

THE MORAL STRENGTH OF THE
PUERTO RICAN PRISONERS OF WAR

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The study of colonial societies and the processes of liberation arising within them reveal a fundamental aspect: the accelerated recuperation of the colonized's sense of humanity and the increasing bestiality of the oppressor. Each liberating action by the oppressed is followed by terrifying repressive actions by the oppressor that clearly reveal the process of personal degradation the colonizer undergoes. The fear of losing its colonial economic interests force the dominating power to commit more repressive acts and ignore the minimum elements of legality — even the legal framework designated to sustain the colonial regimes.

On the one hand, it appears that the colonized's recuperative and self-affirming dynamic, and the loss of humanity by the colonizer on the other, helps to explain the cruel and inhuman treatment of the Puerto Rican POWs by the US government. This treatment is a mirror image of the atrocities planned against the Vietnamese people. It is an example of the various kinds of physical and psychological tortures developed in the US to train torturers in Latin America. It reveals the oppressor's other face, the one that reneges on the minimum standards of decency imposed by its own human condition.

The public unmasking of this brutality against Puerto Ricans is an attempt to terrorize anyone from any association with the independence movement. In this manner, the US expects to destroy the growth of the anti-colonial forces in Puerto Rico, as well as, in the US. It also represents the US government's fear at the possibility of confronting an armed movement in its own territory. The colonial mentality is terrified at the spectre of another Northern Ireland among the Puerto Rican people in the US. And like other colonial powers, has concluded that terror and brutality are the best way to stop it.

The Puerto Rican POW confronts this brutal physical force with only an ideological and moral armor. The POWs are normal, everyday Puerto Ricans who, faced with the terrible poverty that the majority of our people in the US and Puerto Rico suffer, are moved by an enormous spirit of generosity. The frame work of social and economic desolation and the inflexibility of an economic and political system that is insensitive to our people's suffering, slowly transformed their vision of the world and developed in the POWs a commitment to rapidly change these oppressive conditions to avoid the total devastation of our people. A study of our homeland's history brings

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them face to face with the ideology of Pedro Albizu Campos which, in conjunction with the daily experience of our people, influenced and formed their way of thinking.

For them, as well as many other *independentistas*, the 1898 Treaty of Paris which ceded Puerto Rico to the US was illegal. The Treaty violated the terms of the Charter of Autonomy, which required approval by the Chamber of Deputies in whatever transaction Spain conducted that affected Puerto Rico's interests. As such, North American domination over Puerto Rico is illegal — null and void — as is American law in Puerto Rico and its application to Puerto Ricans. Based on this illegal foundation and, because it is an exploitative regime, the colonial yoke that is imposed maintains the colony — which aims at the physical and social degeneration of a dominated people. Given these circumstances, *the Puerto Rican people's first responsibility is to free him/her self from this slavery and his/her second responsibility is to prevent future colonial enslavement.* The responsibility to struggle for freedom is everyone's obligation.

Neither citizenship nor civil rights exist in this colonial condition from which Puerto Rico suffers. Puerto Ricans must confront the colonial administration with a grave crisis so that our demands will be heeded. But if they are not heard, nor paid attention to and, on the contrary, are abused, the Puerto Rican people have the right to resort to arms. This is the exercise of an inalienable right of colonized peoples, and it has been recognized as such by the United Nations. In addition, the UN has ruled that colonialism is a crime against humanity, that combatants that struggle against colonialism cannot be criminalized or be tried as common criminals, and that they are protected by the rights accorded by the Geneva Convention to prisoners of war at the moment of their capture. International law does not recognize the right of the colonial courts to try anti-colonial combatants. The US, along with other colonial empires, has refused to recognize the legitimacy of the international laws that protect the POWs.

The Puerto Rican POWs have been tried by a court whose jurisdiction they do not recognize. As such, they have not defended themselves. Due to their political position, they have been condemned to sentences ranging from 55 to 100 years. Common criminals receive 5 year sentences for similar crimes and many find themselves released on parole after being imprisoned only 2 years. Obviously, these cruel sentences are aimed at undermining any similar civic action protesting Puerto Rico's subordinate position.

Along with this unequal sentence, the Puerto Rican Prisoners of War suffer unequal treatment in the prisons. Treatment that is characterized by isolation, sensory deprivation and personal degradation. This treatment is designed to break their physical resistance so that they will renounce their political convictions or accept suicide as an alternative to their desperate situation. This abuse serves as an additional punishment to their sentences — for their ideological beliefs. It is cruel punishment that violates

individual dignity and threatens their physical and emotional integrity. The repudiation of this inhuman and unequal treatment has been codified in an international treaty of which the US is a signator nation. The colonial regime conveniently ignores this international law as well, when it comes to the treatment of Puerto Rican Prisoners of War.

The international community and various sectors of Puerto Rican society have condemned this uncivilized treatment that the metropolis imposes on our prisoners. This sense of solidarity is one of the elements that permits them to endure their prison conditions. In addition, the POWs are fueled by the fact that they are people who have faith in the valiant men and women who will never be anyone's slaves. They believe in human valor and have faith in the right to freedom, in the recuperation of our homeland's sovereignty and in the conscience of the Puerto Rican peoples. The POWs are fully aware of the size of the empire that they challenge, but are convinced that Puerto Rico's right to independence is much greater. They are also convinced that in the near future, we will all be together in a free homeland that, in spite of its current colonial state, will proclaim their innocence.