

Antonio Maceo y Grajales: A “Titán” for all Races

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When Juan Antonio Alvarado, editor-in-chief of the bilingual journal *ISLAS*, asked me to write a piece—part review, part essay—about Philip S. Foner’s 1977 biography of the Cuban Antonio Maceo y Grajales (the only really complete and definitive, English-language

work on the Cuban independence hero), I unreservedly agreed.¹ Foner’s book is still the only serious English-language attempt to achieve what José Luciano Franco did with his 1973 publication of *Antonio Maceo. Apuntes para una historia de su vida* (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales).



No event better represented Maceo's ideals regarding a free Cuba than the "Protest of Baraguá"

Only later did I realize that I had little notion of exactly what to do to keep my contribution from sounding like a very belated book review.

In my quest for the 'proper' way to approach this task it occurred to me that since the specific issue of *ISLAS* was dedicated to Antonio Maceo, and the year 2007 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the book's publication, it would be appropriate to review the book for its content and impact, not only at the time of its publication but now, three decades later, when the subject of Cuba, its leadership and its future is all too present in Washington, D.C.; the American media; Miami; and in the minds of Cubans everywhere. Furthermore, this comes at a time when there is much debate about the possible election of a black U.S. president, which in the context of an article about a biography of Antonio Maceo, is more relevant than one might think. In both Cuba and the United States, the issue of race and political power was just as pervasive during Maceo's time as it is right now.

In attempting to learn just what reviewers of this 1977 book had said, I found only a scarce few; one of which made no specific reference to the content of Foner's biography of Maceo at all. I wondered if Foner's book

had gone virtually unnoticed despite his acclaim and even controversial reputation. Certainly his status as a historian of the U.S. labor movement, the African American experience and other sociohistorical topics and individuals was well established by then: Foner had already been writing and publishing for thirty years by 1977. Moreover, the Maceo biography was published in the midst of a period that was witnessing the growth of African American and African studies programs around the U.S. It was a time during which great energy was spent on the much needed recovery and documentation of the Black experience, in general, and the history of prominent black individuals, both in and out of the United States. In fact, in his biography Foner eagerly communicates to his readers that this extraordinary man, Antonio Maceo, was known the world over as the embodiment of dignity, intelligence and



Antonio Maceo in Havana in 1890

valor in his ideological and military struggle to win equity for blacks and freedom for all Cubans from tyranny; that Maceo *did* have an impact outside of Cuba; and that his death was mourned in places quite distant geographically and conceptually from Cuba and its independence cause. Of this he provides ample evidence: citing accounts of, reactions to and even plays about Maceo and his death in battle in diverse, black and white publications the world over, e.g., Kiev, Santiago de Chile, Managua, Paris, Detroit, San Juan, Buenos Aires, Santo Domingo, Kingston, Bogotá, Madrid, and New York; in diverse languages such as Russian, Spanish, French, English and even Yiddish (*Antonio Maceo* 261-70).

A cursory survey of reviews of Foner's book revealed not only a dearth of them but also the somewhat mixed reaction to the biography, as if some of the reviewers had had misguided expectations of the book or broader agendas upon writing their reviews.² The only really serious reviewer was James Cortada. His review published in *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 58:4 (1978): 723-24, on the one hand praises Foner's work for being the only full-length, English-language account of Maceo's life; for his use of archival materials; and for 'squarely facing' the issue of racial prejudice and its influence in the Cuban independence movement. Yet, he also criticizes Foner's failure to address claims by other Cuban nationalists that General Maceo was arrogant; loved military life; and might have become 'a military autocrat,' without even considering (a) that the very racial prejudice that hindered the Cuban independence effort might have motivated just such claims, given they came from white Cubans; (b) that most personal information about Maceo is revealed only in correspondence from or to him; (c)



that there are few if any published interviews with him, and (d) that there is evidence enough in Maceo's own writing to dispute any claim that he had designs on a governing position. Foner specifically addresses this throughout the biography, including a discussion of how attempts to appease white Cuban *hacendados* during the Ten Years War (who stood to lose their cheap labor force if abolition came about) actually compromised and delayed the abolition and independence projects that Maceo so fervently saw as utterly inseparable.

Criticisms about Maceo's character that are not seen through the lens of white Cuban insecurity about free and upwardly mobile Afro-Cubans after the war are suspect. For Cuban historians of the past, the issue of Maceo's race has been a source of 'pride and prejudice' as evidenced in the sometimes

unhealthy racialization of Maceo's person. In 1899 Maceo's remains were exhumed and studied anthropometrically, the results of which were published in 1900. This study came to be known as "The Cranium of Antonio Maceo," which 'scientifically' declared: "Antonio Maceo was a mestizo; that the mixture of white and black creates a privileged group-when the influence of the first predominates..." (*Ahora* I [n.p.]: 1934).³ Clearly, we must always evaluate the process by which we have come to much of our knowledge about Maceo.

Suspect, too, are uncontextualized comments regarding his love of military life. Even if Maceo did love military life and aspired to rise through the ranks and gain recognition, it is not clear to me how this can be leveled as a criticism. If the revered Martí had Mendive as his philosophical tutor, Maceo's mentor of nearly forty years was General Máximo Gómez, a thoroughly military man. Maceo literally spent most of his life fighting for Cuban abolition and independence, which says more about his devotion to the cause (he was not the only one), and the fact that it was a drawn out struggle plagued more by disunity, racism, capitalist interests, and Spanish propaganda, than anything else. Notwithstanding, Foner also covers Maceo's non-belligose activities, economic and personal, e.g. his financial projects and various relationships with different women, in noteworthy detail gleaned from significant archival work.

Cortada also faults Foner for not having compared Maceo to other Latin American revolutionaries of the Spanish American independence wars. This was undoubtedly a keen observation but not cause for criticism, since this was (as he wrote), "the *first* full-length treatment of the man, and as such unique and a long time in coming." Certainly



some later or different work might take on the suggested task. What might Foner have sacrificed from the biography to include details of such a comparison? Foner's biography is as much about Maceo as it is about 'Cuba's struggle for independence' (not a gross simplification stating that they were one and the same but rather an acknowledgement of the fact that one cannot speak about Cuba's lengthy road to 1898 without considering Antonio Maceo). There were certainly many more actors (some of extraordinary and perhaps almost equal ideological or military importance), but none of them so completely and totally personified the struggle like Maceo, just as his "Protest of Baraguá" also surely represented a free Cuba.

Despite his key role in Cuba's independence struggles and his important correspondence and ideas about racial equality and Cuban nationhood, Antonio Maceo is virtually unknown within English-language literature. This brings me to the point that Philip Foner's book merits not only rescue from obscurity: it unquestionably needs translation into Spanish. My review of other recent

Maceo literature in both English and other languages confirms the notion that if Foner's biography of Maceo had been translated into Spanish and/or French, and made internationally available, I would have found numerous foreign reviews, particularly from Cuba, the Caribbean, and Europe, and there would have been evidence that the book had reached a larger audience. Foner, himself, in the early pages of his introduction to Maceo's biography, laments that the English-speaking world knew little about him, citing Afro-Puerto Rican Arturo Schomburg before him (*Antonio Maceo* 2). It is clear from this that his intention was to address this egregious lacuna with his lengthy and detailed biography. Much of José Martí's voluminous work has been translated numerous times. He is known for the fifteen years he spent in New York writing chronicles and other literature, for his fundraising efforts for *Cuba libre*, and for his unnecessary death in battle at Dos Ríos. The exploits of General Máximo Gómez, the first name in Cuba's nineteenth-century military struggles for independence are documented in English, as well, as are those of other great leaders of the Hispano-American independence wars, e.g., Simón Bolívar and San Martín.

Even if there were moments in U.S. history when Antonio Maceo was indeed 'on the radar screen' (they are methodically documented and examined by Foner in several chapters, and in his 'Conclusion'), the appeal of a book in English about a heroic, Spanish-speaking, black American (in the broadest of definitions) who had been dead since 1896, seems not have caused much of a stir. This is nothing less than a travesty, particularly when one considers the truly extraordinary life and achievements of Antonio Maceo and the meticulous details about them that Foner wove into 340-page

book. More than just a narrative of life events and accomplishments, Foner infused his biography with a vitality and enthusiasm only possible from an author who wholeheartedly researched, respected and admired his subject. Yet, Foner did not forget his humanity either. The many detailed descriptions of battles and other moments in the book come to life through carefully interspersed reports of conversations and correspondence between Maceo and others. Often, the voice in this biography is Maceo's and not just his biographer's. For Foner, as for many of us, Antonio Maceo was the bigger-than-life incarnation of not just Cuba's struggle for independence and sovereignty; and the struggle of black Cubans for equality, but of global social transformation, too.

Prior to the publication of the Foner biography (since Maceo's death in September 1896), there have been numerous Spanish-language books and articles on Maceo that either collect and reflect on his writing or attempted to address his life and accomplishments. Before and after the Revolution, numerous scholars in Cuba have seen fit to periodically revive interest in *el Titán de Bronce*, publishing and republishing articles about his military prowess, his legacy in Cuba and even a multiply republished piece about a forensic study that was conducted of his remains.⁴ There is currently a Center for the Study of Antonio Maceo y Grajales (*Centro de Estudios de Antonio Maceo y Grajales*) in Santiago de Cuba. Additionally, English-language books and articles on Maceo have been published since the appearance of Foner's biography, despite the lack of response to his 1977 opus.⁵ Let us not forget, though, that it was Foner, back in the 1970s, who realized it was time to rescue the General from the mythical if isolating pedestal to which he, as a 'man of action,' had

been relegated, and examine Maceo's philosophy of nationhood, race and Cuban identity. Post-1959 interest on both sides of the Florida Straits in Maceo as 'a man of action and ideas,' illustrates that Cubans from both sides (literally and figuratively) have felt a need to reconsider their shared but distinct racial myths, reevaluate the reality that actu-

ally ensued, in the wake of the nationalist, race defying rhetoric of both the late nineteenth and mid twentieth centuries (during the independence war and after the revolution), and dig deeper into their history to attempt to understand and address the exceedingly real present.⁶

Notes

(1) Any mention of Philip Foner's biography refers to the book *Antonio Maceo: The 'Bronze Titan' of Cuba's struggle for independence* (New York and London, Monthly Review Press, 1977).

(2) Louis Kushnick's 'review' of Foner's Maceo biography, in *Race & Class* 20:1 (1979): 311-13, contains not one specific reference to the book. Instead, it is a pithy panegyric to the Cuban struggle then and now, and the place of José Martí and Antonio Maceo within it. Thus, it contributes nothing to our understanding of the book's reception.

(3) Translation mine. "Antonio Maceo era un mestizo; que el cruzamiento del blanco y el negro, crea un grupo ventajoso, cuando la influencia del primero predomina..." (Ahora). Sección Dominical. *La Habana*, Diciembre 2 de 1934).

(4) *Ibid.*

(5) In his review of Magdalen Pando's biography of Maceo, *Cuba's Freedom Fighter, Antonio Maceo: 1845-1896* (Gainesville: Felicity Press, 1980), in the *Hispanic American Historical Review* 61:3 (1981): 544-545, Louis A. Pérez, Jr. criticizes her 'romantic' yet uncritical approach to Maceo's life, pointing out that the author neglects to deal with Maceo's views on race or imperialism but concedes that it is well written and a good place for the uninitiated to begin their study of Antonio Maceo.

(6) In recent years, particularly since 1998, a critical reevaluation of José Martí has begun, in a similar attempt to rescue him from his heroic pedestal, and consider him and his achievements in the context of his own humanity. This is particularly important, given that Cubans on both sides of the Florida Straits, and throughout the past century, have co-opted and even distorted Martí for their own purposes.

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