
José Martí came to fight...and became a star

By: Yuris Nórido
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Much is being talked about José Martí's final days.

It spurs controversy.

Some say Martí should not have come to Cuba and should have stayed in the United States organizing things from afar, providing intellectual leadership.

Those who say so prove they did not get to know him and ignore his moral stature by not understanding his life ethics.

The man of thinking and action was the same man. And the Homeland, in his view, was the most important thing. The supreme poetry. It is the altar, not the pedestal.

Martí had to come. He had to be in the battlefield. He had to share the same fate of those men he rallied by himself.

Some say this decision was suicidal taking into consideration he was not a career soldier.

But those who re-read its celebrated *Diario de campaña* (Campaign Diary) will not find in there the voice of a man bidding farewell to life, but the voice of a fighter, a brave man, a soldier being torn between the contradictions emerging from an arduous, necessary war. But he, instead, is committed to this war, which means he is committed

to the liberty of his nation.

And simultaneously, you can find in those pages the lyrical and emotional narrative of a quest, the bedazzlement before the beauty of a landscape.

Martí is the politician, the military leader...But he is still the poet.

With a simple and clear style, short phrases which contrast with the long sentences in so many articles and speeches, the Hero tells us the story. And there is poetry on it:

"The Moon peeps out, red, under a cloud. We arrived at a pebble beach (the little beach at the foot of Cajobabo). I stay in the boat the last one emptying it," he wrote on April 11th.

What an emotion! He must have felt a huge emotion when he set foot

again in Cuba amid an unknown landscape, but which he embraced and felt deep inside.

The Campaign Diary is a roadmap, but seasoned here and there with colorful notes.

On April 14th, he pointed out:

"Mambi day. We left at 5:00. We crossed a river covering our hip, and then we crossed it back: high bagasse on shore. Later, on foot, with a lot of weight on me, the very high hill, full of thin-leave lancewoods, Cuba's majagua, and star-apple trees. We saw, nestled near a milk pan, the first hutia."

And he left testimony here and there of what he feels and he is inspired by:

"And all through the day, what light, what air, how full my chest was. How light my anguished body! Looking out from the ranch, I see, at the top of the crest behind it, a dove and a star."

We must read the Diary. It is a very useful document (perhaps the most useful) to reconstruct that final journey of the Apostle. Martí is meticulous in the telling of eventful journeys.

He wrote on April 22nd:

"A day of restless waiting. Bathing in the river, with waterfalls and ponds, and large stones, and eating sugar cane by the riverside. My blue clothes are washed, my jacket. Around noon Luis's brothers appear proud of the homemade meal they brought for us: fried eggs, fried pork and a large cornbread cake. We eat under the rain, and after cutting a patch with the machetes, they set up a tent, covered with the rubber tarps."

There are moments of peace and also the harshness of combat. April 25th:

«Day of war. - We are approaching through sheer wilderness, already near Guantánamo, hostile in the first war, towards Arroyo Hondo. We lost our way. The thorns cutting us deep. The vines lacing around our necks and whipping us.

We walk through a forest of green calabash trees, attached to the bare trunk, or a sparse space one from each other. People are emptying the fruits, matching their mouths. At eleven, a big shooting. Rained shots, that rumble; against veiled and deaf shots. Like our very feet is the combat: three bullets hitting the trunks enter heavy. "How beautiful is a shooting from afar!" Says the graceful boy from San Antonio - a boy. "It's more beautiful up close," says the old man. »

But the main interest rests, obviously, in everything he reveals about the relationship between the three great personalities of this war: Gómez, Maceo, Martí himself.

Martí flies high, he is above quarrels and intimate resentments. He recognizes the greatness of the work and places himself at the command of that great work.

April 28th:

"I wake up to work. At 9 they line up, and Gómez, sincere and concise gives a speech: I speak, to the sun. And to work. That this strength remains tied in the united spirit: to fix, and order, the active and noble war: to open paths with the North: to quench any attempt, to disturb the war with promises."

With Antonio Maceo the relationship is more complex. Writes on May 5th:

Come on, with all the strength. Suddenly, riders. Maceo, with a golden horse, in a gray Holland suit: the saddle is set in silver, graceful and with stars. He went out to look for us, because he has his men on the march: towards the nearby sugar mill, to Mejorana, Maspon goes to have lunch ready for a hundred (...)

"I cannot untangle Maceo from the conversation:" but you stay with me or do you go with Gómez? " And he speaks to me, cutting off my words, as if I were the continuation of the legal government, and its representative."

It must have been hard for José Martí to argue with Maceo, with the hero of so many battles, with the idol of thousands, the man whom he admired and respected, whom he knew was essential.

They defended two different conceptions of war. In La Mejorana the debate was rough. They did not agree. And both leaders had their reasons.

The meeting between Gómez, Maceo and Martí, at a certain moment, took place without witnesses. Ground for speculation.

Martí closes his notes for the day:

"And just like lying down, and sad ideas, we went to sleep."

The pages from May 6th were ripped off. Historians have not reached an agreement. Who ripped them off? What was their fate?

Some believe that it could have been Martí himself, in an exercise in contention. Putting anger aside before writing. Think with a clear head. Look with perspective.

A war is not a brotherly prank. There are small wars within a great war.

That was Martí's war. But also that of Gómez and Maceo. That of all worthy Cubans. Martí had to find a way.

On May 15th he writes, he is again the poet:

"The night rain, the mud, the bath in Contramaestre: the caress of the running water: the silk of the water."

And on the 17th, two days before his death, the diary closes. He closes it, not knowing that he is closing:

"And those who are coming tell me about Rosa Moreno, the widow farmer who sent Rabí her only son Melesio, 16 years old:" your father died there: I can't go anymore: you see. They roast bananas, and mash cow steak, with a stone in the pylon, for the newcomers. The water from the river is muddy in Contramaestre the river overflowed- and Valentin brings me a jar of sweet boiled fig leaves."

No. Martí did not come to Cuba to be killed. He came to fight, to give his body and soul.

Death was the accident.

And with death, he became a star.

Beacon.

Light.

Translated by Sergio A. Paneque Díaz / CubaSí Translation Staff
