

## Betances, Ramón Emeterio (1827–1898)

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Ramón Emeterio Betances was a prominent Puerto Rican nationalist and social reformer during the latter half of the nineteenth century. He is considered by some to be the “father of the nation” as a result of his leadership of the early struggle for independence from Spain. His greatest fame came as a central organizer of the insurrection later known as the “Grito de Lares” (Cry of Lares), a seminal uprising against Spanish rule in 1868. Betances also campaigned actively for the abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico, which was finally achieved in 1873, eight years after the end of the US Civil War. Throughout, he was an ardent internationalist, working closely with radicals throughout the Caribbean, in the United States, and further afield in Europe.

Born to a mixed-race father and a French mother, Betances was at home in several worlds from birth. He lived much of his life in France, but also spent time in the Dominican Republic, the United States, and the Virgin Islands. He studied medicine in Paris and became an accomplished surgeon with a strong focus on public health. While in France he witnessed the aftermath of the 1848 revolutions, and this experience, along with his active participation in freemasonry, colored his approach to social change. He prioritized secretive conspiracies but also cultivated well-known and powerful individuals to advocate publicly for independence and abolition. This two-pronged approach was first utilized in his campaign against slavery, for which he was exiled from Puerto Rico in 1858. Subsequently, drawing on both the Bolivarian tradition of revolutions in South America and the internationalism of the 1848 events in Europe, Betances

called for a Confederation of the Antilles, which entailed independence for Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Jamaica, as well as sovereignty for Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

In 1867 Betances initiated a conspiracy to stage an armed insurrection against Spanish rule in Puerto Rico. The plot was far-flung, including, among other elements, an attempt to gain support from the Chilean government, a purchase of weapons coordinated between New York and the Dominican Republic, and a ship chartered to transport the arms and reinforcements to Puerto Rico via the Virgin Islands, where Betances, again in exile, coordinated the conspiracy at a distance. In the end, the effort fell victim to a perfect storm of misfortune: the emissary sent to Chile fell ill and died upon arrival, the vessel carrying weapons and volunteers was impounded in the Virgin Islands, and the clandestine cells established in Puerto Rico were discovered by agents of the Spanish military shortly before the planned date of insurrection. The uprising, short of weapons and men, and deprived of any practical support from outside the island, was crushed by the Spanish after only a few days of combat.

Despite its spectacular failure, however, the Grito de Lares marked a turning point in the history of Puerto Rico. Betances and his comrades had drafted a constitution for an independent island, and in Lares on September 23, 1868 the insurgents had proclaimed the Republic of Puerto Rico. Every subsequent generation of the independence movement has drawn inspiration from Lares and from Betances. In a broader sense, the internationalism of the uprising foreshadowed later interactions among Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Dominican revolutionaries that have continued up to the present. Betances himself spent much of the next two decades working with the Cuban revolutionary movement.

Betances spent the remainder of his life in exile, mostly in France. Late in life he is reported to have assisted the Italian anarchist Michele Angiolillo in his assassination of the Spanish prime minister, Antonio Canovas. The evidence for this claim is limited, but it is clear that Betances was associated with anarchists in Paris and had met with Angiolillo. His support for armed action against Spain suggests the accounts are at least plausible. In the end, a commitment to internationalism and revolution ensured that

Betances participated in and supported a strikingly wide range of struggles. At the time of his death, he was basically penniless, but his life's work has been remembered by radicals, in Puerto Rico and elsewhere, for more than a century.

SEE ALSO: Cuba, Struggle for Independence from Spain, 1868–1898; European Revolutions of 1848; Puerto Rican Independence Movement, 1898–Present

#### References and Suggested Readings

- Anderson, B. (2005) *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination*. New York: Verso.
- Jimenez de Wagenheim, O. (1993) *Puerto Rico's Revolt for Independence: El Grito de Lares*. Princeton: Markus Wiener.
- Ojeda Reyes, F. (2001) *El Desterrado de Paris: Biografia del Dr. Ramón Emeterio Betances (1827–1898)*. San Juan, PR: Ediciones Puerto.