

FORUM: PUERTO RICO AND THE UNITED STATES AT CRITICAL JUNCTURES

Seeing the U.S. Empire through the Eyes of Puerto Rican Nationalists Who Opposed It

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A poll conducted shortly after Hurricane María devastated Puerto Rico in September 2017 revealed the disquieting truth: only 54 percent of U.S. residents know that Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens.¹ Not only do most people living in the United States not know this, but also they don't realize that Puerto Rico has been a U.S. colony since 1898 and remains one in 2019—121 years later! Puerto Ricans living in Puerto Rico are not allowed to vote in federal elections—not for Congress, nor for Senate, and not for the President—let alone exercise self-determination.² U.S. colonial rule of Puerto Rico simultaneously confirms that the United States is an empire and demolishes the myth it is an altruistic or democratic ruler. The Trump administration's response to the devastation of Hurricanes Irma and María attests to that most clearly.

Coming to terms with the existence and impact of U.S. empire requires seeing this history through the eyes of those who opposed it. Take, for example, the *Partido Nacionalista Puertorriqueño* (Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, PRNP), which struggled from the 1920s through the 1950s to establish an independent Puerto Rico. The story of its members' resistance allows us to explore the meaning of U.S. colonialism through the perspectives, lives, beliefs, and actions of the colonized. It means we simultaneously include and move beyond the study of U.S. policies, proclamations, and programs, to examine what motivated hundreds of Puerto Ricans to offer their “lives and property” for the liberation of their homeland.³ It also demands we acknowledge that Puerto Rico is still a U.S. colony, which is tangible proof that U.S. imperialism is a current reality, not a past aberration.

The initial lack of opposition to the 1898 U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico may have convinced U.S. officials at the time that Puerto Ricans welcomed them with open arms. Certainly many did at first, anticipating that after centuries of Spanish neglect and abuse, U.S. rule would democratize, modernize, and enrich the archipelago. By the 1930s, however, many Puerto Ricans realized that the United States was either unwilling or unable to offer them the democratic freedoms, economic improvements, and respect they had anticipated and deserved. As a result, an upsurge in anti-colonial sentiment and organizing swept Puerto Rico.

Although the PRNP formed in 1922, several factors coalesced in the 1930s to stimulate support for the party and for independence. First, Pedro Albizu Campos, the brilliant Harvard-trained lawyer, was elected president of the PRNP in 1930. Albizu Campos had spent the previous three years touring the Caribbean, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela meeting with anti-imperialist nationalists. He spoke with them about the need for hemispheric

¹Kyle Dropp and Brendan Nyhan, “Nearly Half of Americans Don't Know Puerto Ricans Are Fellow Citizens,” *New York Times*, Sept. 26, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/26/upshot/nearly-half-of-americans-dont-know-people-in-puerto-ricoans-are-fellow-citizens.html>. Such ignorance mirrors, and in part stems from, the absence of any substantial information about Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans or the past and present colonial relationship between the United States and the archipelago in major U.S. history textbooks. See Van Gosse, “United States History Textbooks and Puerto Rican History,” *Modern American History* 2, no. 2 (Jul. 2019): 179–182.

²If Puerto Ricans move to the United States, however, they can vote in federal, state, and local elections.

³Members of the Nationalist Party took an oath to give their “*vida y hacienda*” to achieve national sovereignty.

solidarity to end U.S. rule, and returned home with a deeper understanding of and opposition to U.S. intervention across the region. His experiences, in part, led him to chart a more radical course for the party. Instead of polite appeals to Washington for independence, the PRNP henceforth called directly for national sovereignty and an end to U.S. control. Second, the ravages of the Great Depression hit Puerto Rico with full, brutal force. Unemployment, hunger, exploitation, and desperation grew, as did dissatisfaction and disillusionment with U.S. governance. Third, the U.S. government sought to contain dissent by militarizing the Puerto Rican government and repressing the Nationalists, a policy that belied claims that U.S. rule would usher in democracy. Washington appointed two former military men, Major General Blanton Winship and Colonel Francis Riggs, to oversee attacks against the Nationalists.⁴ Riggs had previously served in Nicaragua, where he worked with Anastasio Somoza to establish a military government there in the 1930s.

The PRNP advocated the creation of a sovereign nation—one that served the needs of the Puerto Rican people, not the U.S. investors, landowners, and politicians who controlled the archipelago's economy and government. As Albizu Campos proclaimed, "It is impossible, *compañeros*, for this shameful colonialism to continue.... We cannot tolerate our nation's desperate situation one more minute!"⁵ Defining Puerto Rico as a part of Ibero-America (those American nations previously colonized by Spain or Portugal), the PRNP rejected English, Protestantism, and U.S. culture and, instead, embraced the archipelago's Spanish, Catholic, and Hispanic roots. It joined with other Caribbean and Latin American nations to oppose U.S. imperialism in the region and promote hemispheric solidarity.

During the 1930s, the Nationalist Party established two semi-overlapping organizations that signaled its intent to intensify its struggle for independence: Cadets of the Republic for men, and Nurses of the Republic for women. Although members of both organizations received military training, the gendered distinctions between the groups reflected the idea that men were the fighters, while women played a secondary role, tending to the wounded. Nonetheless, both the party and the Nurses recognized women as contributors to the liberation of Puerto Rico, a status that pro-independence women fought for and valued.⁶

Although some PNRP members were Marxist, the party did not promote class struggle, because it sought the unity of all Puerto Ricans against the colonial oppressor and advocated for the economic well-being and spiritual and personal dignity of all Puerto Ricans. Nationalists sought to end the U.S. sugar companies' monopolization of Puerto Rican land and the widespread poverty of Puerto Rican farmers that it caused. They fought to maintain their culture against the colonizer's encroachments and impositions. For example, U.S.-appointed governors and education officials decreed that classes be taught in English, not Spanish—a policy the Nationalists, many teachers, and Puerto Rican families opposed or ignored.

Confrontation between the PRNP and the United States escalated in the 1930s. In 1936, two members of the PRNP assassinated Riggs in retaliation for the police murder of four Nationalists. The police, in turn, murdered the assailants. In 1936, colonial authorities arrested leaders of the PRNP and charged them with seditious conspiracy, or conspiring to overthrow the U.S. government by force. Outraged at this allegation, and concerned about the fate of their leaders, unarmed Nationalists gathered in Ponce, a town on the southern coast of the Island, on

⁴José Paraltici, "Imprisonment and Colonial Domination, 1898–1958," in *Puerto Rico under Colonial Rule. Political Persecution and the Quest for Human Rights*, eds. Ramón Bosque-Pérez and José Javier Colón Morera (Albany, NY, 2006), 67–80, here 71.

⁵"El Lcdo. Pedro Albizu Campos fue electo presidente del Partido Nacionalista de Puerto Rico," *El Mundo*, May 13, 1930, 1, reprinted in J. Benjamín Torres, *Pedro Albizu Campos: Obras Escogidas*, vol. 1, (San Juan, PR, 1975), 86.

⁶See Margaret Power, "Women, Gender, and the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party," in *Gendering Nationalism: Intersections of Nation, Gender, and Sexuality*, ed. Jon Mulholland, Nicola Montagna, and Erin Sanders-McDonagh (London, 2018), 129–43.

Palm Sunday in 1937 to protest.⁷ As the peaceful procession stepped forward, police who had surrounded the marchers opened fire, killing twenty-one, including two officers, and wounding 200. Remarkably, textbooks do not mention what has come to be known as the Ponce Massacre, one of the largest police murders of unarmed civilians in U.S. history.

The trial of the PRNP leaders ended in conviction, and they were exiled to the U.S. Penitentiary Atlanta in 1937 to serve their sentences. While there, several of them met and became close friends with Earl Browder, secretary general of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), who had been convicted of passport fraud. Their personal and political relationships continued after they were released and reunited in New York City, and persisted at least until 1945, when Browder was expelled from the CPUSA.

Although scholars of the CPUSA and the U.S. Left have ignored these friendships, the connections offer insight into how the CPUSA translated its anti-colonial politics into policy and the extent to which personal relationships shaped political relations between parties. For example, the CPUSA, under Browder's direction, sent one of its lawyers to escort Albizu Campos to New York City after his release and paid for his private compartment on the train. The party also financed the publication of *Pueblos Hispanos*. Nationalist Juan Antonio Corretjer, who had also been imprisoned with Browder, directed the newspaper along with Communist Consuelo Lee de Lamb. The newspaper was distributed to Latin American embassies and in Latino communities in New York City and beyond—an initiative that revealed the synergy that emerged between the positions of the CPUSA and the PRNP on such topics as U.S. imperialism, Latino politics, and Latin American relations during the Popular Front period.⁸

During the Cold War, U.S. presidents declared the United States the champion of freedom and democracy. The colonial status of Puerto Rico challenged this claim. To obviate this contradiction, Congressional officials with the pro-U.S. Popular Democratic Party in Puerto Rico sought to change the archipelago's status. The PRNP viewed this maneuver as a direct threat to Puerto Rico achieving national sovereignty. To alert the world that it continued to oppose colonialism, armed PRNP units attacked symbols of U.S. colonial control in Puerto Rico, such as police stations across the Island and, on October 30, 1950, the governor's mansion in San Juan. The attacks failed, and by November 1, fighting in Puerto Rico was over.

One factor, however, distinguished Puerto Rico from other sites of anti-imperialist struggles in Latin America during the Cold War: the presence of large, diasporic Puerto Rican communities, as well as PRNP chapters, in the United States. Distressed at the media's portrayal of the conflict as a civil war and not as an anti-colonial struggle, two PRNP members attempted to assassinate President Harry Truman on November 1, 1950, to call world attention to the fact that the PRNP was fighting against U.S. colonialism. They also wanted the world to know about the repression the U.S. government had unleashed in Puerto Rico with the arrest of over 1,100 people, most of whom had nothing to do with the fighting and were released shortly thereafter. Security guards at the president's Washington, DC, guest house killed one of the two Nationalists and wounded the other before they could reach Truman. Oscar Collazo, who survived, was originally given the death penalty but, in response to demands for clemency, especially from Latin American leaders, Truman commuted his sentence to life imprisonment.

But such events did not deter the political transformation then underway. In 1952, Puerto Rico became a Commonwealth, or a Free Associated State, which it remains today. Leaders and members of the Nationalist Party were arrested, convicted on charges of violating Law 53,


⁷Arthur Garfield Hays, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Civil Rights in Puerto Rico* (New York, 1937). Hays, General Counsel of the American Civil Liberties Union, headed the inquiry.

⁸Margaret Power, "Friends and Comrades: Political and Personal Relationships between Members of the Communist Party USA and the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, 1930s–1940s," in *Making the Revolution: Histories of the Latin American Left*, ed. Kevin A. Young (New York, 2019), 105–28.

which was the Puerto Rican equivalent of the strenuously anticommunist Smith Act, and given long sentences in U.S. and Puerto Rican jails. Two years later, four other PRNP members, led by Lolita Lebrón, attacked the U.S. Congress, once again hoping to demonstrate to the world that some Puerto Ricans continued to seek independence for their homeland. The four opened fire while the House of Representatives was in session, wounding five Congressmen. Lebrón unfurled the Puerto Rican flag and shouted “¡Viva Puerto Rico Libre!” The four were subsequently arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment. The arrests and wave of repression that swept Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican communities in the United States not only decimated the party, but also terrorized many people. Even casual association with the Nationalists or verbal support for independence effectively became a crime. Only later, in the late 1970s, would Nationalists emerge from prison and be hailed by many as global symbols of the anti-imperialist fight.

We can learn much about U.S. history by studying those who oppose it. The Puerto Rican Nationalists who had fought against U.S. colonialism since the 1920s, and U.S. officials’ attempts to repress them, offer powerful insights into the determination of the colonized to end their subjugation and the lengths to which colonizers will go to maintain it.

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