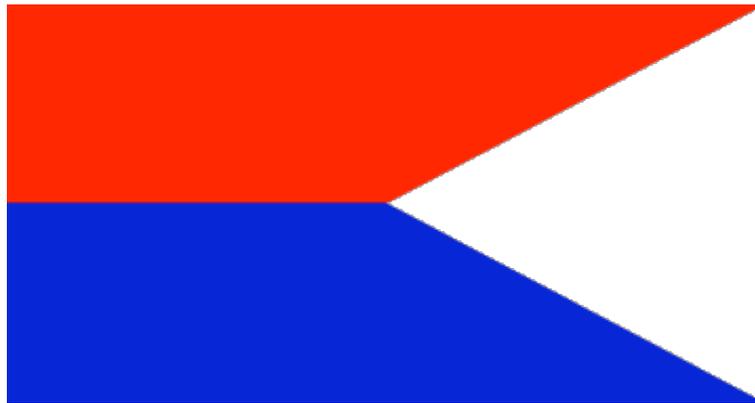


SPAIN IN THE AMERICAS

***"Human Rights" and Guerrilla War:
The Impact of Santo Domingo
Lingers Still Today***



By Jaime GARCIA-RODRIGUEZ



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Just what was going on in Cuba in the 1890's when James Creelman and other American "yellow journalists" filed sometimes sensational reports on Spanish atrocities against Cubans during a rebellion for independence from Spain?

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There is no doubt of Spanish Army atrocities during the Cuban insurrections. The same can be said of Cuban rebels. But, on the whole, those wars somehow obeyed military/honor codes dear to the nineteenth century.

You might call it a Geneva agreement "avant la lettre."

Still the Spanish army considered it no cruelty to summarily execute those caught taking up arms against Spain.

During Spain's rule in the Americas, it was permissible to publicize independence and campaign for it. It was banned to take up arms and join the rebellion. Certain execution was the price, under military rules, within 24 hours.

Spanish officers inflicted death with the same lightheartedness as they accepted it themselves.

Under the Spanish code of honor an officer (in Asia or America), was expected to die in front of the enemy if ever fellow officers' gossip should paint him as a coward.

For their part, Cuban rebels decided to strike deep into the heart of the Cuban-Spanish bourgeoisie by practicing a "scorched earth" policy that, eventually, included hanging of pro-Spanish land owners.

This is reminiscent of communist tactics in Malaysia or Vietnam. It was the reason behind [General Valeriano Weyler y Nicolau's](#) tough anti-terrorist tactics against Cuban rebels.

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The Spanish used counter-guerrilla units ("guerrillas") composed of blacks under a European officer that would live off the earth and hunt the rebels in a manner that also reminds of American led operations against Vietnamese communists. As the Bible's book of Ecclesiastes points out, "There is little new under the sun."

The much criticized "reconcentrados" strategy of isolating

rebels from their country supplies and farmer sympathizers by moving civilians into what might today be called "concentration camps" is also what the British did during the Boer War -- or what the Americans did in Vietnam with the protected "strategic hamlet" villages.

(Americans had used a [similar tactic](#) to suppress the [Philippines insurrection](#) following the Spanish American War.)

There are Lieutenant Calleys in all wars, war being immoral in itself.

It was the Cuban rebels who first are reported to have used explosive ammunition (dumdum bullets), American-supplied dynamite guns and machete maiming techniques.

The main problem for the Cuban independence fighters in all their wars was what to do with the large numbers of Spanish prisoners. Unfortunately, they had not the same means as the Spaniards to keep large numbers of men in prison, feeding them for long periods of time (Spain deported blacks in relatively large numbers to Spanish Guinea and whites to the Chafarina islands or the Ceuta and Melilla Presidios in North Africa). The rebels therefore regularly executed their prisoners.

Of course, a choice was given for them to join the numbers of the revolution, death being reserved for those who refused the offer. It was not infrequent to have Spanish prisoners butchered with machetes simply because ammunition was very scarce and has to be saved to confront the Spanish Army.

Chances to escape Cuban ranks were not very many because of Spanish military rules which did not contemplate obliging to the enemy, not even to save one's life. Again, nineteenth century military codes were stern, and somewhat affected by the Spanish fascination with death.

SPANISH "HUMAN RIGHTS JOURNALISTS"

There were Spanish counterparts to the American journalists. They carried on their war for human rights in Spain.

For instance L. Morote, from "El Liberal", avoided military censorship in Cuba by reporting to his newspaper via London through the Western Union. Morote, who defended Cuban freedoms, crossed the lines and found the hideaway of much feared, general Maximo Gomez in 1897.

During the 1878 war Maximo Gomez hanged two Spanish emissaries. This had caused horror among Spanish public

opinion. Morote carried a white flag and wanted to parley with him.

Morote penetrated the camp undetected and entered the tent where the general was writing. General Gomez was a man with a temper. When he found out that a Spaniard had entered his own tent unnoticed, Morote was almost executed on the spot. He underwent military trial and was acquitted.

Cuban officers gave him a great welcome. Morote then published the best Spanish scoop of all the Cuban wars. He also resisted pressures to reveal the location of Gomez's headquarters.

SPAIN IN CUBA: SOME COMPARISONS

Comparisons of the Cuban insurrection with Asian campaigns waged by the British, French or American are not strictly new. Fidel Castro has always insisted on his vision of the 1895 war of independence as a predecessor for the war in Viet Nam.

When viewed in historic perspective, the tactics used by Spain's General Valeriano Weyler at the time of his mandate in Cuba (1896-97) had results no more controversial than those later achieved by the British Army during the Boer War (1899-1902) or by the French Army during the Algerian war (1954-61).

The 1945 French, freshly out of yet another "traditional" conflict with Germany, found themselves trying to regain a politically subverted empire in Asia having long forgotten the lessons of the blood soaked revolution they faced in Haiti a century earlier.

Both Spanish and French military schools had continued to teach conventional warfare, which included historic emphasis on the "noble" Napoleonic campaigns. Confronted by non-academic revolutionary warfare, the Spanish and the French commands reached similar conclusions as they faced possible defeat: that irregular wars can only be won by "irregular means."

The Algerian war was fought by some Èlite French units more "irregularly" than the Arab fellaghas themselves. French military victory resulted in a political defeat which tarnished the image of many personalities and political parties. Army groups which did not share in such traumatic fighting experiences were more reluctant to the adoption of "irregular war-procedures," for which they saw no justification.

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BOER WAR

(This section by [Frederic A. Moritz](#). For the impact of the Boer War on the failure of Western journalists to report the early signs of Hitler's Holocaust, see Moritz, [Is This Another Nazi Kind of Thing?](#))

British opponents of the the [Boer War](#) charged their country had copied Spanish tactics in Cuba when it herded Boer civilian populations into concentration camps to isolate Boer guerrillas.

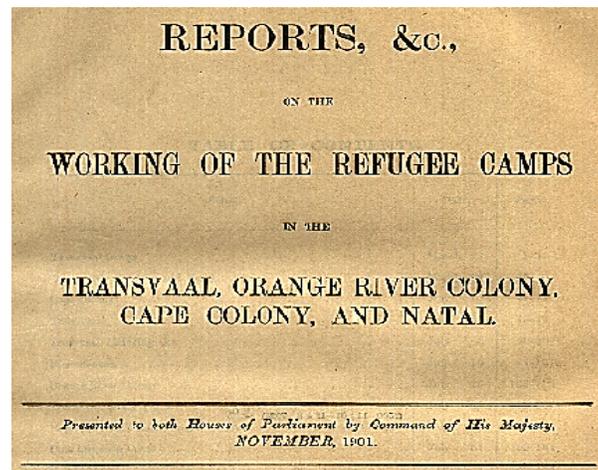
British armies first defeated Boer armies in conventional warfare. Then they faced the difficult challenge of mopping up guerrilla resistance.

Thomas Pakenham highlighted the general brutality of the period in [The Boer War](#), Random House, N.Y., 1979. It took over eight years of research, several months of traveling in South Africa and a frantic quest to find interviewable survivors of this tragic time.

In his introduction Pakenham wrote:

"To deny the guerrillas food and intelligence, Lord Kitchener ordered the British army to sweep the veld clean. The farms were burnt, the stock looted, the women and children concentrated in camps along the railroad lines. Between twenty thousand and twenty-eight thousand Boer civilians died of epidemics in these 'concentration camps' ...The conscience of Britain was stirred by the 'holocaust' in the camps, just as the conscience of America was stirred by the 'holocaust' of Vietnam."

(Check [British documents](#) at Stanford University libraries as well as [photos](#) of concentration camps at the Anglo Boer War Museum.)



On the brutalization of this war see also Pakenham, page 571 in Chapter 41, "Blockhouse or Blockhead?: The New Colonies, November 1901-March 1902.":

"The guerrilla war was fast brutalizing both adversaries. The worst scandals on the British side concerned colonial irregulars --Australians, Canadians and South Africans -- whose official contingents, ironically had won a reputation for gallantry in so many set-piece battles.

"The most notorious case involved a special anti-commando unit, raised by Australians to fight in the wild northern Transvaal, and called the Bush Veldt Carabineers. Six of its officers (five Australians, one Englishman) were court martialled for multiple murder.

"The facts were admitted: in August 1901, twelve Boers, earlier taken prisoner, had been shot by the Carbineers on the orders of their officers. The Australian's defense: as a reprisal, shooting prisoners was now accepted practice. Two of the Australian... Lieutenants "Breaker" Morant and Handcock, were executed in February 1902 on the orders of Kitchener [British high commander}.

"The affair caused an outcry in Australia. There arose a misconception (still current) that foreign political pressures had induced Kitchener to make scapegoats of Morant and Handcock. In fact Kitchener's motives were cruder: evidence of his own army's indiscipline drove him wild with frustration."

(See the [Bushveldt Carbineers](#), on Morant's commando unit, specially formed to travel light and strike hard against the guerrilla tactics of the Boers.

Morant's execution raised indignation from Australians who felt the British army had made a scapegoat of an Australian soldier on charges which would not have brought the death penalty for an Englishman. See a [biography](#) of Morant. Also [The Poetry of Breaker Morant.](#))



*In prison cell I sadly sit,
A d---d crestfallen chappy,
And own to you I feel a bit--
A little bit -- unhappy.*

*It really ain't the place nor time
To reel off rhyming diction;
But yet we'll write a final rhyme
While waiting crucifixion.*

*No matter what "end" they decide --
Quick-lime? or "b'iling ile?" sir--
We'll do our best when crucified
To finish off in style, sir?*

*But we bequeath a parting tip
For sound advice of such men*

*Who come across in transport ship
To polish off the Dutchmen.*

*If you encounter any Boers
You really must not loot 'em,
And, if you wish to leave these shores,
For pity's sake, don't shoot 'em.*

*And if you'd earn a D.S.O.,
Why every British sinner
Should know the proper way to go
Is: Ask the Boer to dinner.*

*Let's toss a bumper down our throat
Before we pass to heaven,
And toast: "The trim-set petticoat
We leave behind in Devon."*

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LEARNING FROM SHERMAN'S "SCORCHED EARTH"

Even the Union Army, led by President Lincoln, now often seen as a champion of human rights, could not come out with a spotless record in subduing the Confederate States during the American Civil War of 1861 to 1865.

General [Valeriano Weyler y Nicolau](#) most certainly had some direct knowledge of the U.S. and the military campaigns of the Civil War. Unlike less professionally minded Spanish officers, General Weyler decided to be one of the European observers in the American Civil War. He even met the Union General Sherman, famous for his "scorched earth" policy on his conquering [march through Georgia](#).

In 1969 one could still see the desolation brought about by generals Sheridan and Hunter in their campaigns to subdue Confederates in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. During that trip (on the occasion of a geology field trip associated with Princeton University) we faced the ruins of what once was a large river mill house where wild vegetation had replaced former plantations. The Chairman of the Geology Dept., Dr. H.C. Maxwell, explained to his students how the rural Shenandoah never quite recovered from Civil War devastation.

BRUTALITY IN SANTO DOMINGO: COMPARISON WITH VIETNAM

After consolidating his military career in Spain, young Weyler volunteered for a colonial outpost in Havana, where he landed in May 1862. He found Cuba too peaceful for his ambitions, and so he quickly volunteered for duty in the Spanish part of the island of Santo Domingo -- the present day Dominican Republic, where a war for independence had started. Weyler arrived there in September. He fought in Santo Domingo throughout the 1862-65 period.

For the overseas Spanish officers Santo Domingo constituted a special campaign, something like Indochina for the French colonial Army. In both cases, traditionally organized military forces faced what Spaniards called "irregular wars," nowadays known as "guerrilla warfare."

Guerrilla warfare, revolutionary by nature, is characterized by hit-and-run operations meant to slowly demoralize the opponent while gathering momentum for a decisive terminating strike.

It relies heavily on peasant support for supplies and information; it needs strong ideological support and indoctrination; everything is subordinated to a cause and the attainment of its final objective; propaganda action is important and inflicting cruelty upon the enemy is but an element of that propaganda.

Both nineteenth century Spanish and twentieth century French armies saw the emergence of groups of officers who, having been in close touch with a "different" enemy, came to the conclusion that that it could only be defeated by using the very same tactics

The Santo Domingo and the Indochina experience may look removed in time. But, in fact, an army loses its experience when veterans disappear from its ranks and a new, forgetful, generation joins the ranks. This is when the danger of repeating past errors begins. Nothing can replace specific combat experience. The Spanish Army in Santo Domingo had already forgotten the cruel fighting that took place in the Spanish-American continental territories.

IMPORTING DOMINICAN TACTICS TO CUBA

Cuban-born General Martinez Campos, architect of the treaty that put an end to the 1868-78 Cuban war of insurrection (ZanjÚn Peace) and Weyler's predecessor as Captain-General of the island, always preferred ruse, bribe and knowledge of local manners rather than sheer ruthlessness throughout his operations.

When Campos concluded that his "suave" approach had reached a limit and could no longer be of use, he proposed

Weyler, whom he disliked but knew well, to replace him and take command of Cuba. Campos apparently concluded the time had come for an iron-fisted approach, of which Weyler was the epitome. Weyler brought to Cuba the brutal violent experience of prolonged war in Santo Domingo.

The modern history of the island of Hispaniola (a.k.a. Santo Domingo or Saint-Domingue) is offensively violent. The island was shared between French Haiti to the West and larger Spanish Santo Domingo to the East. Until the rise of generals Toussaint L. Ouverture, Henri Cristophe and Jean Jacques Dessalines, who slashed the last white settlers and proclaimed a black republic on the 1st of January 1804, Haiti had seen grisly racial-political-social conflicts between slaves and plantation owners; Ancien RÈgime and 1789 RÈvolution; Spanish conservatives reinforced by French royalists and French-Haitian rÈvolutionaries; whites, metissÈs and blacks.

During the 1809-22 period the Spanish part of the island (ceded to France in 1795 and then occupied by the same Haitians who had previously served in the French ranks and then again by British troops) declared itself under suzerainty of Spain as "Spanish Haiti."

At this point Spain was pauperized by Napoleon's invasion, busy about her restive continental possessions and without neither political will nor means to effectively reoccupy its loyal Dominican colony.

Thus Santo Domingo entered a period of nominal Spanish government fittingly called "Dumb Spain" by the locals. Predictably, the newly independent Haitians soon invaded Santo Domingo and united the island controlling it over the 1822-44 period.

Unknowingly, the Dominicans were drifting apart from the kind of Spanish-American identity that defined their Cuban and Puerto Rican neighbors. Dominican national awareness was consolidated during this period. It was largely rooted in racial prejudice and deepest hate of anything Haitian. It brought together Dominicans of all colors and walks of life against a crude stereotype of invading "wild Negroes" or "African savages."

To repel the Haitians back to their Western homeland across the border was no easy task. Both sides fought the same kind of gruesome war over the highest mountains and the thickest tropical forests of the Caribbean. To be old, sick, a woman, a child, a prisoner or wounded granted no mercy in combat areas. A relatively painless death must have seemed quite a blessing.

On the 27th of February 1844, a ravaged, burned out country, where most of the white population of Spanish and

French origin had fled to either Cuba or Puerto Rico, saw the light as an independent Dominican Republic.

The menace of a Haitian return was altogether too real. The young Republic started a frantic race to associate with some protecting power to keep Haitians at bay.

The best choices were France and the U.S. Great Britain benefited from free trade with an independent Dominican Republic and conspired to frustrate French plans to rebuilt some pieces of French Saint-Domingue. The diplomatic entanglement between the two powers left Spain, which was undergoing an exceptional period of progress and stability, free to act.

Spain, which feared losing her hegemony in the West Indies, contemplated with much concern U.S. talks to acquire Samana Bay from the D.R. The surprise arrival of American adventurers raising the American flag on D.R.'s Alta Vela island from April to October 1860, (much like what happened in Nicaragua) revealed greater U.S. territorial ambitions than foreseen and increased Spain's concern.. The Alta Vela incident accelerated Dominican-Spanish annexation negotiations in Madrid.

Spain had two aces up her sleeve. First was the much awaited American Civil War, which was to keep the U.S. off the world scene for several decades. Second was the complicity between the powerful Spanish General Serrano and the all-powerful General Pedro Santana, President of the D.R.

Both generals, set on making personal profit, conspired to achieve annexation in Madrid and Santo Domingo city. This contradicted the isolationist policy up to then favored by Spain. Now the Spanish Government had embarked in a worldwide expansionist effort, which went as far as probing the outlook for recovering some lost territory in the Americas.

It was unfortunate because the annexation of the D.R. proved a mixed blessing if not outright disaster. It brought no economic benefit. It revealed to some mildly loyal Cubans that Spain was not the almighty Caribbean power they thought it was.

It also brought to Cuba an unemployed mass of former Dominican white and light-skinned mulattos who had served with the Spanish Army in Santo Domingo before being evacuated to Cuba and discharged from the Army. They had few skills other than "irregular warfare" They brought with them a dangerous potential for disaffection because of their grudges about having been "dumped."

THE AUTHOR

Mr. Jaime GARCIA-RODRIGUEZ was born in Barcelona in 1944 to a father from Galicia (NW Spain) and a mother from Hispaniola. On his father's side were merchant ship captains who sailed the Corunna-Manila lines. On his mother's were Basque and Andalusian immigrants who by 1870 had settled in the coastal city of Nuevitas (Camaguey Province, E. Cuba) to trade with Spanish Puerto Rico and an emerging Dominican Republic.

He grew up in Havana and Santo Domingo and graduated in Earth Sciences from Madrid University in 1966. A Fulbright scholar, he witnessed the Vietnam years during two academic "tours of duty," in New Jersey (1967-69) and California (1974-77). He studied Theology with the Jesuits at Comillas University (1980-83) and spent the next three years exploring coal fields in Southern Borneo with a Spanish-Indonesian joint venture. Since 1988 he lives in Brussels and works in the civil service of the European Union.

His dual citizenship (Dominican and Spanish) befits someone who once overheard the last confidences of those who saw the decline of Spain and the rise of the United States in the West Indies.

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