

Vindication of Suns and Rays of Bolívar

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***Corresponding author:** Sergio Guerra Vilaboy, University of Havana, Cuba

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Sergio Guerra Vilaboy*

University of Havana, Cuba

Introduction

The first revolutionary movement organized in Cuba with the declared objective of achieving independence from Spain, through an armed uprising, was the so-called Suns and Rays of Bolívar, which aborted in 1823, whose significance deserves to be reevaluated in its bicentennial. Much of the traditional historiography has classified some previous Cuban conspiracies as “Independentist,” despite the lack of documents to support it and without taking into consideration the true dynamics of the emancipatory process.

In none of these precursor movements was there a concrete plan for emancipation or a project for a republic. It was only after the beginning of the third decade of the nineteenth century that conditions matured sufficiently in Cuba for the emergence of the first conspiracy that unequivocally declared its purpose of achieving independence from Spain, called Soles y Rayos de Bolívar, which was established without hesitation in its proclamations and actions.

Signed by its top leader, José Francisco Lemus Escamés, the proclamations contain a formal declaration of independence and the objective of constituting a democratic republic, supported by the Creole population, especially in rural areas, planters and small sugar cane and coffee growers, artisans, farm workers, many of them mulattoes, free blacks and even slaves. for his release was valued.

The favorable conditions for the development of the first emancipatory movement in our history arose during the liberal triennium (1820-1823) in Spain, when Creoles from different social strata, mostly from the west and center of the island, were able to structure the first secret organizations and Masonic lodges aimed at spreading new ideas and subverting the existing order. This happened before Father Félix Varela opted for independence, in September 1823, after the failure of the conspiracy of the Suns and Rays and the reestablishment of absolutism by Ferdinand VII.

Many historians have minimized the historical importance of this revolutionary movement led by Lemus, considering it the result of the proselytism of a small group of Spanish-American émigrés established in Cuba and the expansionist aspirations of the so-called Gran Colombia. These theses have their origin in the pro-Spanish positions of the Creole reformers of the time, among them Domingo del Monte, who wrote that it was a conspiracy fomented “by those of South America” and made up of a few “insignificant men, without roots, or honest name of any kind, without particular merit to distinguish them [... and without support] in the mass of the Cuban population.” [1]

An appreciable part of the historiography, following the criteria of the Western Creole elite, added to the testimony of Vicente Rocafuerte from Guayaquil, has considered that the conspiracy was organized by Colombia through its emissaries and Spanish-American residents in Cuba. Cuban Captain General Dionisio Vives also contributed to exaggerating the work of these émigrés, spreading the version that it was the work of foreign agents, in order to hide the separatist virulence on the island and the leading role of Cubans in the revolutionary movement.

In the records of the interrogations of those arrested for participating in the separatist plot, collected by Roque Garrigó, the main researcher on the subject, there is no mention of the leading role of these Hispanic Americans, nor that the planned uprising depended on liberating expeditions or resources from Colombia. The aforementioned historian himself considered in his classic work, winner of the contest convened by the Academy of History of Cuba to commemorate the first centenary of this movement, that the financing "depended exclusively on the personal resources of the leaders of the conspiracy, since among them were - and I emphasize it - the most conspicuous of the Cuban population of those days." [2]

Despite the clichés stamped on the historiography, the conspirators of Soles y Rayos hoped to unleash a simultaneous armed uprising in different Cuban localities and occupy power, without depending on a military expedition from the Republic of Colombia, something impossible given the correlation of forces existing at that time in the northern Andean scenario. The Bolivarian influence came, apart from the possibility of receiving some weapons and ammunition, from the admiration for the unique role of the Liberator in the irreversible advances of the continental emancipation process, so they gave his surname to one of the lodges that gave its name to the widespread revolutionary movement.

To try to prove that the conspiracy was carried out by Colombian agents, some authors mention the visit to Cuba of Barrientos, a mysterious representative of Colombia, whose name is unknown, and that of the captain of the Liberator's grenadiers, Antonio Jurado, who had resided on the island until September 1822. It is logical that the government of Bogotá was interested in promoting an independence rebellion in Cuba, that it would reduce the military pressure from Havana on its territory, and that corsair ships from this country frequently attacked the Cuban coasts and Spanish ships, while spreading revolutionary propaganda.

But this does not mean that between 1821 and 1823 a military expedition to Cuba was being prepared in Colombia, something then impracticable for this republic in the midst of a war against the royalist troops in its own territory. Hence the surprise of Francisco de Paula Santander, vice president of Colombia, when he learned of the arrests of those involved in the movement of Soles y Rayos, as shown by what he wrote to Bolívar on November 5, 1823: "On the island of Cuba a conspiracy for independence has been discovered in the previous month. It is asserted that the wealthy proprietors were in on the plan: I have seen this new one in the same Havana papers." [3]

The undisputed leader of the revolutionary movement was a wealthy Cuban businessman, José Francisco Lemus, well known for his important role in the street clashes that took place in Havana between the criollos, classified as o'reillynos or yuquinos, and the Spanish piñeristas, that is, colonialist liberals, a faction that directed the harshest attacks of the peninsular press against him. Lemus had businesses in the United States and New Spain, which forced him to travel frequently abroad and he enjoyed great prestige as an officer of the royal guard corps, military knowledge that allowed him to

excel as an instructor of Creole militias, which since the time of Someruelos functioned segregated from the Spanish.

His influence over these forces, nourished by whites, mulattoes and blacks, was revealed in the events that shook Havana in December 1822 when he appeared at the head of the militias, mostly from outside the walls, concentrated with their weapons in the Plaza del Vapor and in the outskirts of the city. The mobilization was against the Spanish volunteers, supported by the permanent peninsular officers, insubordinate to Captain General Sebastián Kindelán, who carried "wooden spoons to their chests as a symbol or sign of drinking with them the blood of the Creoles" [4] and asked for Lemus' head.

In this tense atmosphere, at a time when the liberation movement was irreversible at the continental level, after the emancipation of Mexico, Central America and Peru - while San Martín and Bolívar had just been interviewed in Guayaquil - young Havanans came to disarm Spanish militiamen and the cries of "Death to the Goths!" were heard for the first time in the streets of the capital! and Long Live Independence! In addition, many Creoles urged Lemus to break with Spain with the support of "the sons of the country and the natives of the Canary Islands". [5]

It was precisely the mobilization of these troops that prevented a war between the two sides and the fall of Captain General Kindelán, as Vives, his successor in office, later recognized: "The conduct of the Havanans in that circumstance was to surround themselves with the government, also meeting at several immediate points, to support it at all costs; during that night the Captain-General was deposed." [6]

The clashes between Spaniards and Creoles that had been escalating for months, both in the streets and in the debates of the press, together with the setback in the rights achieved with the constitution of Cadiz due to the imminent return of absolutism, added to the growing influence of the advances of the continental liberation movement, contributed to accelerate the process of formation of national consciousness in a good part of the Cuban population. delimiting as never before, the fields between the natives of the country and those of the peninsula. Also, the demonstration of strength of the Creoles in the crisis of early December 1822 showed that the path of armed struggle was the only possible one to achieve the independence of Cuba.

This explains Lemus's leading role in the movement of Bolívar's Suns and Rays, which was developing surreptitiously at the same time and reached its climax only eight months after these events. The existing documentation does not allow us to specify the degree of organization that the separatist movement had at that time, but the conditions were ripe for the most important conspiracy of the first quarter of the Cuban century to be forged.

Many historians claim without much foundation that Lemus was a Colombian agent, based on his first statements after being arrested in Guanabacoa by the colonial authorities when they aborted the patriotic conspiracy. In the interrogation of Lemus at the Castillo del Príncipe on August 19, 1823, after being humiliated,

mistreated, reviled and exhibited handcuffed through the streets of Havana, the leader of Soles stated that in July 1817 in Philadelphia he was provisionally given in the name of Colombia – which by the way did not exist at that time. for it was founded two years later - “his rank of Colonel” by “two individuals named Pedro Gual and a certain Torres whose name he does not now remember” [7]. He also stated that subsequently, in March or April 1820, he received the definitive appointment, a document that was never found and that was signed, as he declared in his confession, by Santander, vice president of the Republic of Colombia.

However, in a later letter of his, addressed to Captain General Vives, dated “in my prison of Belén, in Havana, on April 2, 1824”, he retracts, explaining that he attributed to himself that military rank: “in order to save my life, and also to free myself from new outrages, I threw myself into being untruthful, supposing myself to be a citizen and Colonel of the Republic of Colombia, for which purpose I contrived that dislocated and fabulous narrative, which is found in my instructive statement; with it he intended to give some plausibility to my supposed employment, persuaded that if, as a Spaniard, the L[eyes] had been violated in order to run me over without any kind of consideration, while it was ascertained that I was not Colonel of Colombia, I would be treated as such, in the class of prisoner of war, fulfilling the agreement made by our nation with that Republic on November 27, 1820.” [8]

In none of the confessions of those accused of their participation in Soles y Rayos or in the manifestos written by Lemus, is there any allusion to the incorporation of Cuba into Gran Colombia, which some authors attribute as the objective of the conspiracy, but to the constitution of an independent state. For her, they designed the first national flag, “which had turquoise blue in its center and a large sun with its rays stamped in the middle point,” like the one adopted in 1818 by the United Provinces of South America.

Lemus’s two main proclamations were addressed to “all the inhabitants,” as “a native of this island of Cubanacán and head of the first republican troops of his homeland,” and bear the slogan “Health, Independence, Freedom.” The revolutionary plan rested exclusively, according to the members of the revolutionary conspiracy imprisoned in 1823, on the armed uprising of the Creole militias.

Signed by Lemus, as general-in-chief of these forces, from his headquarters in Guadalupe, on the walls of Havana, and published by the printers Miguel del Oro (who died in prison) and Pedro Pascasio Arias, the two main proclamations, which never circulated, outlined the advanced political-social program of the planned independence revolution. They referred to the establishment of a democratic republic, the success of which depended on its own military capabilities and the promptness to create a new institutional framework.

For this reason, Lemus himself wrote, it is necessary “to seek in all our towns and fields, those men who, by their honesty and patriotism, deserve our representation in a legislative assembly that will constitute the republic,” [9] directed against the peninsular colonialists and the elite of rich slave-owning planters allied with

Spain, which eliminates “the ridiculous ranks and hierarchies [...] of the virtuous character of the free man”, for the benefit of the Creoles, whites, mulattoes and blacks, with the explicit commitment to value the redemption of the “unfortunate slaves, alleviating their horrific destiny”. [10]

The most significant thing about the programmatic documents prepared by Lemus from the social point of view is precisely that he courageously established his position on the thorny issue of slavery, where he not only expresses his concern for the situation of the discriminated black population, but also hints at his proposal to abolish the disgraceful institution with compensation. offering an active participation to this exploited sector in the new republic, which was undoubtedly unprecedented and was the most advanced of his proposals. In his words: “Let us treat these unfortunate slaves with gentleness, alleviating their horrible fate, while the representatives of our country propose the means of their happy redemption, without prejudice to particular interests: they are children of our own God.” [11]

The name of Cubanacán given to the republic that was to be established has attracted attention, taken from the one that had, according to the chroniclers, an old Taino chiefdom in the center of the island. The name underlines the autochthony of the revolutionary movement, since the conspirators considered themselves legitimate heirs of the indigenous resistance to the Spanish conquest, which was in tune with the common imaginary of the indigenist matrix of the liberators of that generation, who located the roots of their emerging republics in the original cultures of the American continent. In addition, the term “Cubacans” applied to the natives of the island was justified, since at the beginning of the nineteenth century the term “Cubans” was not yet very widespread and could be confused with the term given to the natives of Santiago de Cuba.

The advance of absolutism in Spain and the onslaught of Ferdinand VII against the constitutional regime, which had disillusioned the Creoles, and the news recycled by the local press in July 1823 of supposed negotiations with England, to transfer the island to its sovereignty, precipitated the plans for the uprising. To avert these dangers, a proclamation announced: “the first soldiers of our nascent republic are already assembled” and “in their ranks we have fathers, sons, brothers, relatives, friends and countrymen” to “rid our country of a corrupt government.”

The leader of Soles considered that “the time has come to separate ourselves forever from the dominion of the Spanish nation, which [...] for more than three hundred years it has not ceased to inflict on us all kinds of torments, humiliations and contempt,” [12] to unite the island to the constellation of Spanish-American republics that have already conquered their independence. And he emphatically capitalized that “WE WILL LOSE OUR EXISTENCE. OR WE WILL RID OUR HOMELAND OF ALL FOREIGN DOMINATION.” [13]

All indications are that the armed uprising was set for August 1823, probably in its second half, although the exact date is unknown, which does not appear in any document. The leading

scholar on the subject, Garrigó, wrote: "because of the statements [...] we can deduce that indeed August 16 was the right time for the cry for freedom," since it is only known that "by August 22 the elements committed [in Matanzas] had to be armed to join the contingents that would come from Havana." [14]

The researcher himself wonders: "Was it thought of imprisoning the first authority on the island? Was there any thought of occupying one or more of the fortresses of the capital? Was it in his plans to take possession of Havana by one or by the concurrence of all the measures previously announced?" [15] In reality, nothing is known about the strategy or the combative actions envisaged by Lemus to overthrow the colonial government, although the key to success depended on the Creole militias, which had to respond to his call to seize power, which had been about to happen only a few months earlier.

The first place on the island where the thread of the conspiracy was discovered was in Nuevitas, which was an extension of the revolutionary movement that was deeply rooted in Port-au-Prince and Trinidad. The main figure of the Cadena de Bolívar who operated there was Francisco Agüero Velasco, known as Frasquito. Persecuted since April of that year, the authorities learned from other informers and infiltrators of the revolutionary plot that was being hatched both in the central region and in Havana and Matanzas, the latter places where from the beginning of August - on the 14th of that month Vives informed Madrid - the main suspects began to be arrested. including Lemus himself.

On the night of August 16, says the Havana chronicler Agustín Cervantes, "the entire garrison was under arms, the National Militia was distributed in different points inside and outside the walls, the commissioners of neighborhoods of ronda walked," [16] because as it was later known, by the report of the prosecutor of the Royal Chamber of Crime, the Venezuelan Francisco Hernández de la Joya: "Evil had invaded the whole island like a mighty river, in its avenue it extends over vast fields." [17]

From that moment on, the persecution and capture of the conspirators was unleashed in Pinar del Río, Havana and Matanzas, territories where 602 people would be prosecuted, 286 from Havana, 121 from Guanajay, 125 from San Antonio and the rest of the other western towns. On September 25, 1823, one of the prosecutors reported to Captain General Vives that: "Many colored people have been initiated; and there are those who assure in their statement that all the cab drivers of this City [of Havana] were sworn in." [18] Vives himself commented in a confidential document on the true magnitude and scope of the conspiracy: "At the beginning of the investigations it seemed that in this city only the formex of the contagion was found and that if anything it extended only to the large towns where some symptoms were felt among the people related to the Capital; but this has not been the case, for the greatest number of proselytes consist of peasants, peasants, and colored people, seduced by some mayors, aldermen, and neighbors of the same rank. The association known in this city by the name of Soles and in the interior by that of Soles de Bolívar, had made great progress in many towns." [19]

In the repressive operation, a hundred weapons were seized - only in the house of the Venezuelan merchant Juan Jorge Peoli four boxes of rifles and several carbines were found - gunpowder, standard bearers, cockades and colored ribbons, along with three flags of the Republic of Cubanacán. Other conspirators were seized with knives or even pistols with a machete to attach to the barrel of a firearm.

No more supplies were found, since the main weapons planned were those of the militiamen themselves, such as those commanded in Matanzas by José Francisco Teurbe Tolón, who according to his accusers had asked the men under his command "to gather the weapons they can and keep them in their homes." [20] For a long time, members of the Rational Knights of Matanzas lodge had been instructed to join the militias so as not to arouse suspicion, to obtain military training and access to weapons.

On December 23, 1823, in the Royal Crime Chamber, installed in Havana with judges from Port-au-Prince, sentence was handed down and the twenty-three most committed white Creoles were sentenced to be sent to Spain under a registry (estrangement), and the remaining conspirators to various prison sentences and fines, although most were acquitted and almost fifty managed to escape. However, six black men were hanged in San Antonio de los Baños.

It is striking that very few Hispanic Americans living in Cuba, to whom some historians attribute the authorship of the movement, were prosecuted. That is the case of the former president of the United Provinces of New Granada, the physician José Fernández Madrid, who was able to remain on the island unmolested until June 1825, when he returned to his country.

Several of the participants in the conspiracy were previously in the United States, such as José Aniceto Iznaga, Gaspar Betancourt Cisneros, José Fructuoso del Castillo, José Agustín Arango, as well as José Antonio Miralla and Vicente Rocafuerte. Many of the main conspirators after aborting the uprising also found their first refuge there, including José Teurbe Tolón, José María Heredia, Manuel Madruga, Pedro Pascasio Arias and Roque Hernández de Lara. Lemus, condemned to exile in Spain, managed to escape in Gibraltar and joined many of his comrades in Mexico on June 4, 1826, where he continued to fight for Cuban emancipation until we lose track of him.

In the United States, the conspirators soon understood that the U.S. government was opposed to the independence of Cuba, since that same year (April 28) the policy that has been called the "ripe fruit" had been officially adopted, that is, the defense of the colonial status quo of the largest of the Antilles until the conditions allowed its incorporation into that nation. Disillusioned, the patriots sought the support of Colombia and Mexico, which happened after and not before the failure of the conspiracy of the Suns and Rays of Bolívar. Much later, some of the participants, disappointed and powerless, gave rise to the annexationist tendency. But that's another story.

Very few researchers, among them Francisco Pérez Guzmán [21], Hernán Venegas and above all Jorge Ibarra Cuesta, have made a fair assessment of the true meaning of this pioneering independence

movement and its main figures, which must be rescued and placed in its rightful place in our history on the occasion of its bicentennial. Ibarra himself, one of the most prominent representatives of the most recent revolutionary historiography, rightly stated: "The decade of 1820 provided the history of Cuba with a nucleus of patriots who integrated with Varela the pro-independence vanguard. The fact that they often devoted themselves to the organizational work of the independence movement and not to its preaching has contributed to the fact that their personalities have not been studied with due rigor. However, the discourse of Francisco de Agüero and that of José Francisco Lemus included, with a certain sense, more political and social demands than that of Father Varela, while at the same time they had the practical task of undertaking conspiracies against the colonial power." [22]

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