

The Spanish-American War and Philippine Insurrection

1898–1902



Alejandro de Quesada • Illustrated by Stephen Walsh

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Men-at-Arms • 437

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THE “SPLENDID LITTLE WAR”

The road to war

ON OCTOBER 10, 1868, a former slave-owner “raised the two-barred and single-starred flag of Cuba at Yara in the District of Bayamo and, with his associates, made public a declaration of independence” (Beck, 117). His name was Carlos Manuel de Céspedes y Castillo, and he was soon to be the first president of the Cuban Republic in Arms, and the commander-in-chief of the armed forces during the Ten Years’ War (1868–78) against the Spanish colonial government. Plans for a revolutionary army were implemented, and Gen Manuel de Quesada y Loinaz was appointed General-in-Chief of the Cuban Army of Liberation by the provisional government.

General de Quesada and many other officers who joined the ranks of the newly formed Army of Liberation had gained most of their military experience in foreign armies. General de Quesada had served in the Mexican army of Benito Juárez during the Mexican patriots’ bloody struggle against the Emperor Maximilian’s French occupying army in 1861–67. Many other Cubans had gained valuable military experience while serving in the Confederate forces during the American Civil War (far fewer had served in the Union armies, due to the fact that larger concentrations of Hispanics were located in the Gulf regions of the Southern states). Foreigners with military education and/or practical experience also joined the new insurgent force, such as the Dominican Máximo Gómez and the American Thomas Jordan. Others, without useful experience, joined up simply out of a sense of adventure.

The original Spanish garrison units at the outbreak of the rebellion were the Antillas Infantry Regiment (No.44) and the Cuba and Havana Rifle Battalions (Nos.17 & 18), whose strength would be multiplied many times over by reinforcements recruited in Spain and in Cuba. “The size of the Cuban Revolutionary Army in the period from 1868 to 1878 never passed more than 15,000 regular well-armed troops, although many more fought in irregular units. Spanish troops reached 55,000 by 1871... with an additional 30,000 Spanish-born militia members, and another 30,000 Cuban-born militia forces called *guerrilleros*” (Fermoselle, 61–62).

Although their forces were generally outnumbered by the Spanish, the Cuban insurgents made up for this disparity by their choice of tactics. Apart from ambushing the Spanish on tracks through thick forest and cane fields, and creeping close to small, isolated outposts to take them in sudden rushes, they also favored mounting cavalry charges when possible. Their armament was patchy, but even those who lacked





A field headquarters of the Cuban Army of Liberation taken during their third war, that which began in 1895. The range of ethnicity is wide, from apparently Caucasian (far left background) to very dark African Cuban soldiers; the latter would make a contribution to the war out of all proportion with their numbers. (For the flag, see Plate A.)

of preying on the morale of Spanish troops both during and after the battle certainly worked; however, the principal advantage enjoyed by the insurgents was their knowledge of the terrain, which was used effectively by their military leaders. “They often forced the Spanish to fight at the site of their choosing, where Cuban troops had already taken the most advantageous field positions” (Fermoselle, 62).

Both sides won some significant victories during the decade of hostilities, but by the end of this period both sides had been drained of most of their men, materials and morale. The revolutionary army began to fight amongst themselves, splitting over regional, racial and political issues. The civilian sector of the Revolutionary Government had supervision over the military, and the right to secure funds and supplies for the war effort; the major cause of the internecine squabbling was disagreement between civilian and military leaders over the management of the war. The Spanish, too, had grown tired; back in Spain there was a public outcry for concessions to be made to the Cubans, and the ten-year conflict had greatly reduced the royal treasury of a nation already impoverished. The Treaty of Zanjón, in February 1878, called for total capitulation of the Cuban insurgent forces, but offered in return autonomous rule, and promised that there would be no retribution by the Spanish authorities against those who had taken up arms against the Crown.

The combat experience accumulated by the Cuban insurgents in 1868–78 was to be valuable in their future clashes with the Spanish authorities. In 1880 there was a small uprising by some of these veterans; however, it was put down within a few weeks, and was fondly known thereafter as the “Little War”. In the same year slavery in Cuba was abolished, and in 1886 total freedom was granted to the former slaves. However, Spain’s relative failure to follow through with the concessions won under the terms of the Treaty of Zanjón caused continuing discontent. This reached a climax when, on February 23, 1895, the authorities suspended constitutional guarantees, provoking the Cubans into reviving their Army of Liberation. Its re-born organization was along the same lines that had been followed during

modern firearms wielded a fearsome weapon – the machete, a common tool available to anyone, particularly the free blacks and the slaves who worked in the cane fields. Spanish infantrymen soon came to fear the shout of “¡al machete!” from an insurgent officer; the slung machete became a formal feature of the rebels’ uniform, and officers and NCOs displayed their rank insignia on the slings (see below, “Cuban Army of Liberation”). The policy

the Ten Years' War, but there were two distinct changes. Firstly, "the Revolutionary Government was designed in such a way as to facilitate military operations and avoid previous conflicts between the military and civilian leadership. The military was given more authority to carry out the war without civilian interference and second guessing, particularly in disciplinary matters in the military." Secondly, the abolition of slavery now provided a greater number of able-bodied potential soldiers for the cause. "The backbone of the Cuban Army of Independence was the black soldier, who made up to seventy percent of the army, while only thirty-two percent of the entire population" (Fermoselle, 77–78).

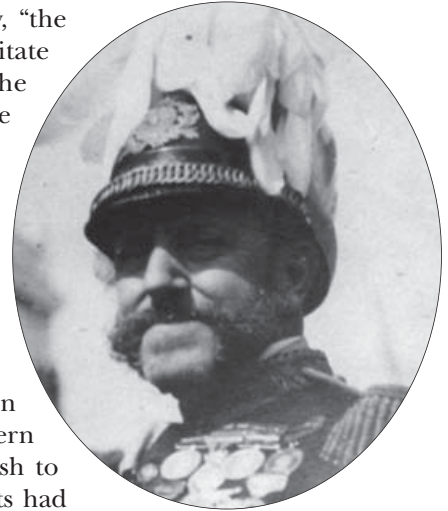
The insurgents' simple objective was to destroy Spain's grip on Cuba. To do this, their forces had to rise in both western and eastern ends of the elongated island simultaneously, obliging the Spanish to disperse their strength; during the Ten Years' War the insurgents had attempted this strategy, but had failed, the rest of the war being fought in the mountainous eastern region. For his part, the Spanish Captain-General Valeriano Weyler attempted to isolate the different groups of insurgents by constructing many defensive lines – *trochas*; the main line virtually cut the island in half from Morón in the north to Jucaro in the south, and a second system west of Havana isolated Pinar del Rio province at the western tip of Cuba.

The Spanish Crown forces now totaled something between 130,000 and 160,000 men, but of very variable quality and morale. Only a minority were mainland Spanish regular troops of "Peninsular" units; about half were locally recruited, into "Provincial" maneuver units, smaller "Volunteer" local garrison units, or even smaller auxiliary "Guerrilla" companies. Small garrisons – typically of one infantry and one cavalry company, with a couple of artillery pieces – were widely scattered in blockhouses protected by trenches, rifle pits and barbed wire. Larger forces would sally out in fast-moving columns to strike at reported insurgent concentrations, or to carry out regional sweeps among the rural population.

During 1895 and 1896 the insurgents' two-front operations had some success under the command of Gens Maximo Gómez, Antonio Maceo and Calixto Garcia. By 1897, however, the deaths of experienced insurgent commanders – especially the loss of Antonio Maceo and his brother José – forced a reorganization on the Army of Liberation due to the shortage of competent senior officers. The army corps were located in districts, within which the various corps commanders would report to the district commander. The army's general headquarters also had to be expanded to handle its growing responsibilities.

United States intervention in Cuba, 1898

By 1898 the Cuban insurgent army held most of the rural areas of the island, while Spain held most of the cities and strategic towns. The colonial authorities had attempted to separate the rebels from their base of support by forced evacuations of non-combatants to defensible concentration areas, where many died of starvation and disease. In the United States an anti-Spanish press had been feeding the pro-insurgent fervor of the American public since the Ten Years' War. Now horror



Valeriano Weyler y Nicolau, Captain-General of Cuba, in Spanish general officer's full dress uniform. Weyler was nicknamed "Butcher" by the Cubans, for his *reconcentrado* policy of forced removal of rural populations into the concentration areas where many died.