



PUERTO RICO'S

REVOLT FOR
INDEPENDENCE

*El Grito
de Lares*

OLGA JIMÉNEZ
DE WAGENHEIM

Puerto Rico's Revolt for Independence

EL GRITO DE LARES

Olga Jiménez de Wagenheim



Markus Wiener Publishing
Princeton & New York

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For information write to: Markus Wiener Publishing, Inc.
114 Jefferson Road, Princeton, NJ 08540

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wagenheim, Olga Jiménez de.

Puerto Rico's revolt for independence: el Grito de Lares/
Olga Jiménez de Wagenheim.

Originally published in 1985

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-55876-071-7 (pbk.)

1. Puerto Rico—History—Insurrection, 1868. 2. Puerto
Rico—Economic conditions. 3. Puerto Rico—Social conditions.

I. Title

F1973.W34 1993

972.95'04—dc20

93-15391

CIP

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

Puerto Rico's Revolt for Independence

EL GRITO DE LARES

**To my father Santos Jiménez,
who defied tradition and
sent me to school**

Preface

The Spanish edition of this book, *El Grito de Lares: sus causas y sus hombres* first appeared in Puerto Rico under the imprint of Ediciones Huracan (1984). It was extensively reviewed by scholars, history buffs, and journalists in the local press, as well as in some academic journals. It was rewarding to see that they found the book to be a balanced study of a very important, and highly emotional, event.

Shortly after it appeared in print, it was adopted for classroom use in courses of Puerto Rican history offered by the major universities and colleges throughout the island. The continuous interest in the book has recently led Ediciones Huracan to come out with a third edition.

Interest in the book by scholars and students in the field of Puerto Rican studies in the United States has led to the present edition in English that is affordable for college students.

My interest in the **Puerto Rican uprising, known as El Grito de Lares**, was first awakened when I was an undergraduate student at the University of Puerto Rico. Although I had no idea at the time that I would one day write a book on the subject, I knew then that I was not satisfied with the accounts provided by the materials I was reading. But as often happens, other interests claimed my attention until years later.

Having by then co-edited a book of documents on Puerto Rico's history, I was aware that much of the official documentary evidence surrounding El Grito de Lares was for the first time available in Puerto Rico. From 1898 to the mid-1970s, the bulk of the island's documents regarding its colonial period under Spain had been laying unclassified in the basement of the Library of Congress. But the persistence of the late historian Dr. Arturo Morales Carrion had changed that, and the documents had not only been returned to the Puerto Rican government, but were accessible to researchers in the archive of San Juan.

An extensive review of the secondary literature, and more mature considerations of the subject, led me to formulate a research plan that would enable me to answer some of the unanswered questions, as well as to correct many of the flagrant contradictions about "the facts" that permeated the available writings about the Lares Uprising and its players. This book is the product of that search.

As with any book of this scope, the present study could not have been carried out without the pioneering work of others. To the historians Salvador Brau, Lidio Cruz Monclova, Loida Figueroa, Labor Gomez Acevedo, and Arturo Morales Carrion, among others, I will always be indebted for their valuable roles in

bringing to light the importance of the Lares Uprising. I also extended my gratitude to the many poets, artists and journalists who every September commemorated the Lares Rebellion and its rebels. I was particularly touched by the lyrical works of the late Juan Antonio Corretjer.

A generous grant from the Ford Foundation made it possible for me to support myself and to devote my time solely to the research of this topic for an entire year. Without this support my task would have undoubtedly been more difficult.

Among the individuals who helped me locate important documents was Hector Vazquez, then Director of the Puerto Rican Forum of New York City. He was kind enough to give me a xerox copy of an entire “pieza” of the Lares documents that had come into his possession many years earlier. His help is deeply appreciated.

I am also especially grateful to the many persons in the Puerto Rican archives who made my task easier by offering leads on documents that appeared outside the boxes I was reviewing. Among them, I would like to especially thank the archivists Eduardo Leon and Luis de la Rosa of the Archivo General de Puerto Rico. They, more than anyone, made my work a lot easier by taking the time to locate many unclassified papers that later proved enormously helpful to this work.

Among the many other persons I want to thank are Don Angel Vega, of the Archivo Municipal of Mayaguez, the staff of the Centro de Investigaciones Historicas at the University of Puerto Rico, at Rio Piedras, and the members of the archivo Historico Nacional and the Biblioteca Nacional of Spain in Madrid for their help in helping me to secure copies of documents related to the Grito de Lares and its rebels.

Outside of the academic world, I also incurred debts of gratitude with family and friends. My friends and colleagues Gloria Rodriguez and Israel Rivera went out of their way to make me feel at home by letting me share their apartment for several months while I carried out the research for the book. My sister Norma Jiménez took charge of my two young children for extended periods of time while I went back and forth between New Jersey and San Juan. How I could have done the research required for this book without her help is something I cannot imagine.

Finally, I would be remiss not to mention that without the encouragement and shared sacrifice of my husband Kal Wagenheim and our children David and Maria, the pursuit of my goals may have never materialized.

*Olga Jiménez de Wagenheim
Maplewood, New Jersey
April 1993*

Introduction

On 23 September 1868, between 600 and 1,000 men, the majority of them creoles from western Puerto Rico, rose in the town of Lares to demand independence from Spain. By midnight they had taken over the municipal seat of government, deposed the Spanish officials, and carried them off to jail along with the major Spanish merchants of the area. They declared Puerto Rico independent, installed a provisional government, abolished the *libreta* system, and offered freedom to any slave joining the rebel cause.

By the next afternoon, the rebels were routed by the militia of Pepino and pursued by the regular troops from Aguadilla and Arecibo. Having struck one week before the date agreed on, the rebels thought it would be best to wage a guerrilla war from the hills until other towns seconded their cry and their exiled leader Ramón E. Betances arrived with the ship, weapons, and recruits he had secured in Saint Thomas and Santo Domingo.

Neither plan materialized and with the ports closely watched by the Spanish soldiers the rebels found themselves trapped in hills that offered little cover. The untimely discovery of their plot had allowed the colonial authorities to put into operation a counterinsurgency plan that prevented the rebels from obtaining any outside support. Poorly armed and without aid or protection, the rebels were easily captured by the Spanish troops pursuing them.

Except for the 20 who managed to escape, the eight who died in action, and the seven who were summarily tried by the War Council, the majority of the insurgents were turned over to the civil courts. Four months later, the Spanish government, itself a product of a liberal takeover during the September 1868 revolution, freed all Puerto Rican prisoners by declaring a general amnesty. While no one was executed or kept in jail more than four months, 80 of the rebel prisoners died in jail from a yellow fever epidemic.

Yet, neither the short duration of the armed struggle nor the fact that the rebels failed to liberate the island has diminished the significance of the Grito de Lares. On the contrary, that historical event has grown in importance for an increasing number of Puerto Ricans since the 1930s. The founding leaders of the Nationalist Party declared the Grito de Lares a symbol of Puerto Rican identity and called upon the Puerto Ricans to pay tribute to

the revolutionary patriots. Every year since the early 1930s thousands of islanders visit the town of Lares on 23 September to honor the Lares rebels.

In recent years, the Grito de Lares has also been recognized by government officials of various political views. For example, in 1969 Governor Luis A. Ferré, an advocate of statehood for Puerto Rico, declared 23 September a national holiday. Also, the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, created by the government of the Commonwealth, declared Lares an historical site and placed a plaque in its plaza to commemorate the uprising.

Despite the present recognition of the importance of the Grito de Lares, there is only one book-length treatise devoted to it. This work was written four years after the uprising took place by José Pérez Moris, a loyalist Spaniard. His main purpose in recording the event was to discredit the revolutionaries and the Puerto Rican liberals who since the uprising had been petitioning Spain for reforms. The few other accounts of the Lares revolt that were written during the nineteenth century were the works of creole liberals who did their utmost to downplay its importance and scope before the Spanish officials. The fact that Puerto Rico remained a colony of Spain until 1898 may help to explain why pro-Lares literature did not appear until this century.

It was with the emergence of the Nationalist Party that a revisionist literature about the Grito de Lares was born. Essentially written by the political ideologues of the party and persons sympathetic to the liberation cause, the new literature identified Lares as the birthplace of Puerto Rican nationalism and the revolt as an example to be emulated. Caught between the devastating conditions of the economic depression of the 1930s and United States colonialism, the Nationalists sought to identify with the 1868 rebels.

In the following decades many articles and essays were written about the Lares revolt and the patriots who plotted it. Unfortunately, the majority of these writings are plagued by errors and generally lack the most basic documentation. Only a few of them were written by scholars. These, although generally documented, suffer from the tendency of viewing the Lares uprising as an extension of the biography of the revolutionary leaders who launched it. In particular, most of these works equate the revolt and its motives with the work of Ramón Emeterio Betances, the creole physician in exile who became the leader of the conspiracy. The motives and actions of the hundreds of creoles who went into the battlefield even though Betances could not join them were never discussed in any of these essays.

In the last eight years, the works of Ricardo Camuñas and Laird Bergad have followed a different path by studying the social and economic motives that produced the uprising. By focusing on the conditions of the society of Lares over a period of 20 years, the authors try to demonstrate that the revolt was local in scope and economically motivated. Bergad's work is a sophisticated socio-economic analysis of the Lares society that proves to be

very valuable for understanding the local antagonisms that could have predisposed the creoles of that town to the revolutionary literature. Yet, by focusing strictly on the local conditions and the economic motives, Bergad has obscured the important role that was played by the revolutionary leaders in shaping the uprising. Thus his interpretation of the Lares revolt represents the other extreme of the purely political interpretation.

In this study we will attempt to close the gap between the material and the ideological interpretations by integrating them with several other factors that also contributed to shaping the forces that were unleashed in the uprising. It is our premise that the mere presence of either social antagonisms between the Spaniards and the creoles, or the appearance of political ideologies calling for revolution were not in themselves enough cause to lead the discontent into an armed confrontation. It should be remembered that Spain had a role to play in these matters and could have easily placated the creole dissidents by granting them the few reforms they requested in 1867. It should also be noted that between the urban revolutionary leaders and the hundreds of exploited creoles in the rural countryside there had to exist a connecting link that allowed them to work together toward a common goal.

Throughout this study I will try to answer the following questions: Why did the Lares uprising occur in 1868 and not decades earlier, when other Spanish American colonies went to war with Spain? What forces delayed the insurrectionary spirit in Puerto Rico? What were the specific as well as the general motives behind the Lares revolt? Who were the rebels who rose in Lares? Why did they fail to liberate the island? What impact did their actions have on the post insurrectionary relationships between the colony and the metropolis?

The research for this study was primarily done in the Archivo General de Puerto Rico (AGPR), the Archivo Municipal de Mayagüez (AMM), and the Centro de Investigaciones Históricas (CIH) of the University of Puerto Rico. Several documents were also obtained in microfilm from the Biblioteca Nacional de Cuba, and the Biblioteca and Archivo Histórico Nacional in Madrid. The bulk of the documentation for this work came from primary sources until now not used by other scholars. Months were spent reading through hundreds of testimonies given by the rebels when they were captured. Official correspondence between various judges, Audiencia, the office of the Governor and the military court were read and compared against other sources of information.

Among the municipal documents consulted the most useful were those of Lares, San Sebastián, and Camuy. The municipal documents of Mayagüez, although rich in content, are a nightmare to work with, for they were bound into book form without any classification whatsoever. Mayagüez also lacks the *Protocolos Notariales* (Notary Records) that were so helpful in the case of the other municipalities in tracing the social and economic standing of many of the rebels.

Several secondary sources were also used to establish the historical chronology up to the 1860s. The interpretation of well-known events such as the *Cédula de Gracias*, or the Reforms of Charles III are my contribution and not those of the authors, unless I specifically state otherwise. Of particular interest were the studies of several leading historians such as Salvador Brau, Lidio Cruz Monclova, Arturo Morales Carrión, Loida Figueroa, and Labor Gómez Acevedo. Of the specialized studies that proved invaluable were those of Fernando Picó, Francisco A. Scarano, Luis E. González Vales, Ricardo Camuñas, Laird Bergad, Estela Cifre de Loubriel, Astrid Iguina, among others. Relating to the Lares uprising, the best secondary source to date is still the 1872 work by José Pérez Moris.

This book is divided into five chapters and a conclusion. Chapter I describes the colonization up to the late eighteenth century and compares it with the same process in Spanish America. It analyzes the factors that delayed the insurrectionary stage in Puerto Rico and demonstrates that following the eruption of war in Spanish America, Spain accelerated its colonization of Puerto Rico via a series of reforms and imperial controls. By analyzing the colonial policies Spain adopted after the 1760s, the chapter explains the changes the society underwent and how the colony became increasingly more dependent on Spain.

Chapter II discusses the motives that led the rebels to declare war against Spain in 1868. It evaluates the rebel literature and extrapolates from it the many reasons the colony had to rebel against the metropolis. It also studies the social and economic standing of the rebel leaders and demonstrates that a great many of them were resentful of, as well as in debt to, the recently arrived immigrants, particularly the Spanish merchants.

Chapter III discusses the political conditions in the colony and contrasts them with the aspirations of the creoles and the ever present promises by Spain. It describes the unfulfilled promises of 1867 and the exile of the liberal intellectuals as the catalytic agents that led to the decision among some of them that Puerto Rico would be better off without Spain. It traces also the steps taken by the revolutionary movement and the counterinsurgency plan developed by the government.

Chapter IV explains how the conspiracy was betrayed and revises the explanation offered by José Pérez Moris. It states the reasons and preparations that led to the change of date of the attack. It describes, in detail, the attack on Lares and corrects a number of errors of the more traditional literature. It analyzes the actions of the provisional rebel government and demonstrates that its program was inadequate to attract support from several sectors of the creole society.

Chapter V focuses on the capture and legal proceedings of the rebels, the struggles over the prisoners between the civil and military courts, the testimonies given by the insurgents, and the outcomes of the sentences. It

discusses the treatment of the prisoners by the civil and military authorities and explains why Spain, through its representative in Puerto Rico, decided to end the proceedings with a generous amnesty for all.

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O'Reilly's study¹ reported that the island had only 44,883 persons, of which 5,037 were slaves. These lived scattered throughout the island, far from the seat of government and church. The settlers also preferred to live far away from one another in the rural countryside. As he put it:

In the towns, the capital included, there are few permanent inhabitants besides the curate; the others are always in the country, except Sundays and feast days, when those living near a church come to hear mass.

He was appalled by the general ignorance of the settlers. The social customs and the conditions in which they lived were summarized by O'Reilly:

To form an idea of how these natives live, it is enough to say that there are only two schools on the island; that outside of the capital and San Germán few know how to read; that they count time by changes in the government, hurricanes, (and) visits from bishops. . . . The principal ones among them, including those of the capital, when in the country, go barefooted and barelegged . . .

The island's economy was basically undeveloped, depending on subsistence farming and illegal trade with the United States and the European colonies in the Caribbean. The neglect of the island's potential for commercial agriculture and the entrenched illicit trade failed to create in Puerto Rico the wealthy class of creole landowners found in other Spanish colonies. Nor were there the great haciendas and colonial mansions found in Mexico or Perú at the end of the eighteenth century. In describing the homes of the Puerto Rican settlers, O'Reilly said:

They occupy houses that look like hen coops, consisting of a couple of rooms, most of them without windows or doors and therefore open day and night. Their furniture is so scant that they can move in an instant . . .

He summarized the state of the economy when he said:

There are no markets, no internal trade, and not one-twentieth of the land distributed has been cleared for cultivation.

To make the colony a valuable possession to the Crown, O'Reilly concluded that the practice of granting land to the poor was not the solution, as that only encouraged their dispersion and increased their rusticity. Instead, he recommended that all the uncultivated land be returned to the Crown, so that such land could be distributed to farmers willing to plant it. He suggested that a tax be levied on those farms given in ownership to encourage

landowners to plant their land. He reasoned that the revenues from the land tax could be used to help defray the cost of the military forces and to pay for repairs needed by the fortifications.²

O'Reilly appeared optimistic about the future of the colony provided its agriculture was commercially developed and its administration were revamped and brought under closer imperial scrutiny. To achieve these ends, the island had to increase its population, reorganize its defense system, and obtain a more flexible trade policy from Spain. The colony needed urgent economic reforms that would allow it to acquire revenues to support itself.

Beginning in the mid-1760s Puerto Rico was earmarked for some of the Bourbon reforms. Gradually, the royal government extended a number of social and economic measures to stimulate productivity and curb contraband trade. Immigration rules were relaxed and incentives were provided to attract new settlers. Prospective immigrants from Catholic nations in Europe and the Caribbean were encouraged to settle in Puerto Rico during the rest of the eighteenth century. A few trade concessions wrested from Spain during this period lured some French planters from war-torn Saint Domingue to grow sugar and coffee in Puerto Rico. The temporary trade measures helped the settlers to secure slaves and work tools needed to boost agricultural production.³

Thus, compared to Spanish America, Puerto Rico at the end of the eighteenth century was just beginning its colonization. In 1797 the population of the colony was approximately 158,000 persons. Its agriculture awaited better incentives. The annual revenues collected, a mere 60,000 pesos, were not enough to cover the costs of the colonial administration.⁴

Consequently, in Puerto Rico, the Bourbon reforms did not produce the antagonistic clashes that in Spanish America prepared the road for the wars of independence. The island simply had not attained the level of social and economic development John Lynch found in Mexico and Spanish South America.⁵ Nor did Puerto Rico have a wealthy class of creoles used to sharing power with the colonial administration. Hence, it was not in a position to challenge the metropolis at the beginning of the nineteenth century as the other colonies did. In Puerto Rico, contrary to what happened in Spanish South America, the new imperial policy began by Spain in the 1760s merely set the stage for what we have called the "new" colonization of Puerto Rico. It is this reconquest of the island in the eighteenth century and the following colonization that delayed the insurrectionary spirit in Puerto Rico until the mid-nineteenth century.

The "New" Colony

Following Napoleon's occupation of Spain, a ruling junta representing the Spanish government in Cadiz and granted Puerto Rico the right to hold its first