

War and Genocide in Cuba, 1895★1898

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ENVISIONING CUBA

Louis A. Pérez Jr., editor

examine shortly, to avoid combat in the fall of 1897. The Cubans were elated. General José María Rodríguez remarked that even in Pinar del Río, where “the enemy had been so active in the past,” the Spanish were “leaving their forts and garrisons” and concentrating in the cities. Spanish columns debouched from these strong points to operate “from time to time,” but they did so “with a notable lack of spirit.” Rodríguez let his men rest, for they were still in no position to seek combat. He recognized that the politics that lay behind the Spanish decision to stand down might change again, and he ordered his officers to take advantage of the respite to convalesce. The men had to be got healthy and ready “in case the enemy begins a campaign” again.⁴⁹

Civilians, as always, suffered most of all. The epidemics among the troops spread to noncombatants in both zones. Reconcentration went virtually unopposed in western Cuba in 1897, and in the late summer it was finally extended to central and eastern Cuba. The starving reconcentrados had no resistance to malaria, typhus, and dysentery. Some who had lived their whole lives in interior towns where yellow fever was absent succumbed to that disease when they were relocated to cities that had long been endemic foci of yellow fever. And because the relocated civilians were also starving, even common viruses and infections killed them. Reconcentration had entered its final, most deadly phase. This tragic story will be the subject of the next chapter.

14 ★ Reconcentration

Weyler’s most controversial strategy for pacifying Cuba goes by the name of reconcentration — the forced relocation of civilians to cities and towns controlled by Spanish troops and their Cuban allies. One of the most terrible catastrophes in the history of the Americas, reconcentration turned an already cruel war into what some have termed genocide. Beginning in the spring of 1896, and picking up in 1897, Spanish troops uprooted half a million civilians and herded them into hastily built barracks, sometimes grouped into what were called “concentration camps.” The army supplied rations, enough to prolong the suffering. Though scholars disagree about the number of civilians who perished due to reconcentration, over 100,000 reconcentrados certainly died, some from starvation, others in epidemics that peaked in the fall of 1897. In November 1897 the Spanish government ended reconcentration, but sickly and starving peasants could not be “deconcentrated” to a burned-out and devastated countryside by fiat. So they continued to die by the hundreds every day in cities like Matanzas, Havana, Cienfuegos, and Santa Clara. Towns passed special ordinances expanding the cemeteries. When that became impractical, the reconcentrados were interred in mass graves, and when the grave diggers and body collectors became too ill, the dead were left for dogs and birds.

Weyler’s contemporaries often misunderstood reconcentration, and sometimes they printed deliberate falsehoods on the subject. This was natural. Nations and empires were at stake, and dead civilians were valuable propaganda. What this means for us is that we will have to wade through a thicket of disinformation, and we will need to bring fresh historical sources to bear on the problem, if we wish to understand reconcentration. What was it? What part did Weyler play in it? What impact did reconcentration have on civilians? This chapter will consider these questions.

Weyler issued his first reconcentration order on February 16, 1896, immediately after his arrival in Cuba. It applied only to the eastern provinces of Santiago and Puerto Príncipe, as well as to the district of Sancti Spíritus in the province of Santa Clara. On October 21, 1896, Weyler imposed reconcentration on Pinar del Río. On January 5, 1897, he extended it to Havana and Matanzas. A few weeks later, on January 30, he ordered the rest of Santa Clara reconcentrated, and on May 27, 1897, he renewed the reconcentration order for Puerto Príncipe and Santiago.¹

The reconcentration orders gave people eight days to relocate to the nearest city or town garrisoned by the Spanish, a narrow time period that ensured non-compliance and violence. Weyler published the decrees in the *Gaceta de la Habana*, the official organ of the government, and local papers reprinted them. In a rural society still largely illiterate, the news of Weyler's order must have frequently arrived with the troops sent to enforce it, to drag people from their homes and march them into cities, past trenches and barbed wire, where they could be "protected."

Weyler mandated the creation of "cultivation zones" to be fortified and defended by Spanish troops and Cuban Volunteers and worked by the reconcentrados for their own sustenance. Crops planted outside such areas were to be destroyed. Livestock outside the cultivation zones was to be destroyed or gathered up and reconcentrated along with the people. Civilians who resisted these orders and remained in the countryside were considered to be in league with the enemy.

There were exceptions. Owners of large rural enterprises could apply for exemption. If they had clear title to their property, were paid up on their taxes, showed signs of resisting the insurgents, penned and controlled their livestock, and had resources to pay for the cost of a garrison's upkeep, they and their managers and laborers might be left alone. With this provision Weyler threw a bone to the sugar barons, big farmers, and other rural entrepreneurs who supported Spanish Cuba. The addendum reminds us that reconcentration had something about it of class warfare. It worked by design against the interests of poor peasants, many of whom did not own or lease the land they worked. Rather, they enjoyed usufruct privileges — unrecorded, customary rights — to work land they did not own in order to supplement the income they earned as laborers in the sugar industry or some other rural enterprise. This gave them a legal standing hardly greater than that of squatters. Moreover, many small proprietors owed some back taxes, which they could never hope to repay during wartime. Thus, Weyler's requirements for exemption from reconcentration — landownership and no taxes in arrears — excluded all but the rich. Weyler's chief of staff, Federico Ochando, elaborated on this aspect of the order to make sure everyone understood that "the spirit" of reconcentration "did not apply to the big agricultural and industrial establishments" but only to small "shops, ranches, and cottages" not under Spanish protection. These were the small-fry that were liable to support the insurgents whether out of choice or through coercion. They had to be removed from play.²

Still, we should not go too far and construe reconcentration as nothing but class war. Strategic and military interests were always paramount. Weyler did

not exempt owners of big estates whose properties lay in areas that could not be secured against the insurgents, and, if military conditions allowed, the government might extend special consideration to small farmers and shopkeepers, some of whom, far from being separatists, were recent immigrants from Spain, even admirers of Weyler.³ Their sentiments of loyalty were not necessarily in question, only their ability in practice to resist the Liberation Army and remain loyal. Some Spanish officers understood this, and they did not enforce reconcentration fully when it was a matter of rural folk in pacified zones able to remain loyal. General Agustín Luque, for example, made a point of allowing "many people to remain in their homes" as a way of affording them "the means to fight hunger."⁴ Unfortunately, Luque's flexible approach was not common enough. The effect of reconcentration was generally to turn the poor into refugees, regardless of their politics.

Weyler's first decree of February 16, 1896, applying to the East was so little enforced (thus its renewal on May 27, 1897) that it is sometimes ignored in accounts of reconcentration. Yet it is an important and telling detail that Weyler issued his first reconcentration order within a week of arriving in Havana, for it reminds us that reconcentration had been in the works for some time.

Reconcentration had both long-term precedents and immediate precursors both in Cuba and around the world. Armies throughout history have relocated civilians in war zones in order to remove them from play as elements of logistical support for the enemy. Some contemporary Americans, including the naval officer and scholar French Ensor Chadwick, argued that reconcentration was unexceptional in this regard and conformed to the rules of war as everyone understood them in the 1890s.⁵ In 1902 the U.S. government, after reconsidering the subject closely in light of its own war of counterinsurgency in the Philippines, concluded that Weyler's reconcentration in Cuba had not, after all, violated accepted military practices.⁶ Leaving to one side what these statements indicate about the accepted rules of war, Chadwick and the U.S. government were right. Reconcentration was nothing new. The United States had practiced a form of reconcentration in its wars with Native Americans by herding them onto reservations. And Weyler, as we have already seen, had ordered the relocation of civilians in the Philippines in the period from 1888 to 1891.

The terms "concentration" and "reconcentration" were used interchangeably in Cuba, and their meaning was clear long before February 16, 1896. Indeed, one does not have to look as far afield as the United States and the Philippines for precursors to reconcentration. The same deliberate relocation of civilians had occurred right in Cuba during the Ten Years' War.⁷ In that conflict, too, the insurgents targeted plantations, ranches, and farms. By 1870 they had so thoroughly

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disrupted agriculture and burned so many hamlets and farms in eastern Cuba that an alarming refugee problem developed there.⁸ "Everyone knows," wrote the governor of Puerto Príncipe on April 26, 1870, "that the insurrectos have declared war not only against Spain but also against property, destroying everything they find in their path." As a result, a "multitude of families" from the countryside, "seeking the shelter offered by our garrisons," had taken refuge in Spanish cities and towns, where they found themselves "in the utmost state of misery" and "lacking any means of subsistence." The situation required the government to intervene creatively to rescue the refugees and restore the economy. This was something very like total war, and the captain general would have to "attend to the creation of new elements of production" with as much energy as had been devoted to the military campaign. To make this possible, authorities in eastern Cuba received approval to implement some radical measures, including the seizure of private property, especially if it remained uncultivated, in order to create cultivation zones, which were ceded temporarily to the refugees. Interestingly, even families with ties to the insurgency were to be afforded this relief. These provisions were intended to save lives, but they were also political and military expedients. The reconcentrados had to be convinced that if they remained loyal to the Spanish regime "they would not be worse off than if they remained in the mountains." Proper management of the refugee crisis, as much as military victory against the insurgents, would provide the necessary antidote to the revolution. Yet to make any of this possible, the Spanish army had to direct refugees to appropriately fortified Spanish towns with barracks and land set aside for their use. Inevitably, this introduced an element of force into the scheme.⁹

The plan of 1870 was never implemented systematically, and so its existence is little known. Weyler knew about it, however, because he alluded to it in his memoirs.¹⁰ And we should recall where Weyler was in 1870. Fighting in Puerto Príncipe, he was in an ideal position to see reconcentration in action. Weyler drew upon this experience when he issued his reconcentration orders in 1896 and 1897. The dubious praise one sometimes sees heaped upon Weyler as "the only Spanish general in two centuries to contribute something new to military strategy" is therefore inappropriate. Reconcentration had many architects.¹¹

One of these was Arsenio Martínez Campos, who used the term "reconcentration" in a letter posted in July 1895, as we have already seen. He claimed to have "higher beliefs" that prevented him from forcibly relocating the population, no matter how necessary it might be to victory, but his moral qualms did not prevent him from recommending Weyler for the dirty job. However, in a reversal of his earlier vow against making war on civilians, Martínez Campos issued direct orders to his district commanders on November 4, 1895, on the

subject of reconcentration. In these directives, the captain general noted that the insurgents' practice of forcibly relocating civilians to rural districts out of the reach of Spanish protection lent "a special character" to the war by producing a much greater contrary movement: "the concentration of a portion of the peaceful inhabitants into towns" as they fled revolutionary justice. This flow of refugees into towns had produced a crisis. "It is clear," Martínez Campos continued, "that this imposes on us the burden of feeding them when they lack for resources, because we cannot abandon peaceful citizens to hunger and misery." The "unavoidable duty of humanity and of government" was to provide relief. In order to do this, the army had to make sure "that the concentrations forced [upon civilians] by the enemy take place in towns that have garrisons and are linked by rail." This, in turn, required that Spanish troops direct the refugees to the appropriate locations, and this, again, implied the use of force.

Once the reconcentrados were relocated, Martínez Campos promised that the government would help care for them, but it could not manage the herculean task alone. For one thing, it lacked the resources. For another, providing direct relief would require the use of supply convoys, and these, he warned, would become additional targets for the insurgents. Therefore, the reconcentrados would have to provide for most of their needs themselves. Martínez Campos ordered military and civilian officials to give the refugees access to "all uncultivated fields" in the vicinity of garrisoned towns, "whether belonging to the municipality or to private individuals." These would be "divided into allotments" so that they could be "worked and enjoyed by the immigrants," who were to be given tools and any other assistance they needed. Martínez Campos sent copies of this order to the War and Colonial Ministries for approval, which he received on November 29. He never carried out the plan, because he was on his way out, but it is clear that all of the elements of reconcentration were in place before Weyler had even been appointed captain general of Cuba.¹²

The refugee crisis faced by the Spanish as early as the summer of 1895 reminds us, too, that the Cuban Liberation Army had a hand in reconcentration. Cuban troops removed people who lived near Spanish towns and roads and confiscated their goods as a way to eliminate them as props to the Spanish regime. Some people cooperated with this "deconcentration" and joined the insurrection, but most sought protection with the Spanish. The scope and intensity of the refugee crisis instigated by the Liberation Army is well documented in the diaries and correspondence of both Cubans and Spaniards and needs to be taken seriously as a precursor to, and even a cause of, Weyler's reconcentration.¹³

Cuban veteran Serafín Espinosa recalled that wherever the Liberation Army went it confiscated or destroyed property so that "farmers had nothing of their