
El Grito de Lares

Written by NYLJ

The historic and nationalist sentiment behind the date of September 23 in Puerto Rico has been recharged since the killing of Filiberto Ojeda Ríos on that same date in 2005. Although Puerto Rican history has been largely neglected in schools, especially in the United States, young Puerto Ricans and Latinos alike have been inspired to learn on their own the significance of El Grito de Lares.

In the mid 19th century in Puerto Rico, many supporters of independence from Spanish colonial rule and others who simply called for liberal reforms were jailed or exiled. Puerto Rico also suffered at the time a severe economic crisis due to increasing tariffs and taxes imposed by a mercantilist Spain on most import and export goods — the Spanish Crown badly needed these funds to subsidize its troops in an effort to regain control of the Dominican Republic.

Frustrated by the lack of political and economic freedom, and enraged by the continuing repression on the island, an armed rebellion was staged by the pro-independence movement in 1868.

On plans designed by Dr. Ramón Emeterio Betances and Segundo Ruíz Belvis, nearly 1000 rebels gathered on September 23, 1868 in the hacienda of Manuel Rojas, located in the vicinity of Pezuela, on the outskirts of the town of Lares, in the midwest region of Puerto Rico.

Poorly trained and armed, the rebels reached the town by horse and foot around midnight. They confiscated local stores and offices owned by "peninsulares" (Spanish-born men) and took over the city hall. Spanish merchants and local government authorities, considered by the rebels to be enemies of the fatherland, were taken as prisoners. The revolutionaries then entered the town's church and placed the revolutionary flag (the Lares flag), knitted by Mariana Bracetti, on the High Altar as a sign that the revolution had begun and the Republic of Puerto Rico was proclaimed under the presidency of Francisco Ramirez Medina. Many of the Puerto Rican rebels were African slaves who had escaped and in hiding. Others were middle and upper class creole that were motivated by the idea of freedom to develop economic opportunities without the restrictions of a foreign feudal power. All slaves who had joined the movement were declared free citizens. The revolt would be known as El Grito de Lares.

Spanish forces eventually ended the insurrection when the rebels attempted to take the next town, San Sebastian del Pepino. Even though the revolt in itself failed, its overall outcome was positive, since Spain granted more political autonomy to the island.

Spanish journalist José Pérez Morís wrote an extensive book against the Grito and its participants that, while biased heavily against them, served as one of the most accurate accounts of the events from a historical perspective.

Although the revolt was put down, the rebellion never ended. The years immediately following the Grito, there were protests and skirmishes against the Spanish authorities in Las Marías, Adjuntas, Utuado, Vieques, Bayamón, Ciales and Toa Baja. El Grito de Lares would live on as a historic day and an inspiration to the independence movement throughout Puerto Rico's existence as a colonial possession.

On the request of José de Diego, the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez was founded on September 23, 1911 to commemorate El Grito de Lares.

September 23rd is a National Holiday in Puerto Rico and the town of Lares is a Historic Site, known as the birthplace of Puerto Rican Nationalism.

The situation has not changes much in the last 138 years. After the Unites States took over Puerto Rico as colonial ruler (as a result of the Spanish-American war), the independence movement was largely outlawed. Displaying the Puerto Rican flag was against the law from 1898 to 1952, an interesting thought when one reflects on the sea of flags during the National Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York City. And members and leaders who sought the creation of a sovereign republic were always at odds with United States and insular government.

The United States attacked Puerto Rico in a military operation, bombing and invading the town of Jayuya with troops and tanks during a revolt, which began on October 30, 1950, known as El Grito de Jayuya. Part of the town was destroyed by Army artillery and the United States declared martial law throughout the island.

Many leaders and members of the independence movement continued to be jailed with unusually long sentences or assassinated by agents of the insular and federal government, even after the signing of the Free Associated State of Puerto Rico constitution in 1952.

The most renowned figure of the independence movement in Puerto Rico in the 20th century, Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos, was allegedly subjected to radioactive experiments while imprisoned. He suffered a stroke as a result and died shortly after being released.

On September 23, 2005, the FBI killed Filiberto Ojeda Ríos, one of the most noted Puerto Rican independence figures of the late 20th century, turning him into an instant martyr of the independence movement.

The economy of Puerto Rico is still very poor -- about half the United States GDP and more than 30% lower than the poorest state in the Union. However, because of import and export laws, which are set by the United States, products and services are expensive and jobs are scarce. Like Spain in 1868, the United States badly needs funds to subsidize wars and control over other countries.