

# The Development and Political Significance of the Cuban Student Movement, 1923 - 1933

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In the decade prior to the establishment of the revolutionary government in 1933, a politically potent student movement emerged in Cuba. The evolution of the Cuban student movement into a prominent political force in the country during the decade spanning the years 1923 to 1933 was marked by three distinct stages and was spurred by three extraordinary events. The first upsurge in Cuban university student activities in 1923 was directly influenced by the University Reform Movement, which emerged in Argentina in 1918. This first stage focused on the institutional reform of the university and this focus characterized the student movement both in the Argentine and Cuban cases. The second stage of the Cuban student movement occurred in 1927. This stage was marked by the university students' response to President Gerardo Machado's manipulation of the Cuban constitution. Therefore, the student movement was oriented in a more political direction, focusing on national issues, though maintaining the initiative of the first stage in demanding a university changed to be more responsive to modern Cuban society. In the final stage of this decade of the student movement, which began in 1930, the students openly confronted the increasingly dictatorial regime of President Machado and they participated in revolutionary activities against it including engaging in urban terrorism. By 1933, one wing of the university student movement was closely associated with the progressive government of Ramón Grau San Martín, which had

emerged from a student influenced coup d'état arising from a sergeants' revolt against the officer class in the army.

## The First Phase

The University Reform Movement in Cuba dates from the influential speech given by a reformist professor of the University of Buenos Aires in Argentina, Dr. José Arce. His lecture given at the University of Havana on the experience of the student movement in Argentina precipitated latent reformist feelings among both the faculty and students at Cuba's premier and only institution of advanced learning which subsequently flowered into a movement for reform of that institution. Prior to Dr. Arce's speech, a nascent organizational structure of university students had been formed.<sup>1)</sup> *La Fraternidad de los XXX Manicatos* (the Brotherhood of the 30 *Manicatos*) was organized to promote the formation of an athletic program at the University of Havana and to engage in sports competitions between themselves and elite teams sponsored by private social clubs.<sup>2)</sup> The importance of the *manicatos* for the University Reform Movement in Cuba was two-fold. They composed the core group that formed the basis of later student reformist organization, and from the midst of the *manicatos* sprang the most dominant student leader of this period, Julio Antonio Mella.

Mella, with impressive physical features and persuasive oratorical skills, through his activism in the movement became not only the most prominent leader of the students, but also a national political figure in his own right. He was a founding member of the *Partido Comunista de Cuba* (PCC ; Communist Party of Cuba) in the summer of 1925. The hunger strike he engaged in over his arbitrary arrest in December of that year stirred the whole country and resulted in the new administration of President Machado backing down by releasing him on bail. Julio Antonio Mella was murdered on the streets of Mexico City by a Cuban government agent in 1929.<sup>3)</sup>

Not long after Dr. José Arce's speech, a dispute broke out in the medical faculty

between a professor and his students and triggered a crisis throughout the whole university. Fearing that without organization the impromptu rebellion of the medical students would fissile out and wishing to expand the dispute to wider issues of university reformation, a group of students formed the *Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de la Habana* (FEU ; Federation of Students of Havana University). The leaders of the FEU promptly wrote and distributed a manifesto dated January 10, 1923.<sup>4)</sup> The manifesto addressed two reforms that were central to all university reform movements in Latin America. The first demand of the FEU called for university autonomy, particularly vis-à-vis the national government. The second demand was for the right of representatives from student organizations to participate actively in the administration of the university.<sup>5)</sup> Nine days later, the FEU leaders called for a general strike at the university. On January 12, a general assembly was convened with about 3,000 participants, the majority of whom were students. It should be noted that several professors were also in favor of reform to some degree or another, including the new rector of the university, Dr. Carlos de la Torre. After a brief occupation of the university by the students, the national government under President Alfredo Zayas intervened. As a result of this intervention and under pressure from the government, the administrative counsel of the university set up a commission to review the performance of some professors and recommend dismissal for those determined to be incompetent. Several professors were suspended and later terminated based on the testimony of students and a review of their academic record. The leaders of the FEU, judging that university reform was in full swing, called off the general strike.

Problems for the reformists soon arose. Dr. Carlos de la Torre resigned after the dean of the Law Faculty refused an order to dismiss a professor deemed incompetent by the review commission. The dean, José Antolín del Cueto, was in fact next in line to become interim rector according to the statutes of the university and was unsympathetic to the reform movement. Another general assembly was held. The assembly resolved to suspend classes for three days and then to reopen

the university under the auspices of the FEU. The new rector responded by attempting to dissolve the student federation by denying it recognition as a university organization. He also attempted to expel the leaders of the FEU. In response, the students came out openly for the ousting of the interim rector. Rector Cueto followed this by convening the *Consejo Universitario* (University Council) in secret and it resolved to close the university. In a bold move, the members of the directorate of the FEU not only disobeyed the order, but occupied the university with other activist students. The leaders of the FEU declared the University of Havana a “free” university and appointed Julio Mella as rector.<sup>6)</sup>

A clash between the FEU and the central government appeared to be imminent. But President Zayas was not one to act in a manner likely to result in a confrontation. Instead of fully backing the university administrators or dealing harshly with the rebellious students, the government decided to intervene directly in the affairs of the university in an attempt to mitigate the problems that had led to the impasse at this academic institution. A decree of the national government created a university assembly, consisting of professors, students and alumni equally represented.<sup>7)</sup> The function of this new institutional body was to investigate complaints from all sectors of the university, to propose reforms to alleviate the complaints, and to elect a new rector, which under normal circumstances was the purview of the University Council. Otherwise, this new assembly would not exercise any executive power over or within the university. Thus, the reformist goal of student participation in the administration of the university was only partially granted by the government. Still, this was enough to satisfy the student leaders. On March 21, 1923 a resolution of the FEU announced the end of the occupation of the university and urged the immediate resumption of classes.

The students reached the height of their influence within the university during this first stage of the student movement in the fall of the same year. After the reforms of the spring, their major accomplishment was the convocation of the *Primer Congreso Nacional de Estudiantes* (First National Congress of Students), which

began on October 15 and lasted ten days. A total of forty-nine delegations attended the congress, representing the FEU, student associations from secondary schools, student publications, fraternities, alumni associations, and groups from religious schools. As can be seen from the participants of this congress, the student movement in Cuba was national in scope and included not only the interests of the students from the university, but also from the secondary and normal schools. Discussions at the congress were organized into three main areas. The first concerned the characterization of the University Reform Movement and its significance. Then, the discussion of specific proposals for the reform of the Cuban educational system took place. Finally, the congress turned its attention to international questions and the relationship between the Cuban student movement and other similar movements in Latin America.<sup>8)</sup>

During this initial period of activity, the university students developed organizational structures to channel their protests and their aspirations for reform into actions. The broadest representative organization of the students of Cuba was, of course, the first congress of students held in 1923, but no subsequent congress was ever convened during this decade of student activism. At the lowest structural level of student organization, there were periodic student assemblies open to the entire student body of the university to discuss impending problems of the movement and to elect or confirm members of the leadership of the students. Although student associations within the different faculties of the university had existed prior to 1923, a student federation with membership encompassing the whole student body was first established that year. This federation, the FEU, was the primary vehicle which voiced student reformist opinion and represented the second level of student organization. The third tier of this structure was the directorate of the FEU, which was the actual leadership of the student movement. The legitimacy of this leadership was derived from the first level of organization, i.e., the student assemblies. Failure to receive the support of these assemblies would remove any authority of the leadership group to speak for the broad masses of students. Throughout the entire period of Cuban student activity of the 1920s and early 1930s, student organized

struggle would be based on this three-tiered organizational structure: student assembly, the FEU, and the directorate of the FEU.

Although certain political questions were addressed at the first student congress and students did not refrain from voicing their concerns about domestic and international politics, the student movement at this first stage was primarily interested in realizing change within the university. Furthermore, a new relationship between the university and the society was posited. There was no intention of restructuring political power in the country, and national political concerns were viewed as just another item among many on the students' agenda. At most, the reform of the university was seen as the preliminary step toward the reform and transformation of Cuban politics and society as a whole.

The success of the university reform movement in 1923 lies in its advocacy by many sectors of society, not only the students. Many prominent educators, influential personalities, and journalists supported the reform movement of the students. The University of Havana, founded two centuries earlier and being the only institution of higher learning in the country at the time, lent a certain social prestige to the students. From this group the future leaders of Cuban society would emerge. Movements for political and societal reform, of which the university student struggle formed a part, sprang up from the professional and working classes in the third decade of the Cuban Republic. These reformist movements reinforced each other. Another factor in the limited success of the student movement was the attitude of the national government under President Zayas, which wanted no open conflicts with the students and their leadership. The government was willing to implement moderate reforms when pressed. On the other hand, the major student demand for university autonomy was never granted, and only a very limited student participation in the administration of the university was allowed for the time being. Unfortunately for the effort of the students, the reforms of the university achieved in 1923 were unstable and vulnerable to being revised or withdrawn. In fact, the reforms favored by the students were easily reversed within a few years.

## The Second Phase

Student activity arose again in 1927, but this time primarily initiated by a national political problem and not issues directly related to university reform. President Gerardo Machado forced through the Cuban Congress certain constitutional changes known as the *prórroga de poderes* (extension of powers). On March 30, the students held a large meeting at the university stadium to condemn the extension of powers. A subsequent march and demonstration was blocked by the police, which later entered the university to prevent further protests and assemblies by the students. Classes were suspended for several days because of this renewal of disturbances.<sup>9)</sup> The following month, a student assembly was able to be held despite the opposition to it by the rector and the police. The assembly confirmed a new and more radical membership for the leadership of the student movement. This new directorate became known as the *Directorio Estudiantil Universitario Contra la Prórroga de Poderes* (University Student Directorate Against the Extension of Powers).<sup>10)</sup> As the new name of the leadership group indicates, the student movement had taken a major step away from academic concerns. The main cause for the resurgence of active student struggle was political, although university affairs would continue to be an important concern of the students. In contrast to the movement in 1923, the newly revived student movement was essentially political.

The month of April 1927 saw a plethora of conflicts between the University Council and the students. Eventually, the University Council resolved to: 1) close the university; 2) form disciplinary committees to suspend and expel rebellious students; and 3) inform the government of the situation at the university so that the latter could take appropriate action to maintain order at the institution.<sup>11)</sup> These decisions were taken after consultations between the central government and the university administration. The government confirmed the closing of the university and postponed the final examinations scheduled for June, although non-disruptive students were to be allowed to take compensatory exams and to complete the school

year. The purpose of this move was an attempt to disrupt the unity of the students in their opposition to the actions of the government in regard to university affairs and President Machado's attempt to extend his term of office while increasing his own political power. The student directorate responded by deciding to boycott the disciplinary committees and determining that no university student should sit for any examination.<sup>12)</sup> The threat of student defiance and non-compliance was sufficient to moderate the views of the administration. Subsequently, a new rector, who was inclined to negotiate with the student directorate, was appointed. Eventually, the university reopened, examinations were held and the school term ended without further disruption.

During the summer recess, sporadic demonstrations by both secondary and university students against the government were held. Just prior to the opening of the new school year in November 1927, fourteen students were arrested during a small demonstration in Holguín, in the east of the island. On November 11, an assembly numbering over 3,000 participants was held at the University of Havana to discuss what the response to the detention of the Holguín students should be.<sup>13)</sup> The government reacted quickly to the renewed challenge. It immediately closed the university and pressured the administration and the professorate to expel members of the student directorate and other campus activists. The police were ordered to occupy the university again. This firm and decisive action on the part of the government, along with the connivance of the university administration and many of the professors, effectively, albeit temporarily, silenced the university students as a group in opposition to the policies of President Machado.

During this second phase of student rebelliousness in the decade being considered, the movement had successfully countered several measures designed to limit student activism. The students held large assemblies contrary to the wishes of the university administration and the government. Their activism led to the resignation of a rector, and his replacement with one more amenable to compromising with them. The students were able to obtain the reopening of the university even after the

government had closed it. Finally, the students had challenged the disciplinary councils and the postponement of the final examinations, and they had been able to negotiate a favorable settlement on both these issues. On the other hand, student activism in 1927 had also led to an unprecedented occupation of the university by the police. Although the students protested their presence, the opposition was futile and the police remained. The students had been no match for the vigorous and firm response of President Machado to their challenge in the fall.

Moreover, the students had been ineffectual in the prevention of Machado's constitutional changes. This had been the overriding issue for the students at this stage. Although they had the support of several prominent individuals in the nation, the students failed to spark a more general opposition to Machado, as they would be able to do three years later. The administration of President Machado was still considered to be reformist and necessary to change the corruption, mismanagement and dependence on the United States that had characterized several administrations since Cuba's independence in 1902. Also, Cuba was yet a few years from the economic devastation that was to impact it during the depression of the early 1930s. The isolation of the students from the general mood of the country in 1927 made the students politically weak and vulnerable to being effectively silenced. In November, Machado easily initiated a repression of the students, which led to many being expelled and a climate of subordination and fear reigned at the university for the next couple of years. In the early 1930s, the students, not so isolated from general Cuban public opinion as in 1927, would again challenge Machado. This time Machado would find that the students could not be so easily dealt with.

### **The Third Phase**

The revolution against President Gerardo Machado began in earnest during the fall of 1930. The crucial event that sparked this struggle was a demonstration led by university students, which was attacked by the police and resulted in the

martyrdom of the student Rafael Trejo. Trejo's death shook the island nation to its roots. Denunciations came from all sectors of Cuban society. Protests and demonstrations erupted throughout the island. Cuba was teeming with conspiracies and political maneuvers by traditional politicians to change the government. By the end of the year, even a coup d'état was attempted, though it failed miserably. From September 30, 1930, the day of the student demonstration, until Machado was replaced as Cuba's leader in August 1933, a relentless campaign against him and his administration was unleashed by many sectors of the population. Cuba's Revolution of the 1930s had begun and it had been sparked by an act of the student movement.

The major aim of the student demonstration of September 1930 was the resignation of Machado.<sup>14)</sup> Once again a new group of university students had formed a leadership group now known as the *Directorio Estudiantil Universitario* (DEU; University Student Directorate). The leaders of the new DEU of 1930 considered it a necessity for university students to enter the field of politics. These DEU leaders maintained that a change in the political and social spheres of Cuba was a preliminary condition for the emergence of the "new" university. As can be seen in comparison with the movement in 1923, a reversal of the direction of the student movement occurred. Whereas originally the reformation of the university would be the first step in changing Cuban politics and society, the leaders of the student movement now posited the direct opposite, i.e., political change was necessary to reform the university.

Police and students clashed in several cities throughout the island during the last two months of 1930. Demonstrations outside Havana necessarily involved secondary students during the school term because the university students were mostly in the capital at Cuba's only institution of higher learning. At the university, the rector soon resigned. The formerly submissive faculty now rose in opposition to the Machado regime. The President responded by closing the university and suspending or dismissing sixty-six professors. No longer was it sufficient to simply expel rebellious students to restore calm. The University of Havana would remain closed,

or in an inactive state, from December 15, 1930 until after Machado fled the island.<sup>15)</sup>

In early 1931, with most of the student leadership in prison, problems arose within the student opposition to the regime. The main debate within the student movement focused on what should be its prime objective : opposition to Machado or opposition to imperialism, namely that of the United States. The majority of the student activists were opposed to broadening the struggle to include anti-imperialism, as that goal was considered by them to be unrealizable, at least, in the short term. Others thought that the mere substitution of Machado was a useless change. They anticipated that Machado would simply be replaced by another like him who was just as amenable to imperialist interests and therefore represented no real change in Cuban politics and society.<sup>16)</sup> Those students who held the latter view separated from the DEU and formed a rival group, the *Ala Izquierda Estudiantil* (AIE ; Student Left-Wing). For the leaders of the AIE, the student movement had to engage in a revolutionary struggle that attacked the roots of the Machado regime, i.e., imperialism, even if that meant a long and protracted conflict. Besides the political divergence of the two groups, the members were divided as to social class. The DEU members tended to be sons and daughters of the Cuban elite or at least financially well off, while those of the AIE generally came from poorer families.<sup>17)</sup>

Differences in the means to depose Machado and achieve the students' goals arose between these two groups during the struggle. The DEU leaders, realizing that the planning and organizing of large demonstrations and protest marches under the increasingly repressive and even murderous dictatorship was not feasible, no longer favored them. Instead, these students conducted spontaneous small demonstrations (call *tánganas*) in parks, on busy street corners, and in movie theaters. They also engaged in bombings and the assassination of police and other government officials. In other words, these students opted for battling the dictatorship through urban terrorism and, in turn, they were subjected to the counter terror of the government. Several students, and others, were brutally murdered by *la porra*, a semi-private

group of violent individuals who were closely associated with Machado.

In contrast to the DEU members, those of the AIE favored agitational propaganda among the proletariat and the rural workers. The aim of this work would be to build for a general strike that would topple the regime. Members of the AIE considered terrorist acts as petit bourgeois adventurism. These views were close to those of the CCP. The members of the AIE were influenced in their views by professors who were prominent communists.<sup>18)</sup> The AIE had in its organization a communist fraction, consisting of PCC members and non-communist leftists. Both the AIE and the PCC favored an agrarian and anti-imperialist revolution for Cuba.

The AIE leaders were not opposed to violent struggle against the regime. They understood that there was no peaceful solution to the political crisis, but they favored mass, as opposed to individual terrorist, violence. They also criticized the DEU for working with and being influenced by traditional politicians. Though a manifesto of the DEU had proclaimed a “total and definitive change of regime” to be the aim of the student movement, this slogan appeared to be too vague for the AIE leaders. The latter group maintained that the student movement had to subordinate itself under the hegemony of the more historically important proletarian struggle for liberation, while the former student group was calling for a united front of all oppositionists to the Machado dictatorship. The basic view within the DEU was : *Primero Machado, lo demás después.* (First Machado, the rest afterward.) Nevertheless, most of the DEU members were more interested in revolutionary action than political ideology. Still, the DEU would prove to be more resolute in transforming Cuba, and not just replacing Machado, than its critics on the left expected. Moreover, the communists themselves would make a last minute deal with the regime, which became moot only a few days afterward when Machado fell from power. In fact, a general strike in August 1933 would paralyze the nation and threaten Machado’s power. At that critical time, the CCP called for the end of the strike in exchange for legal recognition of the party. That compromise would hurt the reputation of the communists among Cuban revolutionaries for decades in the future.

The AIE itself was not without internal dissension. From September 1932, and for about a year thereafter, the PCC lost control of the student organization. Secondary leaders who were heavily influenced by Leon Trotsky emerged at this time while most of the original leadership of the AIE was either in prison or in exile. When the PCC expelled an AIE member from the communist party, the new leadership of the latter organization objected to this action of the party leadership in writing. Some members of the AIE became prominent in the Trotskyist “workers’ opposition” in Cuba. More orthodox members of the communist fraction of the AIE split from the new leadership and formed a committee to reorganize the leftist students. Only after the fall of Machado, the Céspedes interregnum, and the coming to power of Grau did the original leadership group, released from prison and returned from exile, reestablish political unity within the AIE.<sup>19)</sup> While the DEU was unified, actively fighting against the dictatorship, the AIE was weak and divided.

By 1933, the conflict between Machado and the opposition, including the students, was at an impasse. In May, the United States moved toward a more active role to resolve the Cuban crisis. A new Democratic administration, under Franklin D. Roosevelt, decided to reverse the previous hands off policy of the Republican administration of Herbert Hoover. The Cuban stance of the previous United States government had been helpful to the dictatorship of Machado in Cuba. But the Roosevelt administration took the position that the political situation in Cuba would have to be settled before Cuba’s myriad economic problems in the middle of the Depression could be tackled. Roosevelt’s new approach of sending Benjamin Sumner Welles to Cuba as a mediator in the crisis must have filled Machado with foreboding. Yet, the influence of the powerful neighbor of the north in Cuba left Machado with little recourse except to accept mediation and put as much of a positive spin on it as he could. Much of the opposition, most prominently the traditional politicians and the ABC terrorist group, accepted the mediation effort of the United States and Welles. Of course, the CCP and the AIE were not even considered for participation. The strong anti-imperialist views of these two groups would have precluded any of

their members from joining the talks. But to the surprise of many, even the DEU leaders firmly rejected the mediation efforts from the United States. Moreover, for the first time publicly they stated that an objective of the DEU was the annulling of the Platt Amendment.<sup>20)</sup> This was a strong anti-imperialist goal. The mediation of Welles undermined the unity of the two most prestigious revolutionary organizations, the DEU and the ABC, against Machado. Although the lack of participation of the DEU members in the mediation was not considered a serious impediment to solving the political crisis by the participants, the Cuban revolution of the 1930s would eventually be weakened and collapse within a year from this lack of unity of the opposition.<sup>21)</sup>

By the end of July and after protracted meetings with the opposition and governmental officials, Welles had come to the conclusion that the only solution to Cuba's political problems was Machado's resignation of the presidency. The metaphorical noose around Machado's neck tightened further as a strike of omnibus drivers slowly broadened into a general strike. Not only were workers involved in this strike, but also shopkeepers kept their storefronts shuttered. At this point, Machado thundered against Welles, strengthened his nationalist views and began to adopt an anti-imperialist position. He also turned to the CCP and negotiated the previously mentioned deal: legal recognition of the party for its public call to end the general strike. But this was too little and too late. With the country at a standstill and the loss of support from the United States, the guarantor of Cuban "independence" via the Platt Amendment, Machado had little chance of holding on to political power. The final blow to him came when the army launched a coup d'état, with the connivance of Sumner Welles. Machado fled the island on August 12. A new government, led by Carlos Manuel Céspedes, was later formed through negotiations held by Welles, the oppositionists involved in the mediation, and the military officers of the coup.<sup>22)</sup>

During the crucial events that led to the ouster of Machado, the DEU had been on the sidelines. The DEU had no prominent role in the immediate events that

culminated in the ouster of Machado and the installation of a new president. Many of the important leaders of the DEU were in exile in the United States during the mediation and returned to Cuba only after August 12. Of course, in light of the position of the DEU to Welles's mediation, the student group could not approve of the mediation's results. The DEU had no representation or influence in the new government, which was viewed as only replacing Machado and not his supporters who continued to hold political office at the national, provincial, and local levels. Consequently, for the rest of the month, members of the DEU actively conspired with young officers in the army to overthrow the government of Céspedes. In a manifesto issued on August 22, the DEU openly called on this sector of the military to adopt the group's recently published political program and overthrow the government.<sup>23)</sup>

The new government installed on August 13 was never able to function adequately. The end of the Machado dictatorship unleashed waves of violence that reflected the pent-up anger of the populace. Several of the worst criminals of the Machado era were cornered in public places or at their homes, beaten to death, and their bodies were dragged through the streets by large crowds. The new government, inspired by Welles, could not break away from his influence and take root in the context of a Cuba in the midst of a revolution. The Céspedes presidency, viewed as primarily a foreign product and lacking sufficient domestic legitimacy, could not last. The government fell within a month.

## **The DEU in Power**

On the evening of September 4 at the Campamento Columbia, the nation's largest military base located in Havana, the enlisted men and non-commissioned officers rebelled against their officers and forced them to leave the barracks. Many civilians, including leading members of the DEU, soon afterward began arriving at Columbia. They convinced the mutinous military group to initiate a coup d'état and

provide support to a civilian revolutionary government sponsored by the DEU and espousing its political program. Although the DEU leadership reacted quickly to this sergeants' movement, the DEU had once again been left out of the initiation of what became a major political event. The DEU leadership had no foreknowledge of the revolt at the Columbia barracks, nor had they expected any rebellious movement from the lower military ranks, although a small cell of *hombres de acción* (men of action) connected to the DEU had been conspiring with the enlisted men.<sup>24)</sup> These men of action were not focused on the political orientation of the DEU, but primarily involved with the preparation and execution of violent acts against the previous regime.

After less than a week with a five-man executive commission that proved unworkable, the DEU rescinded its support for the commission and appointed Ramón Grau San Martín provisional president of the revolutionary government.<sup>25)</sup> Grau had long been a mentor to the university students. He was a professor of medicine at the university and had a private practice that catered to Havana's elite. His occupation and a substantial inheritance left Grau financially well off. The students viewed him as a person who desired the economic betterment of the Cuban masses while disdaining any personal gain, financial or political.<sup>26)</sup>

The student movement, headed by the DEU, was at the pinnacle of political power in Cuba. The DEU was practically the only organized civilian group supporting and legitimizing the provisional government that it had helped to establish. The new government over the next few months decreed significant social reforms. However, the Grau administration faced considerable opposition from other political groups on both the left and the right. The CCP and the AIE continued to propagandize against the DEU government among the workers and the students, respectively. The traditional politicians, who had opposed Machado, and the head of the reformist ABC, among other minor groupings that had supported the mediation, conspired amongst themselves and at the United States embassy to replace the revolutionary government. Although the government survived the rest of the year despite several

conspiracies and rebellions, it could not overcome its own internal weaknesses and divisions. Relying solely on a university student organization, no matter how prestigious, was insufficient backing for permanence. The Grau government, despite the reforms and considerable popular support, was unable to generate an expanded and organized basis for its survival. Even the DEU itself was vulnerable to a loss of support from its university student base. Furthermore, the non-recognition policy of the United States toward Cuba's new government, developed primarily under the influence of the frustrated Sumner Welles, contributed to the instability of the revolutionary regime. Finally, the new Grau government had little control over the army. Fulgencio Batista, a leader of the sergeants' revolt, had been promoted to colonel and appointed to head the new armed forces. He slowly increased his political power by strengthening his support in the army.

The military began to act in certain situations without the knowledge of the civilians in the presidential palace. Thus, the Grau government was blamed for several attacks on demonstrators and other atrocities committed by an army over which it had little control. By October, it was clear to the DEU leadership that Batista represented a threat to the maintenance of the provisional government as constituted. Could the DEU overcome the opposition of the army and Batista? After acquiring evidence that Batista was conspiring with oppositionists and the American ambassador against the government, the DEU leaders convinced Grau to dismiss and arrest him. But in a surprise move, Grau reversed himself and confirmed Batista in his position.<sup>27)</sup> What can explain this largess of Grau? Most likely, he understood that the army would be a better support for him than the DEU. Grau's reliance on the DEU was becoming burdensome to him. Members of the DEU were giving him advice and counsel, although he considered himself the mentor of the students. Moreover, the DEU itself was becoming weaker as a political group by losing support among the university students. Grau expected that Batista's gratitude for saving the latter's position and even his life would ensure steady support from the military for his administration. Unfortunately for Grau,

Batista would actually continue to increase his own power, with the connivance of the representative of the United States government in Havana, until he was able to force Grau from the presidency in January 1934.

## **The End of the DEU**

The DEU now faced the question of whether or not to continue supporting Grau. At the university, in periodic general assemblies, the students did not distinguish between the actions of Grau and those of Batista. They became increasingly opposed to the government and therefore by implication to the DEU. The DEU leaders fully understood that Grau's confirmation of Batista had strengthened the latter's power vis-à-vis they themselves. Thus, they called an emergency meeting of the DEU to discuss this problem. A small group at the meeting advocated working with Antonio Guiteras, a minister in Grau's cabinet, to kill Batista and present the president with this *fait accompli*. But, the majority was not disposed to embark on such a plan. Most of those present were not able to confront the dilemmas that faced them. Therefore, the majority decided to disband the organization. This seemed to be the optimum solution for the present. Some participants were eager to return to school, withdraw from the current political situation, and resume their preparations for a career.

Moreover, dissolving the DEU resolved many other pending problems. The leaders of the DEU would no longer have to face the opprobrium and the likelihood of repudiation by the student assembly. At a recent general assembly, Eduardo Chibás, one of the DEU's leaders, had to publicly plead for a vote of confidence in the DEU by the student body until the next assembly scheduled for five days hence. He had even been shouted down in the middle of his speech with calls of “*¡Basta ya!*” (Enough already!)<sup>28</sup> Although an amorphous body with varying political tendencies, the general assembly of students was, in general, disgusted with the DEU. The students were in favor of an immediate resumption of classes, while the DEU

leadership prevaricated. Announcements from the DEU of an imminent resumption were followed by other announcements indicating a resumption in November, then later the following January or until political conditions had stabilized. Many students still viewed the DEU as responsible by association for an attack by the military on a large crowd who had gathered in late September to attempt to bring Julio Mella's ashes from Mexico and solemnly bury them in Cuba. Six participants had been killed and many others injured in the assault. Finally, the students now looked upon the DEU as aligned with a political faction and not as the representative of a broad student movement for the renewal and reform of Cuban society. The leaders of the students were supposed to be "pure" and above partisan political bickering. Later, the general assembly resolved to refrain from supporting any particular government of Cuba.<sup>29)</sup>

Disbanding the DEU would also avoid the dilemma of having to lend the organization's support to a government with Batista, increasingly distrusted and despised by the students and other civilian sectors of the population, or place the DEU in official opposition to the administration it had helped create. Finally, those members of the DEU who still wanted to work with the government were free to do so as individuals. Thus, with the formal excuse that the provisional government had consolidated itself and that the present task of the students was to return to the university and resume normal academic activities, the DEU announced to the student assembly its dissolution on November 5.<sup>30)</sup>

The dissolution of the DEU marked the end of the third stage of the student movement. For ten years the student movement had increasingly moved into the political sphere. The most profound expression of this movement had been the DEU formed in 1930. Yet, after three years of political and violent struggle to rid the country of a tyrant, and after contributing to the foundation of the first "authentic" revolutionary government in the Cuban Republic, without the prior consent of the United States, the DEU found itself isolated. The DEU had become a purely political organization tied to a government that was unresponsive to it. The DEU had lost

touch with the university students it supposedly represented. With the university preparing to reopen, and with the granting of university autonomy by the new government, the students in general were chiefly interested in implementing reforms of that institution which they had demanded and fought for since 1923. Also, the university students were concerned with “turning the tables” on the members of the faculty who were responsible for preventing university reform in the 1920s and for expelling the students in 1927. Students at the University of Havana formed committees to investigate the professors and purge the professorate of conservatives and incompetents.

## Conclusion

The political achievements of the Cuban students in this decade were significant. The university students sparked the revolutionary movement that would lead to the end of the Machado regime. Furthermore, the students were able to participate in the appointment of an executive for the republic. No student organization in Latin America reached such heights of political power as did the DEU. How can this influence be explained? Kalmon Silvert’s thesis, which states that students can have a significant political influence in societies in transition to modernity, is useful.<sup>31)</sup> Moreover, when power centers and power contenders are deadlocked or in disarray, students can have a profound impact on national politics. This pattern fits the crucial period of August to September 1933. The political power centers in Cuba were in profound disjunction because of the economic depression and the political catastrophe of the *machadato*. Cuba’s major power contenders of the opposition compromised not only with the remnants of the traditional politicians, but also with the imperialism of the United States, leaving the students of the DEU untainted with the politics of the past. The DEU appeared to Cuban society as a pure and honorable revolutionary organization at the head of a rebellion of the masses. As has been noted, even the socialist left, embodied in the small, but influential communist party, had compromised

itself in a last minute deal with the dictatorship. Thus, the DEU and its program emerged as the most promising for the revolutionaries of September 4.

But this success should not hide the weaknesses of student political participation. Students, being a transitory group in society, had little continuity of leadership during the 1923 to 1933 period. With every new upsurge in student unrest, a new organization had to be created with completely new members. The old organizations of student leadership had either been co-opted by accommodating students or they were outlawed. Leaders of the student protests during a certain stage of the movement were no longer students during the subsequent stage. Although the students in the revolution were young, brave and idealistic, they were mostly ideologically vague as to what they were fighting about. The DEU, in its manifestos, envisioned an undefined complete change to create a new Cuba. The students of the DEU were nationalists and social reformers without a detailed revolutionary program until August 1933. This program of the DEU, written not by the students but by a lawyer, highlights one final weakness in the student movement, that is, the reliance on other groups, sectors of the populace and individuals to successfully accomplish their goals. In general, the successes of the first and third stages of the movement, and the failure of the second, correspond to the ability of the students to achieve support from other sectors of Cuban society. The commitment of the DEU to Grau, stemming from his teaching at the university and close association with student reformers and rebels from the late 1920s, created insuperable dilemmas for its continuance in November 1933. Thus, while the revolution of the 1930s would have a significant impact on Cuban politics and society for several decades, the students' significant role in the politics of the island would only be ephemeral.

### Notes

- 1) Fernando Portuondo, "La revolución universitaria de los años veinte : Mella y el Primer Congreso Nacional de Estudiantes," *Islas*, no. 38 (enero-abril, 1971) : 7.
- 2) Luis E. Aguilar, *Cuba 1933 : Prologue to Revolution* (New York : Norton, 1972), pp. 72-73. The word *manicato* is derived from an indigenous word meaning "brave."

- 3) A useful biography of Mella is Erasmo Dumpierre, *J. A. Mella: Biografía* (La Habana, Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1975); a short, but informative, panegyric is Raúl Roa, "Julio Antonio Mella" in *idem, Bufa subversiva* (La Habana: Cultural, 1935), pp. 317-20; discussions of Mella's involvement in the student movement can be found in Ladislao González Carbajal, *Mella y el movimiento estudiantil* (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1977) and Fernando Portuondo, "La revolución universitaria de los años veinte: Mella y el Primer Congreso Nacional de Estudiantes," *Islas*, no. 38 (enero-abril, 1971): 3-19; and an anecdotal account of Mella's hunger strike is Pablo de la Torriente Brau, "Mella, Rubén y Machado" in *idem, Pluma en ristre* (La Habana: Publicaciones del Ministerio de Educación, Dirección de Cultura, 1949), pp. 117-26.
- 4) Raúl Roa, "La revolución universitaria de 1923," in *idem, La revolución del 30 se fue a bolina* (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1976), p. 22.
- 5) Declaraciones del Directorio de la Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de la Habana, "La Federación de Estudiantes exige participación en el gobierno de la Universidad," in Olga Cabrera and Carmen Almodóbar, comps., *Las luchas estudiantiles universitarias, 1923-1934* (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1975), pp. 69-70.
- 6) "Los estudiantes proclaman la Universidad Libre," *Pensamiento crítico*, no. 39 (abril, 1970): 20-22.
- 7) Decreto no. 1225, in Cabrera and Almodóbar, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-85.
- 8) *Julio A. Mella, documentos para su vida: Primer Congreso Nacional de Estudiantes* (La Habana: Comisión Nacional Cubana de la UNESCO, 1964), *passim*.
- 9) Ladislao González Carbajal, *El Ala Izquierda Estudiantil y su época* (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1974), pp. 196 and 198; and Lionel Soto, *La revolución del 33*, 3 vols. (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1977), 1: 298.
- 10) J. Buttari Gaunaurd, *Boceto crítico histórico* (La Habana: Editorial Lex, 1954), p. 658.
- 11) Soto, *op. cit.*, 1: 401.
- 12) Directorio Estudiantil Universitario, "Acuerdo" (n. d.) in Cabrera and Almodóbar, *op. cit.*, pp. 221-22; and Buttari Gaunaurd, *op. cit.*, p. 717.
- 13) González Carbajal, *op. cit.*, p. 220.
- 14) Manifiesto de los Estudiantes Universitarios, "Al pueblo de Cuba" (September 30, 1930) in Hortensia Picharo Viñals, comp., *Documentos para la historia de Cuba*, 4 vols. (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1969-1980), 3: 449-51.
- 15) Carlos González Peraza, *Crímenes y horrores de un régimen* (La Habana: Cultural, 1933), p. 81; and Soto, *op. cit.*, 2: 48-49.
- 16) Pablo de la Torriente Brau, "105 días presos," in *idem, op. cit.*, p. 5. This article originally appeared in the newspaper *El Mundo* in 1931.
- 17) Jaime Suchlicki, *University Students and Revolution in Cuba, 1920-1968* (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1969), p. 27.
- 18) For example, see the letter of a professor to an AIE member, Juan Marinello, "Carta a Raúl Roa" (February 10, 1931) in *Pensamiento crítico*, no. 39 (abril, 1970): pp. 129-130.
- 19) González Carbajal, *op. cit.*, p. 78 and pp. 81-83.
- 20) Directorio Estudiantil Universitario, "Al pueblo de Cuba," (n. d.) in Pichardo Viñals, *op. cit.*, 3: 567-69.
- 21) Samuel Farber, *Revolution and Reaction in Cuba, 1933-1960* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1976), p. 57.

- 22) Charles A. Thomson, "The Cuban Revolution : Fall of Machado," *Foreign Policy Reports* 11 (December 18, 1935) : 254-58.
- 23) Directorio Estudiantil Universitario, "Al pueblo de Cuba" (August 22, 1933) in Pichardo Viñals, *op. cit.*, 3 : 590-603.
- 24) *Pensamiento crítico*, no. 39 (abril, 1970) : 204.
- 25) Ricardo Adam Silva, *La gran mentira : 4 de septiembre de 1933* (La Habana : Editorial Lex, 1947), pp. 276-79 ; and Aguilar, *op. cit.*, pp. 168-69.
- 26) Enrique Lumen, *La revolución cubana, 1902-1934* (México : Ediciones Botas, 1934), p. 48.
- 27) Adam Silva, *op. cit.*, p. 361 ; and Aguilar, *op. cit.*, pp. 190-91.
- 28) *Pensamiento crítico*, no. 39 (abril, 1970) : 216.
- 29) Pablo de la Torriente Brau, "La nueva actitud universitaria" in *idem, ¡Arriba muchachos!* (La Habana : Ediciones La Memoria, 2001), pp. 19-21.
- 30) Soto, *op. cit.*, 3 : 215-17.
- 31) Kalmon H. Silvert, "The University Student," in John J. Johnson, ed., *Continuity and Change in Latin America* (Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 1964), pp. 222-23.