

INTRODUCTION

Revolution and exile. This book is about a man and his exile community in Key West struggling against the odds during thirty years to achieve revolution and an independent Cuban republic dedicated to the welfare of all its citizens. “*Adelante la revolución*” (Forward the revolution) was his mantra; immediate armed action is what he meant. José de los Dolores de la Encarnación Poyo y Remírez de Estenóz (1836–1911) died a little over a century ago, but his political career as a revolutionary nationalist and the history of his insurgent community remind us during this era of global rebellion and upheaval about the power of grievance, ideology, leadership, and popular aspirations to mobilize people and communities for radical action and change.

Cuban independence required upheaval and violence and involved a leap of faith informed with ideals and convictions, particular historical circumstances, personal pain and sacrifice, and the patriotic fervor of religious intensity. Optimistic and acting with an aura of certainty, though not without distracting bouts of self-doubt and pessimism, Poyo took a leap of faith that ultimately translated into practical methods of revolutionary action. Too much intellectual pondering threatened paralysis, which he avoided at all costs. This revolutionary imperative defined Poyo’s nationalist career in Key West as a newspaper editor, cigar factory reader, activist, orator, social critic, Freemason, and even as a husband and father.

Poyo lived during an era of nationalism and political and socioeconomic change in Latin America, a period when nations struggled to emerge from the remnants of the Spanish and Portuguese empires. Thousands of Hispanics were exiles during the nineteenth century, unexpectedly torn from their homelands by political disruption, violence, or civil war. Many sought refuge

in the United States—especially Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Cubans. Poyo was one of those exiles.

In their new places of residence, they participated in building communities that reflected their traditions and heritage. Often they converted immigrants who arrived for economic reasons into exiles, demonstrating that the circumstance of departure was not the only factor in the creation of exile mentalities and communities. They created political organizations, newspapers, strategies for insurrection, and even clandestine armies, all the while finding ways to make a living. Although the exile community was ideologically and socioeconomically diverse, its members generally desired to influence events in their countries of origin and return home.

Estimates of the number of Cubans living in the United States during the nineteenth century vary from a low of 20,000 to perhaps a more realistic 100,000, though many more came for business trips, vacations, or short-term residence. Smaller Cuban communities also formed in Venezuela, Central America, Mexico, Peru, Colombia, Jamaica, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. In Europe they gathered mostly in France and to a lesser extent in England, but the favorite destination remained the United States.

Cuban contacts with the Anglo-American colonies began with a brief British occupation of Havana in 1762 during the Seven Years' War. This encounter laid the foundation for trade between Cuba and the American colonies that expanded throughout the nineteenth century after Cuba replaced Haiti as the dominant sugar export economy in the Caribbean. Cuban communities in the United States included many white and upwardly mobile immigrants who were merchants, intellectuals and writers, journalists, doctors, dentists, lawyers, and entrepreneurs. Others worked in a variety of enterprises common to large cities. Thousands had come to the United States for their education, eschewing the traditional European destinations. They attended elite schools such as Harvard and Columbia; business, commercial, and technical schools; and even boarding schools where they completed secondary education. These new generations took advantage of business contacts and networks, learned English, and generally expanded the economic opportunities and ties of the Cuban community.

After the Civil War, a booming Cuban cigar industry in the United States broadened the social and racial composition of the migratory flow. Cigar workers traveled on a circular loop between Havana, New York, New

Orleans, and Florida, taking advantage of changing economic circumstances and employment possibilities. Cubans of all classes and races established vibrant communities, became citizens, practiced democracy, participated in a dynamic capitalist economy, and integrated and transformed their traditional cultural ways in new community settings. Cubans worshipped in a variety of religious traditions, produced a distinguished body of literature, supported theatre and musical arts, and even pioneered the game of baseball in Florida's communities.¹

These communities became congenial settings for the cultivation of nationalist thinking, and many Cubans developed a distinct exile identity. The first exiles arrived during and soon after the Latin American wars of independence (1810–1824), which left only Cuba and Puerto Rico still under direct Spanish rule. Some Cubans instigated insurrection, but entrenched Spanish and Cuban elites who were prospering from a sugar boom, the growing slave trade, and a generally comfortable relationship with Spain remained loyal. However, within a few years many Cubans on the island became disillusioned and activists began seeking change. They wanted political representation in the Spanish Cortes (parliament), the abolition of the slave trade and eventually slavery itself, and a freer economic and commercial system. When these ideas did not gain traction during the 1840s through the 1860s, many activists departed for the United States. A Cuban insurrection against Spain's rule known as the Ten Years' War erupted in 1868 that the Spanish did not completely defeat until 1880. Over the next fifteen years, expatriate communities played a critical role in organizing a second rebellion in 1895, which eventually sparked the Spanish-American War in 1898, ending Spanish rule and setting the stage for U.S. occupation of Cuba.

After the Ten Years' War, exile activists spoke and wrote freely, engaged in ongoing debates, and influenced opinion in their homeland. Some hoped that Cuba would become annexed to the United States, where they thought it would thrive as a relatively self-governing state of the union, but the vast majority of Cubans wanted absolute independence. Those advocating rebellion and independence disagreed about methods for eliminating Spanish rule and about the political and social order they wanted to see in Cuba. Moderates, who generally lived in middle-class communities in New York and other northern cities, agitated for an eventual war of independence led by the island's Cuban elites. This strategy involved waiting for liberal autonomists

who were seeking an accommodation with Spain to tire and join independence seekers. Their more impatient compatriots in Florida's working-class communities, particularly Key West, urged Cuba's multiracial sectors to embrace an immediate anticolonial armed struggle led by the military veterans of the Ten Years' War.²

Critics referred to Key West as a "bandit-infested cave" and its political activists as fanatics, criminals, and malcontents. Such language was a response to the revolutionary militancy of Key West's Cuban community. Manuel Deulofeu Lleontar's 1904 study instead referred to the Cubans of Key West as "persistent, consequential, self-sacrificing patriots" who had a "perfect conscience of their social and political duties." Deulofeu called on historians to ensure that those who constituted the founding group in Key West were not lost to history.³ In that spirit, this book recovers and highlights the figure of José Dolores Poyo and offers a detailed exploration of a fascinating revolutionary enterprise. Portions of this story have appeared in print over the years (see the bibliography), but this volume is a comprehensive, integrated narrative that draws upon recent archival and newspaper research. My previous book on nineteenth-century Cuban exile communities, *"With All, and for the Good of All": The Emergence of Popular Nationalism in the Cuban Communities of the United States, 1848–1898*, examined expatriate influences on nationalist thought and serves as the basis for this deeper exploration, which examines the concrete and practical aspects of the Cuban revolutionary nationalist tradition in Key West during the same era.

South Florida's importance to the career of José Martí, the gifted political and intellectual leader who offered an inspired and clearly articulated nationalist program, has been recognized, but its distinctive revolutionary character and the systematic process through which it helped prepare, launch, and maintain the independence war has not. Besides highlighting little-remembered but consequential historical actors, this study builds on the foundational work of Deulofeu and Gerardo Castellanos García and narrates the story from an intimate local point of view, transforming Key West's place in the historiography of Cuban independence from a member of the supporting cast to a lead role in sparking insurrection.⁴

The book also adds narrative depth to the popular and grassroots dimensions of Cuba's independence struggle.⁵ From the José Antonio Aponte rebellion in 1812 to the independence war that began in 1895, Cuba's racially diverse

popular classes, including former slaves, free persons of color, working-class urban and rural whites, participated in challenging Spanish colonialism, each group for its own reasons. The Cuban community in Key West was composed largely of these very demographic sectors, and their militancy and predisposition to action produced a reputation for radicalism that many in the established classes on and off the island regarded with suspicion. Spanish authorities kept close tabs on most Cuban exile communities, directing their consular offices to collect intelligence and report regularly, but they paid special attention to Key West for its proximity to the island, its tobacco wealth, its experienced revolutionary leadership, the large number of undefeated and unrepentant veterans, an unpredictable bandit element, and the constant threat the community represented. Even before the end of the Ten Years' War, revolutionary leaders celebrated Key West for its constant activism, determination, and popular traditions, a reputation that stuck and became a badge of honor for its residents and leaders.

In the Cuban struggle for independence, the indispensable military leaders Máximo Gómez, Antonio Maceo, Calixto García, and of course, Martí are well known. But the local grassroots political, labor, business, religious, and cultural leaders who organized and mobilized the Cuban communities in Key West, Tampa, New York, and other cities are not yet appreciated.⁶ These local leaders cultivated and incubated nationalist and revolutionary thought, provided legitimacy to and resources for the primary political leaders, and did the hard work of mobilizing constituencies, securing resources and organizing expeditions. Uncovering the contributions of local leaders forces a reconsideration of the traditional view that the primary leaders single-handedly mobilized nationalist émigré constituencies, an interpretation that posits larger-than-life figures who arrived in Key West and other centers to mold quarrelsome, disorganized, and demoralized communities into viable and effective catalysts for revolution.⁷

Poyo exemplified these important local leaders, and this account is the first comprehensive biography of a Cuban exile community leader in the United States during the period under consideration other than Martí. He was one of numerous important but unheralded exile nationalist leaders in Key West, and his revolutionary career guides this story. Although Poyo is often referred to in historical studies, his multidimensional grassroots work and the role of his newspaper *El Yara*, the longest-lived Cuban exile newspaper of

the nineteenth century, which historian José Luciano Franco referred to as a “*periódico de combate*,” has never been examined in much detail. Through *El Yara* and two decades of nationalist activism, Poyo became Key West’s undisputed leader and most recognized voice for the militarist faction that eventually led the war against Spanish forces that began in 1895.

Poyo, who was especially knowledgeable about Latin American and Spanish affairs and history and sufficiently familiar with political theory to write about the republican and democratic principles necessary for Cuba’s future, believed that Spain would never voluntarily dismantle its colonial system on the island. He operated from an assumption that Spanish colonialism was irreparably dysfunctional and corrupt and that, after decades of failed attempts at reform, it had to be destroyed through whatever means necessary and as soon as possible and replaced with a republic free of slavery that was dedicated to workers’ rights and committed to the welfare of all its citizens. He believed that only revolution could effectively challenge Spain’s intransigent and inflexible three-and-a-half-century colonial grip.

Poyo was what scholars of revolution have referred to as a “task-oriented revolutionary,” a revolutionary who consistently and in a practical way struggled to reach his goal. One resident of Key West characterized him as parochial. He was not uneducated or unsophisticated, but he always focused on mobilizing the local arena and rarely projected his leadership outside the community. He organized armed expeditions and revolutionary cells in Cuba, supported insurgent actions once they began, and believed that small groups of committed and focused activists could make a difference. Poyo embraced the idea of Key West as a vanguard community with a special role to play in promoting and supporting revolution. Community leaders such as Poyo influenced the thinking and actions of the primary nationalist leaders, who saw Key West’s popular constituency, political structures, financial resources, and connections with insurgent groups in Cuba as indispensable for sparking and maintaining insurgency on the island. Poyo’s career highlights the sources, development, and manifestations of Key West’s unrelenting popular and militant commitment to revolution. These efforts ultimately convinced Martí that his path to leadership must travel through south Florida.

For thirty years, Poyo participated in organizing the institutions necessary to create, maintain, and perpetuate revolutionary activism. Clubs, labor unions, and organized cigar factory floors inspired nationalist action.