

A Man of Actions and Ideas:

Thoughts on General Antonio Maceo*

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Introduction

Antonio Maceo was one of the truly great figures in the history of the Hispanic-American wars of independence. For twenty-seven years—his entire adult life—all of his

thoughts and actions were conditioned by the cause of Cuban independence. He sacrificed everything—his family and countless opportunities to lead a life of ease and luxury—to the cause. Continuing resolutely toward his fixed goal, suffering insult and

criticism because he was a man of color, sustaining twenty-five wounds, he fought bravely and brilliantly for his country, *and never once lost a battle*. Neither bullets nor sickness stopped him; at the time of his death, his body was racked with constant pain, and he was able to walk only with a great deal of effort. But his thoughts were fixed on how best to defeat the enemy.

Uneducated and of humble circumstances, Maceo rose from obscurity to heights of great fame and prestige, and he accomplished this under the continual burden of race prejudice. Maceo's career began in a movement dominated by the white aristocracy—the elite of Oriente province. Yet against imposing obstacles, he became a hero of his country and an idol of his people.

From the first battle until his death, Maceo's life quite literally belonged to his country. His military instincts, his personal bravery, and his qualities of leadership were legendary. Having volunteered to fight in the army of liberation as a simple soldier, he rose rapidly and eventually became the major military official, next to General-in-Chief Máximo Gómez. The two military leaders worked together closely during both the Ten Years' War and the Second War for Independence, and they frequently found themselves at odds with the more conservative political leaders of the rebel government. The politicians opposed Gómez because of his unwavering insistence on the need to extend the war from the east to the economic heartland of the island in the west. They opposed Maceo not only because of his close cooperation with Gómez, but also because they felt threatened by his popularity among both blacks and the poor.

Maceo's race was a constant source of political controversy. During both wars, the Spaniards capitalized on existing racist atti-

tudes among white Cubans and spread malicious rumors about the alleged secret ambitions of the black leader. While these rumors were consistently denied by all who fought with and knew Maceo, they were widely believed and were a factor in undermining the unity of the Cuban insurgents. For his part, Maceo usually maintained silence when he was informed of the slanders against him. He considered racism incompatible with the goals for which he was fighting—a republic based on equality and fraternity—and he deeply regretted the division among Cuban fighters. Maceo did once break his silence and expressed his views on the problem of race and racism, in a letter to then President Cisneros on May 16, 1876. In this letter, he reviewed his record of service to the rebel republic and noted that the racist insinuations that were being cast about him were both unjust and divisive. Speaking of himself, he said:

“And since I belong to the colored race, without considering myself worth more or less than other men, I cannot and must not consent to the continued growth of this ugly rumor. Since I form a not inappreciable part of this democratic republic, which has for its base the fundamental principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, I must protest energetically with all my strength that neither now nor at any time am I to be regarded as an advocate of a Negro Republic or anything of the sort. This concept is a deadly thing to this democratic republic which is founded on the basis of liberty and fraternity. I do not recognize any hierarchy.”

Maceo believed that the acquisition of equal rights for blacks would have to await political independence. Therefore, he fought on while others tried to undermine his position.

A lifetime of achievements

Of all Maceo's achievements, one in particular made him an enduring hero to all generations of Cuban patriots: the Protest of Baraguá in February 1878. When virtually all the political leaders of the republic-in-arms, and most of the military commanders as well, were ready to agree to peace in the Treaty of Zanjón, Maceo alone refused to surrender. Rejecting the minor political concessions the Spaniards were willing to make, he openly defied the Spanish general, Martínez Campos. Although he was soon obliged to cease fighting and to join the other leaders in exile, Maceo's defiance had two important consequences: first, Zanjón, instead of being considered a peace treaty, came to be viewed as no more than a truce; secondly, Maceo's act strengthened the determination of his countrymen to renew the war as soon as possible.

It took seventeen years for this opportunity to present itself. Maceo spent these years going from one Caribbean country to another, and to the United States. With others in exile, he devoted his energies to the task of reorganizing the rebel forces for the eventual resumption of the war. To judge from his own writings, Maceo grew both intellectually and politically during his period in exile, which he spent traveling, working, and reading. He was able to develop his own distinctive social vision, which went well beyond his patriotic passion at the time of Baraguá. By the time he was fighting again in Cuba, Maceo saw his goals in terms of well-defined concepts of anti-imperialism, social justice, and human responsibility.

Before returning to do battle, Maceo made one important visit to Cuba in 1890. On that occasion, he was greeted throughout the island with enormous enthusiasm.

Although the Spanish authorities forced him to cut his stay short, the response to his visit demonstrated the readiness of the Cuban people to renew the struggle and indicated that Maceo himself had been endowed with the status of a hero. It is unlikely that any other nonwhite would have been welcomed so warmly by white high society, nor is it likely that anyone but he could have so inspired Cuban youth who barely remembered the Ten Years' War.

When hostilities broke out again in 1895, Maceo was among the first to return to Cuba. He forthwith met in La Mejorana with his former commander-in-chief, Máximo Gómez, and the writer, poet, political theorist, and organizer, José Martí, to undertake the task of setting out the political objectives of the future republic. However, Martí was killed shortly thereafter, and Maceo and Gómez soon found themselves in precisely the same position they had been in during the previous war. Again, despite their efforts, power remained in the hands of ambitious, competing politicians: again their military plans were subject to constant political interference, and again Maceo was accused of having racist ambitions. Just as in the previous war, however, Maceo devoted all his thoughts and activities to only one objective—the achievement of Cuban independence.

Maceo lived long enough to accomplish another feat that assured his fame forever. At the end of October 1895 his army began the long march westward—a march that realized Gómez's longtime insistence that the revolution must be brought to the inhabitants of the rich agricultural lands in the provinces beyond Camagüey. The Cuban insurgents fought their way from the eastern end of the island to its western end in Pinar del Río, a distance of over 800 miles. The unexpected



*Antonio Maceo gathered with other compatriots
and several Costa Ricans, in Costa Rica*

success of the Cuban western invasion forced the Spanish to reorganize their activity. On February 11, 1896, the new commander-in-chief of the Spanish forces, General Valeriano Weyler, entered Cuba. His first military efforts were devoted to the destruction of Maceo. Maceo, on the other hand, fought, evaded, and frustrated Weyler for almost a year. Ironically, he met his death near Havana in a skirmish that was more an ambush than a battle. Characteristically, the last words he was heard to utter were “¡Esto va bien!”

Maceo was beloved by his soldiers and feared and respected by his enemies. On December 14, 1896, De Truffin, the Russian minister in Havana, wrote:

Maceo's accidental death in a clash at the gates of Havana . . . is undoubtedly a great success for our Governor General [Weyler]. . . . It is not to be denied that the death of the most popular insurgent leader is a grievous blow to the revolutionary cause, because the deceased, quite apart from his military qualities, enjoyed great influence among his men.¹

General Fidel Alonso de Santocildes, the Spanish general who later died fighting Maceo, made a point of personally telling Maceo that he was the most capable officer he had ever faced.² During the Ten Years' War, General Martínez Campos said, “Maceo is the key to real peace.”³ And at the beginning of the revolution of 1895, the Spaniards admitted “the great importance of the landing of the leader Maceo in Cuba.”⁴

After the death of Martí, Maceo and Gómez embodied the spirit of the Cuban revolutionary movement. Maceo's name became a household word among all Cubans wherever they lived, and his exploits were discussed again and again in the *bohíos* of peasants. Too often, even in Cuba, he was pictured in one-dimensional terms, “solely as a great warrior, a man of action but not of ideas.”⁵ But his correspondence demonstrates how diligently he pursued his self-education, even in the midst of military campaigns, and how well he succeeded. He was reported to have acquired a fair knowledge of several languages, including English. Those who heard him speak reported that he could converse with some assurance on history, political science, and military theories. Maceo recognized and respected the need for education, and wherever he went, he surrounded himself with those from whom he could learn and thereby improve himself. The extent to which he succeeded is testified to by Martí's statement in *Patria* of October 6, 1893, that

“Maceo has as much strength in his mind as in his arm.”

His clarity of thought and purpose

Maceo also made important contributions to the ideology of the revolution. It



Mambi soldiers.

was his Protest of Baraguá that kept alive hopes for independence. When the rebel leaders wished to rekindle the Cuban spirit, they invariably pointed to Maceo and his Protest. During the Second War for Independence, whenever Cubans wanted to demonstrate the invincibility of their cause, they used the example of the undefeated Maceo to humiliate the Spaniards. On an island averaging no more than fifty miles in width, they found it impossible to contain him, and general after general was recalled and replaced because of this failure. Even the famed and feared General Weyler was on the verge of being summoned home when Maceo was killed. In the Ten Years' War, Maceo aroused international attention with his Protest of Baraguá. In the Revolution of 1895, the world rang with praise for the fabulous exploits of Maceo and the western invasion, Maceo and the threat to the capital, Maceo and the campaign in Pinar del Río.

Maceo symbolized and embodied the hopes of the black people of Cuba, and he fully justified their faith in him. In every statement he uttered, he stressed the dual cardinal principles: independence for the nation, and freedom and equality for blacks. The emancipation of the slaves in 1887 did not by any means eliminate racial inequality in Cuba. When Maceo fought for independence after 1895, he also fought for racial equality, convinced that the latter could not be achieved without the success of the former. He was thus able to rally to the revolutionary cause the thousands of blacks and mulattoes who joined the *mambi* forces in such large numbers and whose support was so important for the struggle against Spain.⁶ By steadfastly refusing to place himself above the revolution, Maceo reassured some of those who feared that he might lead a struggle for black domination in Cuba. Maceo always insisted that there were no black or

white soldiers—all were Cuban warriors and all should work together to establish and build the republic. In 1895, a pamphlet was published (in Spanish) in the United States entitled “The Program of Maceo,” and subtitled, “Ideas of Maceo, Head of the Black Race in Cuba.” It emphasized that Maceo saw himself as the spokesman for black Cubans and that his special mission was to establish, with his sword, the dominance of the black race in an independent Cuba.⁷ Nothing, however, could have been further from the “ideas of Maceo,” and it is clear that the pamphlet was just a clever device on the part of Cubans, in league with Spain, to create confusion and disarray in the ranks of the independence fighters. An accurate reflection of Maceo’s true ideas is the following observation by the African historian Joseph Ki-Zerba, who wrote in 1972:

It was a general of African descent, Antonio Maceo, who was to conduct the liberation struggle against Spanish domination. When a Cuban of Spanish descent advised him to organize his regiments with whites and nonwhites (separately), Maceo replied: “If you weren’t white, I would have you immediately shot; but I don’t like the idea of being accused of being a racist like you, Get out. But I warn you—next time I won’t be so patient. The Revolution has no color.”⁸

A symbol of a truly free Cuba

Like Martí, Maceo was also the symbol of a free Cuba—equally free from the domination of Spain and of the United States. He was ready to lay down his life for only one cause—the genuine independence of Cuba. Nor could he accept any other solution for the Cuban people, black or white. Indeed, when his lawyer and consultant, Antonio

Zambrana Vázquez, broached the idea that evolution, rather than revolution, and autonomy under Spain, rather than independence, might be the best solution for Cuba, the “Bronze Titan” broke off both their friendship and their business relationship. When Maceo learned in June 1896 that the United States and Spain were discussing the possibility of granting Cuban autonomy and not independence, he wrote to Perfecto Lacoste: “The [North] Americans and Spaniards can make whatever agreements they wish, but Cuba will be free in a short while and can laugh at the negotiations which do not favor its independence.”⁹

It could hardly be expected that Maceo was without any weaknesses. He was considered somewhat irresponsible in the handling of money and valuables, and as a result, rebel leaders hesitated to trust him with them. When he did have money, he spent it quickly and often unwisely. But he never profited from his revolutionary activities; in fact, just when he had achieved his goal of economic stability and prosperity in Costa Rica, he abandoned it all without hesitation when he was called upon to join the revolutionary movement organized by Martí. Because of his impeccable dress and the fact that he cherished fine objects, Maceo was often considered vain. His enemies repeatedly attacked him on this score, but those who knew Maceo testified that it was pride, not vanity, that prompted his behavior. His manners were courteous, and he was always respectful of the opinion of others. He reacted with great sensitivity to ridicule heaped upon him because of his color and lack of formal education, and there is no doubt that he sought, through his impressive appearance, to achieve the respect and social position denied him by racism, whether Spanish or Cuban in origin.

To a remarkable extent he succeeded, and achieved a degree of social mobility almost unique in Cuban society for a man of his origins. There were many black officers in the wars for independence, like José Maceo, Flor Crombet, Guillermo Moncada, Quintín Banderas, Cecilio González, and Pedro Díaz. While they were able to move up in the ranks of the revolutionary army despite the barrier of prejudice, none of them rose to Maceo's heights as a military commander or attained his fame and popularity. Nor did any of them acquire the international reputation that

Maceo won during his travels through the Caribbean countries and in the United States. Both in Cuba and abroad, Maceo appears to have been better known in his time than even Martí. Writing in the *New York Times* of September 16, 1900, Dorothy Stanhope, the *Times*' special correspondent in Havana, observed: "Maceo, one of the Cuban idols in the war of independence, was a black man. All Cubans, of whatever color, look upon him"—one of the noblest of their countrymen."

Notes and Bibliography

*The first section of the "Conclusion" to Philip S. Foner's biography of Antonio Maceo, *Antonio Maceo. The "Bronze Titan" of Cuba's Struggle for Independence* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), has been adapted and reprinted here with permission from the Monthly Press Review Press for the purpose of including it in this special issue of ISLAS 2:1 (2007), dedicated to Cuban freedom fighter—Antonio Maceo.

1. *International Affairs* (1964). Moscow, March, p. 123.
2. Peralta Griñan, Leonardo (1941). *La muerte de Antonio Maceo, causas y consecuencias*, Havana, p. 45.
3. Figueredo Socarrás, Fernando (1902). *La revolución de Yara*, Havana, p. 191.
4. *Diario de la Marina* (1895). Havana, April 10.
5. Portuondo, José Antonio, ed. (1962). *El Pensamiento vivo de Maceo*, Havana, p. 7.
6. Although blacks formed a large proportion of the Liberating Army and quite a few rose to the highest ranks, no exact figures are available. In 1912, black leaders claimed that they had provided up to 85 percent of the soldiers during the Second War for Independence. One American historian, Charles Chapman, felt that these estimates were too high, but he did agree that "certainly the negroes had provided a majority of the Army of Liberation." More recently Rafael

Fermeselle-López, in an unpublished doctoral dissertation at American University, concluded "that about 49 percent of the generals and colonels were blacks." ("The Insurrection in Cuba," *Outlook*, June 1, 1912, p. 238; Charles E. Chapman, *A History of the Cuban Republic: A Study in Hispanic-American Politics* (New York, 1927), p. 308; Rafael Fermeselle-López, "Black Politics in Cuba: The Race War of 1912" (Ph.D. diss., American University, 1972), p. 9. Perhaps the best way to answer this question is to say, as did the distinguished Cuban historian Sergio Aguirre, that the black soldier was the backbone of the revolutionary army, and made up to 70 percent of the fighters while only comprising about 32 percent of the entire population. (Sergio Aguirre, "El cincuentario de un gran crimen," *Cuba Socialista* Año II (December 1962), pp. 34-35.)

7. *Cuba Libre*. (1965). *Misión Providencial. El Programa de Maceo. Ideas de Maceo, jefe de la raza negra en Cuba Insurrección*, New York, 1895.
8. Ki-Zerba, Joseph (1972). *Histoire de l'Afrique Noir*, Paris, p. 223. I am indebted to José Luciano Franco for calling my attention to this work.
9. Franco, José Luciano (1963). *La Vida heroica y ejemplar de Antonio Maceo*, Havana, p. 110.