranks of farmers and urban working class. Many wealthy Cubans lost their property, and joined the urban middle class. The number of sugar mills dropped and efficiency increased: only companies, and the most powerful plantation owners, remained in business. The number of campesinos and tenant farmers rose considerably. It was in this period that United States (US) financial capital began flowing into Cuba, mostly into the sugar and tobacco businesses and mining. By 1895, investments reached US$50 million. Although Cuba remained Spanish territory politically, it started to be more intertwined economically with the United States.[8]

At the same time there began the rise of labour movements. The first such organisation, created in 1878, was the Cigar Makers Guild, followed by the Central Board of Artisans in 1879, and many more across the island.[9] After his second deportation to Spain in 1878, José Martí moved to the United States in 1881. There he mobilized the support of the Cuban exile community, especially in Ybor City (Tampa area) and Key West, Florida. His goal was revolution in order to achieve independence from Spain. Martí lobbied against the U.S. annexation of Cuba, which was desired by some politicians in both the US and Cuba.

After deliberations with patriotic clubs across the United States, the Antilles and Latin America, “El Partido Revolucionario Cubano” (The Cuban Revolutionary Party) was officially proclaimed on April 10, 1892. Its purpose was to gain independence from Spain for both Cuba and Puerto Rico. Martí
was elected Delegate, the highest party position. By the end of 1894, the basic conditions for launching the revolution were set.[10]

“Martí’s impatience to start the revolution for independence was affected by his growing fear that the imperialist forces in the United States would succeed in annexing Cuba before the revolution could liberate the island from Spain”. [11] A new trend of aggressive US “influence” was expressed by Secretary of State James G. Blaine suggestion that all of Central and South America would some day fall to the U.S.:

“That rich island”, Blaine wrote on 1 December 1881, “the key to the Gulf of Mexico, is, though in the hands of Spain, a part of the American commercial system… If ever ceasing to be Spanish, Cuba must necessarily become American and not fall under any other European domination”. [12]

Blaine’s vision did not allow the existence of an independent Cuba. “Martí noticed with alarm the movement to annex Hawaii, viewing it as establishing a pattern for Cuba…” [11]

War

On December 25, 1894 three ships; the Lagonda, the Almadis and the Baracoa, set sail for Cuba from Fernandina Beach, Florida, loaded with soldiers and weapons. Two of the ships were seized by US authorities in early January, but the proceedings went ahead. Not to be dissuaded, on March 25, Martí presented the Manifesto of Montecristi, which outlined the policy for Cuba’s war of independence:

- The war was to be waged by blacks and whites alike;
- Participation of all blacks was crucial for victory;
- Spaniards who did not object to the war effort should be spared,
- Private rural properties should not be damaged; and
- The revolution should bring new economic life to Cuba.

The insurrection began on February 24, 1895, with uprisings all across the island. In Oriente, the most important ones took place in Santiago, Guantánamo, Jiguani, San Luis, El Cobre, El Caney, Alto Songo, Bayate, and Baire. The uprisings in the central part of the island, such as Ibarra, Jagüey Grande and Aguada, suffered from poor coordination and failed; the leaders were captured, some of them deported and some executed. In the province of Havana, the insurrection was discovered before it was underway, and authorities detained its leaders. The insurgents further west in Pinar del Río were ordered by rebel leaders to wait.

On April 1 and 11, 1895, the main Mambi leaders landed on two expeditions in Oriente: Major General Antonio Maceo along with 22 members near Baracoa, and José Martí, Máximo Gómez and 4 other members in Playitas. Around that time, Spanish forces in Cuba numbered about 80,000, of which 20,000 were regular troops and 60,000 were Spanish and Cuban volunteer militia. The latter were a locally enlisted force that took care of most of the “guard and police” duties on the island. Wealthy landowners would “volunteer” a number of their slaves to serve in this force, which was under local control as militia and not under official military command. By December, Spain had sent 98,412 regular troops had been sent to the island, and the colonial government increased the number in the Volunteer Corps to 63,000 men. By the end of 1897, there were 240,000 regulars and 60,000 irregulars on the island. The revolutionaries were far outnumbered.

The Mambises were named after the Negro Spanish officer, Juan Ethninius Mamby who joined the Dominican fight for independence in 1844. The Spanish soldiers referred to the insurgents in the Dominican Republic as “the men of Mamby” or “Mambies”. When Cuba’s first war of independence
broke out in 1868, some of those same soldiers were assigned to Cuba; they brought along what by then become a derogatory Spanish slur for insurgents. The Cubans adopted the name with pride.

After the Ten Years' War, the government had forbidden possession of weapons by private individuals. From the beginning of the uprising, the rebels were hampered by lack of suitable weapons. They compensated by using guerrilla-style fighting, based in quick raids and fades to the environment, the element of surprise, mounting their forces on fast horses, and using machetes against regular troops on the march. They acquired most of their weapons and ammunition in raids on the Spaniards. Between June 11, 1895, and November 30, 1897, out of sixty attempts to bring weapons and supplies to the rebels from outside the country, only one succeeded through the protection of the British. Twenty-eight ships were intercepted within U.S. territory; five were intercepted at sea by the U.S. Navy, and four by the Spanish Navy; two were wrecked; one was driven back to port by storm; the fate of another is unknown.

Martí was killed shortly after landing on May 19, 1895, at Dos Rios, but Máximo Gomez and Antonio Maceo fought on, taking the war to all parts of Oriente. By the end of June, all of Camagüey was at war. Based on new research in Cuban sources, historian John Lawrence Tone demonstrated that Gomez and Maceo were the first to force the civilian forces to choose sides. "Either they relocated to the east side of the islands, where the Cubans controlled the mountainous terrain, or they would be accused of supporting the Spanish and be subject to immediate trial and execution." Continuing west, they were joined by 1868 war veterans, such as Polish internationalist General Carlos Roloff and Serafín Sánchez in Las Villas, who brought weapons, men and experience to the revolutionaries' arsenal.

In mid-September, representatives of the five Liberation Army Corps assembled in Jimaguayú, Camagüey to approve the "Jimaguayú Constitution." They established a central government, which grouped the executive and legislative powers into one entity named “Government Council", headed by Salvador Cisneros and Bartolomé Masó. After some time of consolidation in the three eastern provinces, the liberation armies headed for Camagüey and then Matanzas, outmanoeuvring and deceiving the Spanish Army several times. They defeated Spanish Gen. Arsenio Martínez-Campos y Antón, who had gained victory in the Ten-Year War, and killed his most trusted general at Peralejo.

Campos tried the same strategy he had employed in the Ten Years' War, constructing a broad belt across the island, called the trocha, about 80 km long and 200 m wide. This defense line was to confine rebel activities to the eastern provinces. The belt was developed along a railroad from Jucaro in the south to Morón in the north. Campos built fortifications along this railroad at various points, and at intervals, 12 meters of posts and 400 meters of barbed wire. In addition, booby traps were placed at locations most likely to be attacked.

The rebels believed they had to take the war to the western provinces of Matanzas, Havana and Pinar del Río, where the island's government and wealth were located. The Ten-Year War had failed because it had not managed to proceed beyond the eastern provinces. In a successful cavalry campaign overcoming the trochas, the revolutionaries invaded every province. Surrounding all larger cities and well-fortified towns, they arrived at the westernmost tip of the island on January 22, 1896, exactly three months after the invasion near Baraguá.

Campos was replaced by Gen. Valeriano Weyler. He reacted to the rebels' successes by introducing terror methods: periodic executions, mass exile of residents and forced concentration of them in certain cities or areas, and destruction of farms and crops. Weyler's methods reached their height on October 21, 1896, when he ordered all countryside residents and their livestock to gather within eight days in various fortified areas and towns occupied by his troops.
Hundreds of thousands of people had to leave their homes, and were subjected to appalling and inhumane conditions in the crowded towns and cities. Together with the forced reconcentrations done by the rebels in the eastern provinces, it is estimated that 25 to 30 percent of the civilian population subjected to it died during the three years of warfare. Using a variety of sources, Tone estimates that civilian losses totaled 155,000 to 170,000 deaths, representing nearly 10 percent of the total population.[13]

Starting in the early 1880s, Spain had also suppressed an independence movement in the Philippines, which was intensifying. In effect, Spain was now fighting two wars, a heavy burden on its economy. In 1896 it turned down offers in secret negotiations by the United States to buy Cuba from Spain.

Maceo was killed December 7, 1896, in Havana province while returning from the west. As the war went on, the major obstacle to Cuban success was weapons supply. Although weapons and funding came from within the Cuban exile community and supporters in the United States, the supply operation violated American laws. These were enforced by the U.S. Coast Guard: of 71 attempted re-supply missions, only 27 got through; 5 were stopped by the Spanish, but 33 were stopped by the U.S. Coast Guard.

In 1897, the liberation army maintained a privileged position in Camagüey and Oriente, where the Spanish controlled only a few cities. Spanish Liberal leader Práxedes Mateo Sagasta admitted in May 1897: “After having sent 200,000 men and shed so much blood, we don’t own more land on the island than what our soldiers are stepping on”. The rebel force of 3,000 defeated the Spanish in various encounters, such as the Battle of La Reforma, and forcing the surrender of Las Tunas on August 30. The Spaniards were kept on the defensive. Las Tunas had been guarded by over 1,000 well-armed and well-supplied men.

As stipulated at the Jimaguayü Assembly two years earlier, a second Constituent Assembly met in La Yaya, Camagüey, on October 10, 1897. The newly adopted constitution provided that military command was to be subordinated to civilian rule. The government was confirmed, naming Bartolomé Masó President and Domingo Méndez Capote Vice President.

Madrid decided to change its policy towards Cuba, and replaced Weyler. It also drew up a colonial constitution for Cuba and Puerto Rico, and installed a new government in Havana. But with half the country out of its control and the other half in arms, the colonial government was powerless and these changes were rejected by the rebels.

The Maine Incident

The Cuban struggle for independence had captured the American imagination for years. Some newspapers had agitated for US intervention, especially because of its large financial investment, and featured sensational stories of Spanish atrocities against the native Cuban population, which were exaggerated for propaganda.

Such coverage continued after Spain had replaced Weyler and changed its policies. American public opinion was very much in favor of intervening on behalf of the Cubans.[15]

In January 1898, a riot by Cuban Spanish loyalists against the new autonomous government broke out in Havana. They destroyed the printing presses of four local newspapers that had published articles critical of Spanish Army atrocities. The U.S. Consul-General cabled Washington with fears for the lives of Americans living in Havana. In response, the battleship USS Maine was sent to Havana in the last week of January. On February 15, 1898, the Maine was rocked by an explosion, killing 258 of the crew and sinking the ship in the harbor. At the time, a military Board of
Investigations decided that the Maine had exploded due to the detonation of a mine underneath the hull. However, later investigations decided that it was likely something inside the ship, though the cause of the explosion has not been clearly established to this day.[16]

In an attempt to appease the United States, the colonial government took two steps that had been demanded by President William McKinley: it ended forced relocation of residents from their homes and offered negotiations with the independence fighters. But the truce was rejected by the rebels.

**The Spanish–American War**

The sinking of the *Maine* sparked a wave of public indignation in the United States. Newspaper owners such as William R. Hearst leaped to the conclusion that Spanish officials in Cuba were to blame, and they widely publicized the conspiracy. Realistically, Spain could have had no interest in drawing the United States into the conflict.[17] Yellow journalism fueled American anger by publishing “atrocities” committed by Spain in Cuba. Hearst, when informed by Frederic Remington, whom he had hired to furnish illustrations for his newspaper, that conditions in Cuba were not bad enough to warrant hostilities, allegedly replied, “You furnish the pictures and I'll furnish the war.”[18] President McKinley, Speaker of the House Thomas Brackett Reed, and the business community opposed the growing public demand for war, which was lashed to fury by the yellow journalism. The American cry of the hour became, *Remember the Maine, To Hell with Spain!*

The decisive event was probably the speech of Senator Redfield Proctor, delivered on March 17, 1898, analyzing the situation and concluding that war was the only answer. The business and religious communities switched sides, leaving McKinley and Reed almost alone in their opposition to the war.[19][20] “Faced with a revved up, war-ready population, and all the editorial encouragement the two competitors could muster, the United States jumped at the opportunity to get involved and showcase its new steam-powered Navy”.[21]

On April 11, McKinley asked Congress for authority to send American troops to Cuba for the purpose of ending the civil war there. On April 19, Congress passed joint resolutions (by a vote of 311 to 6 in the House and 42 to 35 in the Senate) supporting Cuban independence and disclaiming any intention to annex Cuba, demanding Spanish withdrawal, and authorizing the president to use as much military force as he thought necessary to help Cuban patriots gain independence from Spain. This was adopted by resolution of Congress and included the Teller Amendment, named after Colorado Senator Henry Moore Teller, which passed unanimously, stipulating that “the island of Cuba is, and by right should be, free and independent”. The amendment disclaimed any intention on the part of the United States to exercise jurisdiction or control over Cuba for other than pacification reasons, and confirmed that the armed forces would be removed once the war is over. The amendment, pushed through at the last minute by anti-imperialists in the Senate, made no mention of the Philippines, Guam, or Puerto Rico. Congress formally declared war on April 25. The Senate and House passed the amendment April 19, McKinley signed the joint resolution on April 20, and the ultimatum was forwarded to Spain. War was declared on April 20/21, 1898.

“It's been suggested that a major reason for the U.S. war against Spain was the fierce competition emerging between Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*”. Joseph E. Wisan wrote in an essay titled “The Cuban Crisis As Reflected In The New York Press”, published in “American Imperialism” in 1898: “In the opinion of the writer, the Spanish–American War would not have occurred had not the appearance of Hearst in New York journalism precipitated a bitter battle for newspaper circulation.” It has also been argued that the main reason the United States entered the war was its failed attempt to purchase Cuba from Spain.[22]
Hostilities started hours after the declaration of war when a contingent of US Navy ships under Admiral William T. Sampson blockaded several Cuban ports. The Americans decided to invade Cuba and to start in Oriente, where the Cubans had almost absolute control. They cooperated by establishing a beachhead and protecting the U.S. landing in Daiquiri. The first U.S. objective was to capture the city of Santiago de Cuba in order to destroy Linares' army and Cervera's fleet. To reach Santiago, the Americans had to pass through concentrated Spanish defences in the San Juan Hills and a small town in El Caney. Between June 22 and 24, 1898, the Americans landed under General William R. Shafter at Daiquiri and Siboney, east of Santiago, and established a base.

The port of Santiago became the main target of naval operations. The U.S. fleet attacking Santiago needed shelter from the summer hurricane season, thus nearby Guantánamo Bay, with its excellent harbor, was chosen for this purpose and attacked on June 6 (1898 invasion of Guantánamo Bay). The Battle of Santiago de Cuba on July 3, 1898 was the largest naval engagement during the Spanish–American War, resulting in the destruction of the Spanish Caribbean Squadron (Flota de Ultramar).

Resistance in Santiago consolidated around Fort Canosa. All the while, major battles between Spaniards and Americans took place at Las Guasimas on June 24, El Caney and San Juan Hill on July 1, 1898, outside of Santiago, after which the American advance ground to a halt. Spanish troops successfully defended Fort Canosa, allowing them to stabilize their line and bar the entry to Santiago. The Americans and Cubans forcibly began a bloody, strangling siege of the city, which eventually surrendered on July 16, after the defeat of the Spanish Caribbean Squadron. Thus, Oriente was under control of Americans, but U.S. General Nelson A. Miles would not allow Cuban troops to enter Santiago, claiming that he wanted to prevent clashes between Cubans and Spaniards. Thus, Cuban General Calixto García, head of the Mambi forces in the Eastern department, ordered his troops to hold their respective areas. He resigned over being excluded from entering Santiago, writing a letter of protest to General Shafter.

Peace

After losing the Philippines and Puerto Rico, which had also been invaded by the United States, and with no hope of holding on to Cuba, Spain sued for peace on July 17, 1898. On August 12, the United States and Spain signed a protocol of Peace, in which Spain agreed to relinquish all claim of sovereignty and title over Cuba. On December 10, 1898, the United States and Spain signed the Treaty of Paris, which recognized Cuban independence.

Although the Cubans had participated in the liberation efforts, the United States prevented Cuba from participating in the Paris peace talks and signing the treaty. The treaty set no time limit for U.S. occupation and the Isle of Pines was excluded from Cuba. The treaty officially granted Cuba's independence, but U.S. General William R. Shafter refused to allow Cuban General Calixto García and his rebel forces to participate in the surrender ceremonies in Santiago de Cuba.

Analysis

Most Spanish historians argue that the insurgency could not have succeeded on its own. Cuban historians argue the Cubans were on the verge of winning in 1898 and needed no outside help.

References