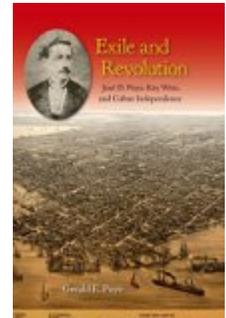




**Gerald Eugene Poyo.** *Exile and Revolution: José D. Poyo, Key West, and Cuban Independence.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014. 312 pp. \$74.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-4918-2.



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The contributions of the Cuban exile community to the independence of Cuba from Spain between 1868 and 1898 have not yet received the scholarly attention they deserve. Gerald Poyo, a professor at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, tries precisely to address that gap through "the first comprehensive biography of a Cuban exile community leader in the United States during the period under consideration other than Martí" (p. 5).

The character that gives the book its title is the author's great-great-grandfather, José Dolores Poyo (1836-1911), who worked as a *lector* (someone who read aloud for workers at factories), a journalist, and also as honorary consul of Peru at Key West from 1869 to 1899. As editor of *El Yara*, a Cuban nationalist newspaper published there, José D. Poyo became one of the most influential leaders within the community of Cuban exiles. Looking at his life, the book offers "the first comprehensive account of the contributions of Key West's working-class community to the Cuban na-

tionalist movement through a local perspective" (p. 8).

The author also advances other reasons that make Poyo's life interesting from a historian's perspective. In his view, local grassroots leaders who, like Poyo, organized and mobilized Cuban communities were more instrumental for Cuba's independence than has been hitherto acknowledged. The main difference between the Key West community and others in the United States, like the one in New York, lay in the fact that in the Floridian city (which Cubans and Spaniards called Cayo Hueso, "Isle of Bones") the majority of Cubans were tobacco workers—both black and white—rather than middle-class professionals. In only a few years these migrants made up almost half the population of the city and transformed it in a vibrant community. They also gave the nationalist movement a democratic and popular character absent in other places.

This book is a valuable contribution to the field of Cuban studies that builds on previous

works of the author (*With All, and for the Good of All: The Emergence of Popular Nationalism in the Cuban Communities of the United States, 1848-1898* [1989]). It retells the story of Poyo from the moment he left Cuba in 1869—at the beginning of the Ten Years' War (1868-78), Cuba's first war for independence—to his death in Havana in 1911. The main obstacle the author has faced in his task is the scarcity of primary sources: most of Poyo's personal papers were lost and there are no complete collections of his newspaper, *El Yara*. The author therefore has been forced to rely, for example, on Spanish diplomatic sources. In this sense, this book is more an analysis of the Key West community through the eyes of Poyo than a conventional biography.

Poyo was a radical member of the separatist movement from the start and he never wavered. Through his readings at the Martinez Ybor factory, his editorials in *El Yara*, and his work as a community organizer, Poyo tried to mobilize and raise funds from the Cuban community in Key West and organize expeditions to aid Cuban rebels with men, weapons, and ammunition. Poyo relied especially on secret Freemason-like societies (Orden Cosmopolita del Sol [Cosmopolitan Order of the Sun], Nihilistas Ubiquitarios Cubanos de Key West [Ubiquitous Cuban Nihilists of Key West], Convención Cubana [Cuban Convention], or Liga de Cubanos Independientes [League of Independent Cubans]) to maintain the discipline among his followers and avoid infiltrations by Spanish spies. However, the secrecy of these societies makes it hard to explain how they actually worked.

These efforts did not bring about significant results during the Ten Years' War, which ended with the surrender of the Cuban revolutionaries, due in great part to their own divisions. But Poyo's most valuable contribution was his work in the years between the Zanjón Pact that put an end to the Ten Years' War, and the outbreak of Cuba's second war for independence in 1895. Poyo, as

many military leaders, never accepted the Zanjón Pact. Those were hard times for him: Key West workers were increasingly reluctant to contribute to the independence cause when they had more immediate concerns, especially after the failure of the Bonachea-Agüero expeditions and the great fire of 1886, which destroyed most of the city's neighborhoods. Other equally dangerous threats for the separatist movement were the constant immigration of Spanish workers from Cuba—which challenged Cuban hegemony in the city—and the spread of labor ideologies ambivalent or hostile to Cuban nationalism (Knights of Labor, socialism, anarchism).

This is precisely the less convincing section of the book. The author relies heavily on Cuban historiography and Poyo's own writings in *El Yara* to evaluate the impact of his work in Key West. The problem is that Cuban historians have tended to advance an ideologically charged interpretation of the independence movement that links it directly with the principles of the 1959 revolution. They have been prone to idealize the exile communities and despise the role of autonomists as either naïve or traitors to the cause. As a result, the only thing the reader sees in many pages is Poyo's and the Cuban nationalists' perspective on contemporary events—including their support for every available means used to fight Spain—with which the author seems to be identified in many passages. For his part, the author puts too much trust in confidential reports from Spanish spies, which even Spanish diplomats in Washington saw as unreliable.

Furthermore, the book offers an extremely confusing image of Spanish rule in Cuba between 1878 and 1897. The author implies at different moments that somehow Spain gave some measure of political autonomy to Cuba in those years, but such was never the case. In those decades, the successive captain generals the Spanish government appointed for Cuba enjoyed the same powers as before. The main change in Spanish colo-

nial policy after the Zanjon Pact was the repeal of the so-called special laws that had been regulating Cuban life: from then on, Spanish laws were more or less enforced in Cuba and Cuban representatives were elected to the Spanish Cortes. Only in 1897 did Spain give some degree of political autonomy to Cuba and Puerto Rico in order to appease the United States.

The role of the Autonomist Party remains equally unclear: Poyo and other separatists vociferously opposed its proposals, which the author tends to ignore, considering them irrelevant. This contradiction becomes a serious one to any specialist who knows that relations between separatists and autonomists were closer and more fluctuating than what the book seems to imply. A closer look at some of the works written by Spanish historians on Spain's colonial policy, Key West, and the Autonomist Party in the late nineteenth century would have greatly improved this section. [1]

The book is much more convincing when it turns to the alliance between Poyo and Jose Marti, the main leader of the Cuban separatist movement in the 1890s, founder of the Partido Revolucionario Cubano (PRC, Cuban Revolutionary Party) and the mind behind the uprising of 1895. According to the author, Marti—despite living in New York—became the leader the revolutionaries needed precisely thanks to the help of Poyo and the Florida community, which had learned from past mistakes. In the end, Cuba's second war of independence (with its heavy human toll) was only a mixed success: Cuban revolutionaries finally got rid of Spanish rule, but only with the help of the United States and abiding by its conditions. This way, the Cuban Republic that was born in 1902, under U.S. supervision, fell short of the ideals exiles like Poyo had been sustaining for thirty years, something which surely filled them with a strong sense of disappointment.

In any case, the weaknesses of the book do not belie its main argument: that local leaders like

Poyo were essential to the work of primary revolutionaries such as Marti. The author provides a great deal of valuable information about Cuban exiles, Key West, Cuba-United States relations, and the Cuban separatist movement. All scholars interested in this period of the history of Cuba should read this book.

#### Note

[1]. Luis Garcia-Mora, "La Fuerza de la Palabra. El Autonomismo en Cuba en el Último Tercio del Siglo XIX," *Revista de Indias* 61, no. 223 (2001): 715-748; M<sup>a</sup>. Dolores Gonzalez-Ripoll, "La Emigración Cubana de Cayo Hueso (1855-1896): Independencia, Tabaco y Revolucion," *Revista de Indias* 58, no. 212 (1998): 237-254; and Ines Roldan, *La Restauracion en Cuba: El Fracaso de un Proyecto Reformista* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas, 2000).

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