

# From the Commotion to the Crime

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The massacre perpetrated in Spring 1912 by General José Miguel Gómez's liberal government against members of the Independent Party of Color (1908-1912) sowed terror and panic amongst the population in a number of the country's regions for many decades. With its intention to eradicate the Independents of Color, who were responsible for a symbolic uprising with which they hoped to pressure the authorities to protect their ability to politically participate after having been declared illegal, the government mobilized more than 3,000 regular soldiers in just four days. Liberals used this convulsive event in Oriente province, or black war, as justification for unleashing all the pent up race hatred against people who only wanted to have Apostle José Martí's promises of racial equality come to fruition.

The "Western Volunteers," one of the military forces campaigning in Oriente, committed a horrendous and abominable race crime within their own ranks. The victims, a lieutenant and three soldiers—all black—had no other option but to die unjustly at the hands of inveterate criminals.

At Cayo Piedra (near Boquerón, in the current province of Guantánamo), Captain

Enrique de Reguiera and other participating officers butchered Lieutenant Santiago García and soldiers Prudencio Céspedes, Domingo Tamayo and Julián Hernández with machetes because they refused to continue in slave-like conditions.

At the campaign's end and arrival of the "Western Volunteers" in Havana on July 2, 1912, the real truth of the crime was revealed. All the soldiers in Havana's Fourth Company's, the unit to which the victims belonged, wore black armbands in mourning for their assassinated brethren. They accused Captain Regueira and other officers before General Manuel Piedra, who according to *El Cubano Libre*, was not present at the time of the massacre.

The newspaper's correspondent in Guantánamo who went to meet and interview them decided it more prudent not to publish coverage of the item. He did not want to alarm the public or provoke rancor against the operating military unit. After a telegram from Havana arrived requesting clarification, witnesses of the event gave their own version to the press for publication.

Soldier Novo declared to *El Cubano Libre* that on the night of June 12<sup>th</sup> he was

on watch and Captain Regueira went to the cell where the *mestizo* Céspedes and blacks Hernández, Tamayo and García were being held under charges of conspiracy and insubordination. Upon arriving, the Captain said to the prisoners: "Let's go, boys, stand up and exit the cell one by one." As they exited, Lieutenant Rafael Ponce de León forcefully tied them up with a new rope purchased expressly for that purpose. Shortly after, Novo heard horrendous screams from the place where they were taken to supposedly transport them elsewhere by boat.

Later on, Novo discovered that the jailers, who said they had transferred them to Guantánamo, had assassinated the four of the detainees with machetes. In addition to Captain Regueira and Lieutenant Ponce de León, Lieutenant Alejo Arriot, Sergeants Julián Izquierdo and Rafael Duarte and soldier Federico Gisbert also participated.

After a detailed investigation, the War Council tried the Boquerón crime's perpetrators and sentenced them to death. However, President Gómez commuted sentence and imposed no other, subsequent one.

Regueira's defense by Captain González del Real revealed the prevailing racism, hatred cruelty and disdain for life suffered by Cuba's

Afro-descendants. González del Real established differences between the regular and irregular forces in the campaign, and justified the crime by saying that there was a kind of discipline that was meted out with machetes, and that the victims had been accused of treason, which is punishable by death. Thus, the actions that were being judged were already foreseen in Article 178 of Military Code, which exempts anyone who committed a violent act if it served to prevent rebellion, insubordination and treason, regardless the results. It became clear that blacks had no right to protest or demand certain conditions, only to obey for "the good of the Republic."

Injustice and racial discrimination explain the decision of the Independents of Color. Black Cubans, who actively participated in all of Cuba's national, independence struggles, and indisputably contributed to ending slavery and emancipating themselves as social beings, saw in the new, republican context how their aspirations were at the margins of any concept of the citizenry's wellbeing.

This horrific crime is a blemish on our nation's history; its victims should be added to the long list of innocent, assassinated victims; military campaign horrors; and racial hatred of extremist liberals.