

Cubans in the Prison Camp of Ceuta

Fernando Tarrida del Mármol

1897

The Canovist¹ ferocity, unleashed against Cubans as well as against Filipinos and the democrats of Spain, allows itself free rein in the prison camps to which so many unfortunates are sent, guilty only of wanting a free country. The most savage inquisition is being carried out in the African *presidios*, notably in that of Ceuta, where almost 500 Cubans are imprisoned. My respectable friend, Dr. Betances, Delegate to Paris of the Cuban government, was kind enough to send me a large number of authentic documents that leave no doubt on this question. These documents show how Mr. Canova exacts vengeance on the defeated, the wounded, and the prisoners of the failures of his compere General Weyler.

A great number of Cuban *politicals* have arrived in Ceuta after a peregrination of several months through the hospitals, fortresses, and prisons of Cuba and Spain. When they arrived in Africa they no longer had either suits, underwear, or shoes, and they weren't even provided with the regulatory uniform. In order for these detainees – some of whom belong to the main families of the Greater Antilles – to cover their nakedness, they had to wait for the arrival of packages from America, and that's if they weren't intercepted by Spanish authorities.

Among them are many wounded and mutilated. A guard wrote:

“It is a shame that prisoners of war were sent to prison camps who were gathered up on the battlefield among the dead and the wounded, men who arrive here held up crutches who were condemned to perpetual forced labor.”

The prisoners themselves had to organize sanitary services, for the only doctor they are allowed to consult is a wretch whose infamy is attested to by several testi-

¹ After Antonio Canovas, reactionary and repressive Spanish head of state. [Translator's note]

monials.² This *patriot* refuses any assistance to Cuban patients; he cynically insults those who are going to the hospital and never writes prescriptions. “Honestly,” he says to the unfortunates who consult him, “I don’t know how you dare come to see me. Don’t you know that you were sent here to die? I must make my contribution so we can have done with the *manigua*!”

The Cuban prisoners form three groups in Ceuta: the deportees, the condemned, and the *nanigos*.

The first group is made up of peaceful separatists. Legally they are innocent, since the government of Cuba has not managed to gather sufficient proof against them to bring them before tribunals, even though these latter are not very demanding. By virtue of the Law of Public Order in effect in the Greater Antilles they could only be forced to change domicile and be sent away at a distance of 100 kilometers. In fact, they were sent 1600 leagues from their residence, and their change of domicile was transformed into relegation to a fortress. They have been forced to live as prisoners in the fort of Hacho, and they are treated more cruelly than criminal deportees. Not content with limiting the circle in which these victims of the arbitrary die, the authorities have sought the means of rendering their lot even more intolerable by making them submit to all kinds of vexations.

For nothing, on a whim, they are punched and beaten with sticks. Here is the latest exploit of the authorities, told by an eyewitness: Two deportees were, on a whim, arrested by a guard who led them to the spot where penalties are meted out. “So, you dare to mock me, eh?” And he administered a lash with his whip. The sergeant came to do the same, and then the captain. “Oh, so you mock soldiers!” and he covered them with blows. There was no pretext for this iniquity, which is constantly renewed.

The condemned, who number about 250, are mixed in with the common criminals in one of the outposts of the prison camp, the fort of Hacho.

Whatever is said to them is accompanied with insults, punches, and blows with sticks. For the least misstep they are covered in blows and a heavy chain is attached to their feet, or they are attached *en blanca*.³

² In Spain the ferocity of the tyrants is only equaled by their stupidity. This is the reason that their surveillance is so often illusory and that so many letters written by prisoners have been able to illegally pass out of prisons and arrive at their destination. Aside from this, jailers and guards, themselves disgusted, sometimes unveil the turpitudes they have witnessed. Whatever the case, a prisoner often manages to get news out: my own experience convinces me of this.

³ This punishment consists in chaining the patient to the cell wall by his foot and his upper body. The chain is a little longer than one meter. It is under these conditions that the man must sit, lay on the ground – for he has no mattress – eat, and take care of all his needs, and this for months on end.

Their food consists of one pound of black bread and, twice a day, a ladle of *rancho*⁴ of such low quality and in such an insufficient quantity that it is impossible for a man of average appetite to not feel hunger a half-hour after the meal. And woe on he who complains or asks for more. *En blanca* immediately.

The condemned are under the control of supervisors called *cabos de vara* (corporals of the rod), industriously chosen from among the criminals with the greatest aptitude for cruelty and denunciation. This makes me think of the strange opinion that the authorities in Barcelona must have had of me when, last summer, they called me *capataz* or *cabo de vara* in cell number one of the Bridge at Montjuich.

From the moral point of view no humiliation is spared the Cuban *politicos*. Threats are constant and insults without measure are rained down upon them. This has reached such a point that the soldiers themselves feel pity for the Cubans. Several have even admitted that they were pushed to fire their rifles or kill with bayonets without any reason. I was able to observe similar sentiments among several soldiers at the garrison of Montjuich.

The *nanigos*, not very numerous – perhaps thirty – are deportees in a special situation, insignificant politically, punished simply because they are Cuban. The pretext was vagabondage. They are considered individuals living a “bad life,” and advantage is taken of the suspension of individual guarantees in Cuba to make them leave the country for fear that they swell the ranks of the insurgents. They were not condemned by any tribunal: it was through an administrative measure that they were sent to the prison camp. They have been treated so roughly that they have been rendered interesting.

As for the scenes which Cuban prisoners of no matter what category must witness in the cells or the *brigades*, one would need the talents of the author of *Festin de trimalcion* to attempt to describe the frolics of the lovely crowd that the terminology in use at Ceuta divides and describes thusly: *honradas* (honest ... more or less), *reservadas* (reserved) and *busconas* (female investigators).

The only crime of these Cubans martyred at the prison camp of Ceuta is that of having loved liberty and defended the independence of their fatherland. It is vital to protest against the ferocity of the Spanish government, which is so sadly in contrast with the chivalrous conduct of Aranguren and so many insurgent leaders.

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⁴ The *rancho* is a soup of beans, chick peas (garbanzos) and rancid lard.

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