

Albizu Campos, Pedro (1891–1965)

Michael Staudenmaier

Pedro Albizu Campos was the most important figure in the Puerto Rican independence movement during the twentieth century. As leader of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party for more than four decades, he was responsible for a dramatic overhaul in the character of the movement, challenging its respectability and politeness and encouraging the restoration of militant and even armed struggle to a prominent place in its arsenal. He was a gifted theoretician, a skillful organizer, and a renowned orator. In his most famous effort, Albizu Campos coordinated the abortive 1950 insurrection known as the *Grito de Jayuya* (Cry of Jayuya).

Albizu Campos was born into a poor, African-descended (mulatto) family, but his early showing of intellectual promise resulted in a scholarship to attend school in the United States. Between 1913 and 1920 he spent several years at Harvard University, although his time there was broken up by service in an African American battalion of the US army during World War I. While at Harvard he worked closely with Irish republicans, including Eamon de Valera. The multi-faceted struggle for Irish independence, involving armed struggle and legal negotiations, provided inspiration to Albizu Campos in his later efforts in Puerto Rico. Having obtained his law degree from Harvard, he returned to the island, where he initially pursued independence through proposals for a constitutional convention that was to be sanctioned by the United States. Embarrassed by the willingness of other independence activists to capitulate to US demands, Albizu Campos shifted his approach to the struggle. He joined the recently founded Nationalist Party, acting as an international representative for the party throughout Latin America, later becoming its president.

Once in charge of the Nationalist Party Albizu Campos put his militant strategy into practice. He rejected the legitimacy of US rule, while romanticizing the previous era of Spanish domination. He lauded a Puerto Rican identity built on

Spanish heritage and Catholicism. At the same time, he organized across racial and class barriers that had limited the effectiveness of previous independence efforts. He provided support to striking sugar cane workers, while heightening the conflict with the North American-led police force. He also systematically promoted women into leadership roles within the Nationalist Party. By 1935 the party had explicitly affirmed the legitimacy of armed struggle, while pledging to boycott an electoral framework it viewed as inherently colonial.

The next several years saw an escalation of violence between party members and US forces, resulting in Albizu Campos' first prison term in the United States. After serving ten years he returned to the island and immediately began plotting a major uprising for independence. Due to increasing police surveillance and repression the insurrection was rushed into action at the end of October 1950 and was quickly put down. Albizu Campos was again imprisoned and he spent all but a few months of the rest of his life behind bars. While incarcerated he claimed that he was being subjected to radiation experiments, an assertion that was ridiculed by US authorities. He did indeed die of cancer a few months after having been released from prison for humanitarian reasons. Decades later, the US government acknowledged that federal prisoners had been subjected to involuntary radiation experiments during the period of Albizu Campos' incarceration, but his participation in such experiments has never been confirmed.

In death, Albizu Campos has become a reference point for much of the Puerto Rican independence movement, although his methods remain controversial to this day outside radical circles. His legacy includes both the broad affirmation of Puerto Rican identity and the validation of the legitimacy of armed struggle as an option for the independence movement.

SEE ALSO: De Valera, Eamon (1882–1975); Imperialism, Historical Evolution; Irish Nationalism; Puerto Rican Independence Movement, 1898–Present

References and Suggested Readings

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- Rosado, M. (1992) *Las llamas de la aurora: acercamiento a una biografía de Pedro Albizu Campos*. Santo Domingo: Corripio.
- Wagenheim, K. & Jimenez de Wagenheim, O. (1994) *The Puerto Ricans: A Documentary History*. Princeton: Markus Wiener.