

RESEARCH NOTES AND REPORTS / NOTAS E INFORMES DE INVESTIGACIÓN

The Call of the Distant Fatherland: Spanish Migrants in Argentina and the Cuban War

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I. INTRODUCTION

It seems accepted knowledge that all America was in favored of an independent Cuba during the second Cuban War (1895-1898), and that it was only after Washington's armed intervention in mid-1898 that this changed, with some sectors of Latin American opinion siding with Spain. This paper challenges such perception. The Cuban crisis divided America from the very beginning, with at least Spanish migrants and the more traditionalist sectors of the Catholic Church siding purposefully with Spain. The role of Spanish migrants in particular has been grossly overlooked by the historiography of the period: it deserves more attention than just a passing footnote, both for its contributions to the Spanish war and for its impact on public opinion in America¹. In fact, had it not been for migrant intervention it is doubtful that the continental wave of post-1898 Hispanism would have taken the form and shape it did.

We are to argue this point in relation to the Spanish community in the Río de la Plata. There is a special reason to focus on this geographic area. By the mid nineties, some 52 percent of all Spanish migrants in America lived in the Plata, 71.6 percent if we do not take into account those who lived in Cuba and Puerto Rico (still Spanish territory then). In Argentina, the Spanish was the second migrant community in volume, after the Italian. Just in Buenos Aires the number of Spaniards had doubled between 1887 and 1895, from 39 600 to 80 400; in this last year, 58.4 percent of them lived in the center of the city². If migrants were to gather any political strength, Buenos Aires would be the place in which it would show.

II. CONTRIBUTION OF SPANISH MIGRANTS TO THE WAR EFFORT

Let us first study the extraordinary contributions of these migrants, and their allies within the ranks of the Argentinean traditionalist church, to the war effort of Spain. To put the data we have researched into perspective, we will compare it first with the contributions to the war made by the Spaniards in the Peninsula.

In Spain, all political groups (Anarchists excepted) were in favor of a Spanish Cuba, the federalists of Pi i Margall included: they did want *autonomía* for Cuba, but it was exactly the same *autonomía* they wanted for Catalonia or Asturias as well. There were signs of patriotic fervor, as manifested in this anonymous poem from one Spanish publication in Buenos Aires:

El que diga que Cuba se pierde
mientras Covadonga
se venere aquí
es un pillo, ladrón, laborante,
canalla, insurrecto,
rebelde, mambi³

or this other one that Francos Rodríguez puts in the voice of dancer and singer gypsy who was well-known in the cafés of Madrid:

Al pelear con los yanquis,
señores, tendrá que ver
cómo de dos ladrillazos
les haremos de correr.
Tienen muchos barcos,
nosotros, razón;
ellos, armamento;
nosotros, honor (Rodríguez 1931:149).

Despite this, there are many accounts that the war was not fully supported at popular level. Rubén Darío, in 1899, in one of his first articles sent from Spain to *La Nación* in Buenos Aires registered;

El pueblo no quería la guerra, pues no consideraba las colonias sino como tierras de engorde para los protegidos del presupuesto. La pérdida de ellas no tuvo honda repercusión en el sentimiento nacional. Y en el campo, en el pueblo, entre las familias de labradores y obreros, aún podía considerarse tal pérdida como una dicha: ¡así se acabarían las quintas para Cuba, así se suprimiría el tributo de carne peninsular que había que pagar forzosamente al vómito negro! (*La Nación*, 12 de mayo de 1899)

Varela Ortega, who has studied in depth this period, writes as an example of what the attitude towards the conflict was, how on the Sunday in which the news of the defeat of the Spanish Navy in Manila reached

Madrid, the people filled the bullrings as usual (Ortega 1977:316-17; 1980:2).

Meanwhile, in Buenos Aires, the daily *El Correo Español* tells us how every time a major development was expected, or had occurred in relation to the Cuban war, hundreds of Spaniards queued for hours up to two in the morning in the foyer of the Spanish Club to read the latest cables – they could not wait until the next morning to read them in the paper. The Club, *El Correo* and the Asociación Patriótica Española (an organization created in March 1896 with the specific aim of "contrarrestar los trabajos que realizan los filibusteros en Buenos Aires"), had agreed to contribute with some extra money each to get more cable coverage, which was put in the foyer of the club as soon as *El Correo* had finished typing it.⁴ It was not sterile patriotic fervor. In the Península, volunteers were mostly conscripted soldiers, lucky enough to be paid at volunteer rates (*El Correo Español*, May 16 and 31 1896). From Buenos Aires, some 1 600 of them left actually for Cuba from late 1895, transported by the Spanish ships *San Francisco*, *San Fernando* and *Ciudad de Cádiz*, and many more could have gone then, had the Spanish diplomatic mission not done everything possible to discourage them. When war with the United States broke out, some 10 000 volunteered, just to be told that Spain could not afford diverting the ships to Buenos Aires to carry them (García 1998:114-127).

Not being allowed to offer their blood, they did offer their money. Subscriptions were instituted in Spain during the Cuban war to raise money to buy ships for the Spanish Navy and money was collected, but not a single ship was built. In Buenos Aires, migrants paid 2 190 000 pesos for one protected ship, *Río de la Plata*, of 1770 tons, which in February 1898 would have ranked 21 in volume out of the existing 157 ships, 13 if taking into account that some of the biggest Spanish ships were old (*El Correo Español*, February 8 1898). The warship was handed in to the Spanish navy in 1899. When the United States entered the war, the Queen Regent headed a National Subscription to cover war expenses. Some 21 134 578 pesetas were collected by June 18, and 6 938 848 (some 35 percent) from Buenos Aires⁵. An impressive amount, particularly taking into consideration that a significant amount of the money collected in Spain was public money donated by local councils, diputaciones etc., while in the Río de la Plata all money collected was private.

Putting together monies raised to send the volunteers (58 000 pesos), to buy the warship (2 190 000) and to the National Subscription (2 258 000), migrants from the Buenos Aires area contributed to the war effort with an estimated amount of some 50 pesos/moneda nacional per capita⁶. How would this compare with the money raised by Cubans in the tobacco

fields of the United States towards the independence, or by Irish also in the United States towards the Sinn Fein, or by Italians all over America for the Garibaldi's cause? It is doubtful the contributions of these Cubans, Irish or Italians would have been higher, on a per capita basis. Supporters of the Free Cuba Committees in Argentina – headed by young people with prominent surnames as Roca, Mitre or Vélez Sársfield, and which included a special envoy of the insurgents, Arístides Agüero, sent to help the campaign – collected some 5 200 pesos oro⁷; insignificant compared with what the pro-Spanish Cuba side managed to subscribe.

Julio de Arellano y Arróspide, who reached Buenos Aires as a *ministro de España* just after the war, wrote to Madrid in one of his first reports: "La abnegación con que todos han procedido raya en lo inverosímil y causó aquí [Buenos Aires] general estupor"⁸. Why this explosion of patriotism? Migrants themselves at the time gave "distance" as the reason. There was a verse they often quoted when referring to this:

Distancia es aire
que apaga fuego chico
y aviva el grande.⁹

Their big love for their fatherland was made bigger by distance! There are reasons to argue, however, that this explosion of patriotism was also the response of the Spanish community in the Plata to a century of anti-Spanish xenophobia.

Spaniards were called "*gallegos*" in the Río de la Plata, then meaning either thieves, stringy if referring to that minority of successful merchants, or sort of stupid, able to perform only the heaviest, more repetitive duties if referring to the great majority of unskilled labor. Speaking the same language did not help much, as Spaniards, when they talked in Spanish – many came with Gallician, Basque or Catalan as their mother tongue – did so with a strong differentiated accent. During the nineteenth century, the Spaniards were the most despised of immigrant groups, black Africans aside. The Spaniards' extraordinary manifestation of love for the fatherland can in this context be considered defense mechanism, a way of keeping their individual and collective self-esteem together.

Why this discrimination against Spaniards? The migrants themselves rationalized it as a by product of envy:

Hay quien busca explicación
del odio que a España tiene
gentuza sin corazón
que a duras penas sostiene
su mísera condición.
Yo lo hallo muy natural.

¿No es como todos sabemos
 nuestra gloria provercial?
 Digo que encuentro explicable
 que a nuestra patria no estime
 esa turba miserable,
 pues nunca lo despreciable
 se avino con lo sublime (Batalla 1897)¹⁰.

It can be better explained, albeit as a corollary of the colonial period. For the Argentine elite Spain was synonymous to obscurantism and fanaticism, the opposite of all those values they admired from Europe. Which was quite an unfair view: this description may have fitted the *Carlistas* and adjacent groupings, but there was also a liberal Spain Argentines who choose to ignore. Precisely in Buenos Aires, a big chunk of the elite of the Spanish community belonged to the most liberal section of Spanish politics: that of the Republicans. On the other hand, in Argentina there was a powerful traditionalist lobby as well, the only difference between both countries being that the liberals were totally in control of the political power in Buenos Aires, while this was not always the case in Madrid.

In any case, unfair or not, the reality was that whenever Spain got into trouble in America – the Pacific War in the sixties, the first Cuban War, 1868-1878 – the Spaniards in the Plata should expect to have their shops and social clubs attacked. After the *grito de Baire* in 1895 this trend could not but exacerbate. But the Spaniards, by now the second immigrant community in numbers and growing at a fast pace, were this time ready for it. Their reaction was twofold: on the one side, defensive, which gave rise to the explosion of patriotism we have just considered. On the other, proactive: they wanted to change public opinion to gain the Argentine opinion to their side. We will see now to what extent they were successful in this endeavor.

III. THE IMPACT OF THE SPANISH MIGRANTS ON PUBLIC OPINION

As soon as the Cuban War broke off, the elite of the Spanish community started its damage control strategy through the pages of *El Correo Español*: the Argentines did not read it, but the Argentine newspapers did, and reported on the opinions of the Spanish community through it.

During 1895-1896, *El Correo* tried to convince public opinion that the independence of Cuba was not at all the prolongation of the wars of independence of Spanish speaking America that started in Argentina in 1810. Three major arguments were used to establish this. José Martí, the leader of the insurgents, they wrote, could not be compared with José de

San Martín (*El Libertador*) and the hero of independence in 1810. Cuba, the Spaniards argued, was not a colony of Spain like Argentina was in 1810, but a province of Spain, very much at the same level than Asturias or the Canary Islands were. The rebels did not constitute an Army like that of San Martín, they were merely hordes headed by adventurers like Martí, paid by the Yanquis: "Oro yanqui, brazo africano", the implication being that only civilized societies had armies – savage societies could not rise up from the level of hordes. *El Correo* exploited directly the race angle, trying to gain some sympathy from it: the rebels were just savages, blacks and mulattos, whose level of humanity was not as high as to allow them to thank the same people who had freed them from slavery a few years before. They compared them also with the anarchists, whose direct action tactics the Argentinean public opinion had been made aware precisely in those years: the rebels did not fight a war, they fought using the same means anarchists did: arson and dynamite. If public opinion all over the world was against the anarchists, why was it not against the Cuban insurgents?¹¹

Since public opinion in Buenos Aires was not impressed by these arguments, *El Correo* changed strategy by the end of 1896. Spain was a friendly nation, it would argue now. Cuba was part of Spain. Defending Spain should be allowed in Argentina, but defending the insurgents should not, as that would be equal to attacking Spain which was a friendly country. Thus, the Argentine government should take seriously the task of making its own citizens respect its own laws. Should they fail to do it, the Spaniards would.¹²

They did not succeed in convincing public opinion either. The more balanced newspapers – *La Nación*, *La Prensa* – would say that at least equal rights had the Spaniards to support their case as the Argentines had to support whichever (*La Nación*, December 24 1896). The Spaniards did not change their mind: every time anyone attacked Spain, the members of the Asociación Patriótica would be there, ready to intervene, which they did. The street fights escalated in November 1897 following a meeting that the Asociación Pro Cuba Libre with Arístides Agüero as the main speaker in the Teatro Doria, after which hundreds of Argentine youth sang slogans of "Muera España, Viva Cuba Libre, Mueran los gallegos sarnosos, Abajo los ladrones y otros más soeces aún" in front of the Spanish Club, the Café Tortoni and of other shops in which they would expect to find Spaniards¹³.

Even if in the streets were always overpowered by the free Cuba supporters, the timing helped the Spanish cause. The Argentine government panicked: it was on the verge of a war with Chile over border disputes and the last thing it needed at that moment was unrest in the home front. Orders were given to the police to quell those fights, even if that meant not

allowing the pro-Cuba side to exercise its constitutionally sanctioned the right to freedom of speech – which was not an easy decision to make in an election year¹⁴.

Taking the hostile confrontations off the streets was a first tactical victory for the Spanish side. Another thing that proved to be much more important was soon to follow. With military intervention by Washington looking imminent, sections of the mainstream liberal elite started having second thoughts about the good intentions of their previously admired *Coloso del Norte*. They saw how Spain was ready to concede independence to Cuba, and they interpreted Washington intentions as not having much to do with achieving the independence of Cuba as with its annexation. In other words, North America aimed no so much to help the Cuban freedom fighters as to humiliate Spain and, by extension, all Spanish-speaking America.

The Asociación Patriótica, which had so successfully coordinated the efforts of the migrants, was headed by liberal Spaniards – some of them well-connected with the local elite. Despite these connections forged over decades, during the period from April 1895 to April 1898, no Argentine of any significant position raised a voice in defense of Spain. The leaders of the Patriótica were, however, first in noticing this ideological shift and did all they were capable of to encourage it. The point of departure was not the same. The Patriótica saw Washington's intervention as the logical option if it wanted to annex the island, as the Spanish general Weyler had already crushed the insurrection. For the Argentines, on the other hand, Spain had already conceded independence to Cuba before Washington was to enter the war. The point of arrival was, however, the same. The paradigm started to change: before it was America versus Spain; now it was to be Anglo-Saxon civilization versus Hispanic civilization.

On April 3, Calixto Oyuela published "Oda a España", not on the pages of *El Correo* but on those of the most prestigious of evening newspapers, *El Tiempo*.

¡Vuelve a ceñir el casco refulgente,
Matrona egregia, y la invencible espada
Con que trazaste un día por el mundo
Surco inmenso de gloria!

¡Levanta en ira ya el potente brazo
Con que arrancaste un orbe de los mares,
Genial sembrando en soledades bárbaras
Mil pueblos florecientes!

Y la que, inerme, en ímpetu sublime,
Supo postrar al Capitán del siglo,
Castigue ahora la codicia infame

Del Mercader de América.

Oyuela was already a well-established poet, whose literary career started precisely with the floor natural at the first Juegos Florales organised by the Centro Gallego in 1882. His was the first voice outside the Catholic traditionalist area raised on the defense of Spain. In his poem, the two sides of the new paradigm were already established. On the one hand

Pueblo sin tradición, allegadiza
Turba de traficantes sudorosos,
Que a ruin medida y cálculo sujetan
Los impulsos del alma;

and on the other, the

...adalid de la hidalguía antigua,
Viril y noble España, tus derechos
Contra todos defiendes, y no cuentas
Tu honra en esterlinas!

The clash between "el ladrón de California y Tejas" and the race that "la Cristiandad salvó en Lepanto, / y dio un mundo a la Historia" was inevitable, argued Oyuela, popularizing stereotypes of Spain and United States that would be profusely repeated in the following years. "Léanlo, léanlo si pueden sin derramar lágrimas de entusiasmo", advised its readers *El Correo* (April 5 1898).

Next person raising his voice in favor of Spain was Luis V. Varela, also in *El Tiempo*, encouraged by Rafael Calzada, one of the leaders of the Patriótica. Varela's "España y Estados Unidos" argued that American Monroe doctrine for the Americans had given way to MacKinley doctrine, pointing again to the risks of Washington's intervention in Cuba for the republics of the south. This article was supported days later by Herrera y Obes, former president of Uruguay, in his article "La verdad palpitante", first appeared also in *El Tiempo*. (April 12 respective 20, 1898).

With the Spanish-American War in full swing, the Spaniards in Buenos Aires prepared themselves to celebrate the Second of May, their National Day. For the first time in years supported by the liberal elite, they arranged to mark the occasion with a meeting in the Teatro Victoria in which it would not be not but representatives of the Italian community – Italy being the “mother” of Spain, France as its “sister” and Argentina as its “daughter” will speak. José Tarnassi was chosen to represent Italy, Paul Groussac representing France and for Argentina, Roque Sáez Peña. He was the one that, as a representative of his country in the First Pan-American Conference in Washington in 1890, had formulated against the Monroe maxim of America for the Americans his America for the World. In the Teatro Victoria, he rectified Varela's stand by saying that MacKinley's

doctrine was not against Monroe's – one anti-interventionist, the other interventionist – but the corollary of it. He pointed out that no country has given Washington authority to negotiate in its name. He acted as if it had the representation of America, but in fact it did as it pleased himself:

Condenar las intervenciones europeas en el mismo documento en que se reservan las americanas y en que ellas se ejercitan por acto propio e inconsulto, no es, en efecto, reprobear la intervención, sino gestionar su monopolio.¹⁵

The echo of this conference in Buenos Aires and throughout America was enormous. That the process was inspired by the Patriótica can be seen in that they spoke at the request of the Patriótica. The funds collected at the door of the Teatro Victoria were to engross the arcs of the National Subscription, and that they all accepted the same year the title of honorary members of the institution.

The one that did not receive this title, and perhaps is the one, in hindsight, who most deserved it, was Rubén Darío. He was at the Victoria's meeting, and it was, he tells us, under its influence that he wrote also in *El Tiempo*, "*El triunfo de Calibán*":

Y yo, que he sido partidario de Cuba libre, siquier fuese por acompañar en su sueño a tanto soñador y en su heroísmo a tanto mártir, soy amigo de España en el instante en que la miro agredida por un enemigo brutal, que lleva como enseña la violencia, la fuerza y la injusticia.

He had been notorious within the Spanish community for his "galophilia" and his "hispanophobia". He would set the record straight here:

Y usted, ¿no ha atacado siempre a España?" Jamás. España no es el fanático curial, ni el pedantón, ni el dómene infeliz, desdeñoso de la América que no conoce; la España que yo defiende se llama Hidalguía, Ideal, Nobleza; ... se llama la Hija de Roma, la Hermana de Francia, la Madre de América.

Miranda preferirá siempre a Ariel; Miranda es la gracia del espíritu; y todas las montañas de piedras, de hierros, de oros, de tocinos, no bastarán para que mi alma latina se prostituya a Calibán.¹⁶

Of the many personalities that at the time changed their stand, let us just quote another, the then very influential Lucio V. Mansilla:

En tanto los cubanos procuraban su independencia, nosotros, que habíamos hecho lo propio en una época anterior, estuvimos de su lado. Pero lo que no podemos aceptar es que para lograrlo hayan buscado ayuda, a fin de hacer frente a la Madre Patria, en una nación extranjera que es peligrosa tanto para ellos como para nosotros . . . [En el futuro] no podremos hacer nada en nuestro propio hogar sin antes pedirle permiso a Norteamérica.¹⁷

Then came the disaster. The tremendous effort of the migrants in Argentina could not change the course of the war. The Spanish community

entered into a period of deep crisis, but soon to realize that the loss of Cuba was not, as feared, the maiming of the fatherland. Cuba was not, after all, a part but a possession of Spain (Calzada 1927:18). They discreetly adapted to the new situation: as soon as Cuba appears on the pages of *El Correo* in the first years of the new century, it would do that as another of the prosperous "daughters" of "mother" Spain in America.

On the other hand, the impact of Hispanism did not vanish with the war. In 1900 in Montevideo, José Enrique Rodó published the *Ariel* – very influential at continental level – following Darío's metaphor in "*El triunfo de Calibán*". In the same year in Buenos Aires, Ernesto Quesada's *Nuestra raza* abounded on the same themes. The new continental consciousness that emerged from the Teatro Victoria of Buenos Aires on May 2 1898, valuing Spanish heritage and weary of Anglo-Saxon prepotency, was there to stay. Spain and Latin America, that had spent the nineteenth century with their backs turned against one another, were to start the twentieth facing each other. That this could happen owed a lot to the Asociación Patriótica and Spanish community in Buenos Aires of 1895-1898. And as a by-product of their patriotic feat, Spanish migrants were also to gain a place of respect in Argentinean society. They were the most despised of all migrant groups in the nineteenth century. They would start the twentieth century, at least in the pages of the newspapers, as the one closest to the Argentine soul.¹⁸

Notes

- 1 Just a footnote they gained, if mentioned at all. See Rodríguez (1931:130); Smith (1994:228).
- 2 Percentages include the Spanish community in Uruguay, calculated from data obtained by Ferrando (1995: 33); Fernández (1991:65-58); Biagini (1993:55).
- 3 *Poesías Patrióticas. A España. A beneficio de la Suscripción Nacional Española*. (1898) La Plata: La Popular, p. 138.
- 4 Asociación Patriótica Española. Third Annual Report. In *El Correo Español*, April 30 1899. Quote from Ortiz y San Pelayo (1914:13).
- 5 Asociación Patriótica Española. Third Annual Report. In *El Correo Español*, April 30 1899.
- 6 Calculation made by the author based on *El Correo Español* data which appears sometimes in the currency in which is collected, others in the currency in which it is sent: pesos moneda nacional, pesos oro, pesetas, francs or pounds.
- 7 Data from *El Correo Español* (thus, not very reliable), January 5 1898
- 8 Ministro de España to ministro de Estado, 1 February 1999. Archives of the Ministry of External Affairs, Madrid (AMEA), leg. 2314.

- 9 For example in *El Eco de Galicia*, 20 November 1895, or *El Correo Español*, 15 September 1896.
- 10 Oscar L. in *El Correo Español*, 30 November 1897.
- 11 Examples: on Martí vs San Martín, *El Correo Español*, May 24 1896; on race, *Ibid.*, August 20 1895; on anarchists, *Ibid.*, April 30 1896.
- 12 For example, *El Correo Español*, 23 December 1896.
- 13 Quote from *El Correo Español*, November 23 1897. All the newspapers of the capital on that day carry the story.
- 14 See *La Prensa*, November 23-26 1897 and *El Diario*, November 24 1897.
- 15 *El Correo Español*, May 3 1898. Speech at the Panamerican conference in Peña (1935: 85).
- 16 *El Tiempo*, 20 de mayo de 1898. José Enrique Rodó (1948) continúa este tema en *Ariel*. On the influence of Dario's article on Rodó, see Rodó (1898:164-165).
- 17 Quoted from *La Ilustración Española y Americana*, May 8, 1898.
- 18 This point has already been made, without references to the Cuban War, in Moya (1989:13). In García (1998:39), I argue in detail that it is in the context presented here that this change took place.

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