

A Revolt Remembered: El Grito de Lares

Escrito por Andre Lee Muñiz / La Respuesta
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El Grito de Lares (The Cry of Lares) is an important event in Puerto Rico's history, so important that many look to the day it was initiated as the birthdate of the Puerto Rican nation. It was on the night of September 23, 1868 that hundreds of people of diverse backgrounds came to the town of Lares for the declaration of an independent republic from Spain. The event marked a turning point in the development of the Puerto Rican people, whose national identity had formed within a colonial context founded on the domination and enslavement of indigenous and African peoples.

El Grito was a popular uprising that led to eighty-eight deaths (eighty of which occurred in prison) and five-hundred and twenty-three arrests. That September 23rd saw diverse groups of people fighting together for the revolutionary change of Puerto Rican society. Those who participated included rich and poor; intellectuals and the illiterate; professionals, wage earners, and artisans; clergymen and laymen; as well as civilians and soldiers. One of the goals of the uprising was the abolition of slavery, influencing dozens of slaves to join the revolt, even alongside their owners, with the understanding that a successful revolt would lead to their freedom. As all of these sectors of Puerto Rican society came together at Lares, the group that later faced the largest number of arrests at one hundred and eighty-nine, the jornaleros(wage earners), symbolically burned the libretas (employment passbooks) that served as their identification and tied them to the haciendas they worked on.

gritola-res-mediumOne of the principal leaders of El Grito was Dr. Ramón Emeterio Betances, a native of Cabo Rojo who received a university education in France during its long revolutionary period. He returned to Puerto Rico to practice medicine and, inevitably, participate in the development of an abolitionist movement. One of his close partners was Segundo Ruiz Belvis, a native of Hormigueros who studied in both Venezuela and Spain, later becoming a prominent political figure in the city of Mayagüez while also having a law practice. When both became part of a group of eleven ordered into exile in 1867 by the Spanish government, they went to the Dominican Republic, eventually making their way to New York City by way of Saint Thomas. Using New York as a base, they established contact with the Cuban Revolutionary Party and built the network needed to secure Puerto Rico's independence. A few months later, they activated this network and put into motion the plans they had constructed for the liberation of

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Puerto Rico from colonial rule.

Leaving New York, Betances traveled between the Dominican Republic and Saint Thomas, where he met and worked with Gregorio Luperón and other allies of Puerto Rico's independence movement. Intending to gain material support and troops, the completion of his mission was prevented when authorities in Saint Thomas confiscated his ship. Ruiz Belvis fared even worse—soon after landing in Chile to connect with the revolutionaries he met in New York that promised material support with the collaboration of surrounding countries, he was found dead in his hotel. Nevertheless, they had already managed to ensure that El Grito would take place, with people like Matías Brugman and Manuel Rojas leading the organization of rebel cells throughout Puerto Rico with Brugman leading one in Mayagüez and Rojas another in Lares. Interestingly, many of those who played key roles in the military development of the revolutionary movement happened to be from other countries. For example, Brugman and Rojas were from New Orleans and Venezuela respectively, while another family, the Beauchamps, had sons born in Haiti of direct French descent. Supporting the idea that the uprising was against the crimes of colonialism and not the people of Spain per se is the fact that Spaniards also participated, fourteen of whom were documented among those later arrested. Three people born in Africa would also be counted among those arrested. In the end, however, when the Republic of Puerto Rico was declared in Lares, all of those chosen to head the government were born in Puerto Rico, such as Francisco Ramírez Medina, the native of Aguada who was selected to become the first president.

Women played key symbolic and organizational roles as well. San Germán native Lola Rodríguez de Tió penned a poem shortly before El Grito titled *La Borinqueña*, which would become adopted as Puerto Rico's national anthem (under U.S. rule the lyrics would be changed into the version that is used officially today while the original serves as the anthem for pro-independence supporters). Añasco native Mariana Bracetti was an active member of the cell in Mayagüez and was married to Miguel Rojas, the brother of Lares cell leader Manuel Rojas. Bracetti is also credited with having sown the first flag of Puerto Rico, currently used today as the flag for the town of Lares. Lesser known is another Añasco native, Eduvijis Beauchamp, who not only supplied Bracetti with the materials used to sew the flag, but was also a member of the Mayagüez cell, being named a “distinguished member” for her active participation in it.

El Grito de Lares, though defeated militarily, was a well-planned event that engaged virtually all sectors of Puerto Rican society. Transcending barriers of race, class, national origin, and even sex, the movement that led to the declaration of an independent republic included a fair representation of Puerto Rican society. By gaining the support of other countries throughout the Caribbean and Latin America, as well as establishing a base of support in New York City, even though such support was not realized, the movement took on an international character. All of these are lessons that can be applied today in the Puerto Rican people's continued struggle against colonialism under U.S. rule.

To be clear, the importance of El Grito de Lares was not forgotten by the Puerto Rican people in large part due to the focus it was given beginning in the late 1920s by Nationalist Party leader Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos. Since then, the Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico has commemorated

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El Grito and its patriots every year on September 23 in the town of Lares. Over time, other organizations and groups would form and begin to hold their own events elsewhere in Puerto Rico, with the Diaspora eventually practicing the tradition as it grew in size. A recent example of the Diaspora mobilizing on September 23 was in 2006 in New York when the 'September 23 Organization' played a large role in that day's march from Times Square to the United Nations. The march and rally was also a response to the FBI's killing of political-military leader Filiberto Ojeda Ríos in Puerto Rico on September 23, 2005. The FBI operation was denounced by virtually all sectors of Puerto Rican society for various reasons, with the date chosen for it being one of them.

The importance of El Grito will not easily be forgotten, with places in Puerto Rico being named after the event and its heroes, as well as in the Diaspora. To name a few, in Chicago there is the Segundo Ruiz Belvis Cultural Center, in Boston's Villa Victoria community there is a Plaza and annual festival named after Betances, and in New York the public housing authority has property in the Bronx named 'Betances Houses' and another in Manhattan's Lower East Side named 'Bracetti Plaza.'

The international character of the struggle for self-determination in Puerto Rico still endures, with a number of countries supporting resolutions by the Special Committee on Decolonization in the United Nations that continually reaffirms Puerto Rico's right to self-determination and independence. Our anti-colonial struggle today does not have to be the same kind of conspiratorial, insurrectionist movement as in the 1860s, but similarly broad networks should be developed, especially as the Puerto Rican people now find themselves in greater numbers outside of the island. Through national unity, which includes the Diaspora, constant dialogue, as well as solidarity, self-determination is possible.

Recommended Readings:

Memoirs of Bernardo Vega: A Contribution to the History of the Puerto Rican Community in New York edited by César Andreu Iglesias

Puerto Rico's Revolt For Independence: El Grito de Lares by Olga Jiménez de Wagenheim