

## Social History

Ada Ferrer

INSURGENT CUBA

Race, nation, and revolution, 1868-1898

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**I**nsurgent Cuba is an admirable book; Ada Ferrer has attentively examined the dynamics between the racial groups involved in Cuba's struggle towards independence. Spain retained the "ever faithful isle" against the currents of independence in Latin America, in part, by conjuring the spectre of Haiti. The notion that one was either "African or Spanish" seared Creole consciousness and affected the very idea of Cuban sovereignty. In 1868, however, on October 10, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, a plantation owner, raised the flag of separatism, freed his slaves and detonated a conflict which became known as the Ten Years War. Together, but tensely, Creoles and ex-slaves forged a fully integrated army, which regrouped twice after 1878: in the Little War (1879-80) and the War of Independence (1895-8). In war and peace, Cubans of all colours struggled for independence and a common vision of Cuba.

Ferrer meticulously documents these struggles and provocatively reinterprets them. Most impressive is her ability to keep her analytical eye close to the Cuban ground; though Spain and later the United States are integral to this book, Ferrer eschews the prevailing trend in Cuban historiography which seeks external

explanations for the island's development.

During the Ten Years War, Spain raised fears of a race war by portraying the insurgents as mostly black (which they were not). But the propaganda worked, as many white insurgents laid down their arms and a truce was eventually established. In 1898, the Spanish-American War brought "Jim Crow" notions of race to Cuba as well as a US occupation army. But white Cubans themselves were riven with racial fears, and they willingly reinforced imperial behaviour. That, despite these obstacles, Creoles and ex-slaves established a raceless nationalism as the foundation of Cuban nationhood is one side of Ferrer's story; the other is how black insurgents used that process to claim their rights as citizens. Creoles expected deference even while advocating equality; ex-slaves felt entitled to equality without obeisance. Therein lay the contradictions of nation-building.

*Insurgent Cuba* ends with the US occupation. As Ferrer notes, the transition to a republic in 1902 fuelled racial misgivings and undermined the joint experience of the independence movement. In the end, "racialized assumptions about civilization and politics" – then widespread as common sense – prevailed. Yet, the secular republicanism espoused by Cuban elites of all colours was also Western; the black and mulatto intelligentsia, especially, embraced Western notions of citizenship. Were there really any acceptable alternatives?

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