

José Martí, Soul of the Cuban Revolution

By Tom Whitney

Cubans celebrate José Martí's birthday every year and preparations this year are elaborate. As before, there will be a torchlight parade in Havana to mark the 165th anniversary of his birth on January 28, 1853. Youth organizations are organizing tours of places throughout the island identified with Martí. Commemorative meetings and symposia are taking place, along with voluntary work projects and torchlight parades in other cities.

Martí, untrained as a soldier, died in combat in eastern Cuba on May 19, 1895 at the onset of war for independence from Spain. The importance of his memory and example for Cubans is evident to visitors there. They see buildings and spaces named for Martí and statues in cities and small towns of the man Cubans regard as their "Apostle." Leaders of the revolution headed by Fidel Castro identified him as the "intellectual author" of the 1953 attack on Santiago's Moncada Barracks that initiated the uprising.

Martí is Cuba's national hero. That's so because during his short life he became the master of societal change in Cuba. Martí took charge of -- was the master of -- preparations for the revolution aimed at securing national independence. He was a master for Cubans in another sense of that word; he was their teacher. He took on that task with a seriousness little seen among political leaders of any era.

Enabled through experience, knowledge, skills, and ideals of justice, Martí was a strong political organizer. He had been molded by imprisonment in his youth by the colonial power and by living in exile in Spain, Mexico, Guatemala, Venezuela, and for 15 years in the United States. Proselytizing Cuban exiles, he traveled widely in eastern United States, the Caribbean, and Central America beginning in 1890. He was instrumental in forming the Cuban Revolutionary Party in 1892 as the political vehicle for both the uprising and an independent Cuba. Martí established, edited, and wrote for the Party's *Patria* newspaper which became an essential tool for agitation and recruiting. Martí, importantly, smoothed over disagreements between rebel generals Máximo Gómez and Antonio Maceo. Through his cajoling, they accepted civilian leadership for the independence revolution.

José Martí defined the ideas upon which the revolution was built. In speeches and writings, he called for education, land, and livelihood for workers and small farmers, for racial equality in Cuba, and for respect for Spanish soldiers -- not hate. He famously proclaimed, "With all and for the good of all." Martí warned of dangers to Cuban independence from the United States, something Cuban revolutionaries since then have taken to heart. Martí also explored linkages between Cuba's independence struggle and stirrings of unity among Latin American and Caribbean nations. He advanced the notion of "Our America" in a famous 1891 essay of that name calling upon Latin Americans to value their cultural and historical uniqueness and distance themselves from European traditions and, by implication, from U.S. pretensions. [1]

In addition to being a revolutionary leader, Martí was also a teacher, and ever since through his legacy has remained a teacher. He taught as author and speaker. Texts of his speeches were preserved, and he produced translations and wrote books of poems, a novel, and hundreds of articles and essays for periodicals in Latin America. He reported on U.S. political developments, the lives of ordinary U.S. Americans, and past and present artistic, literary, and political personalities of the world.

Martí's articles appearing in *La Nación* in Buenos Aires showed up in newspapers throughout the region, and he thus became "the most widely read writer in Spanish in the Hispano-American world in the 1880s," according to editor José Olivia Jimenez. [2]

For two years in New York Martí was a classroom teacher of Spanish evenings in a public school. He organized courses for exiled black Cuban and Puerto Rican workers – some being recruited for the independence struggle – and shared in teaching them. He sought school curricula with emphases on science and technology and on programs combining study with work.

In writings and speeches, Martí emphasized both moral and ethical values and cultural enlightenment. He was preparing Cubans for a new society. Indeed, for Martí, "Being cultured is the only way to be free." [3] He explored Cubans' cultural heritage as a way to enhance their awareness of what it means to be Cuban -- "cubanidad." Martí was introducing ideas of nationhood.

Monthly Review Press in 1979 published *On Education by José Martí*. Edited by Philip Foner, the volume contains 35 of Martí's "Articles on Educational Theory and Pedagogy." He writes in one of them that, "Education – who can deny it – is above all a labor of infinite love." [4] In New York schools, he observed, "teacher and pupil do not share that warmth of affection which enlarges to giant size the student's desire and aptitude for learning, and which remains in their souls as sweetly as a vision of paradise." Children there leave school "without having acquired any cultured tastes, or grace of childhood, or enthusiasm of youth, or a liking of knowledge." That's due to a "niggardly sense of life which is a national cancer [in the United States]."

José Martí in 1889 published a monthly magazine for children. Lasting only four issues, *The Age of Gold* contained fables, poems, translations, stories of Latin American heroes, a summary of the Iliad, reports on native American civilizations and on French colonialism in southeast Asia, and much more – all written or translated by Martí.

"*The Age of Gold* is the best-written book for young people in the Spanish Language," says one literary critic cited by Philip Foner. [5] "The writings of Martí for *The Age of Gold* "are the most clear and truthful ever published in Spanish for children and young people," says another. No wonder that in Cuba, a visitor sees busts of Martí at entrances to schools throughout the island, even tiny schools in remote areas.

Today unfriendly commentary on Cuba complains of communist domination there. José Martí in fact took exception to the teachings of Karl Marx. He attended an 1883 meeting in New York where Marx, who had recently died, was being honored. Journalist José Martí begins a report to *La Nación* this way:

“Look at this large hall. Karl Marx is dead. He deserves to be honored for declaring himself on the side of the weak. But the virtuous man is not the one who points out the damage and burns with generous anxiety to put it right; he is the one who reaches a gentle amendment of the injury.” [6]

In one of his poems Martí does say, “With the poor people of the earth/I want to cast my lot.”[7] But his political views were never much about class conflict. So it’s an anomaly that a socialist nation takes on as its preeminent national hero a non-socialist. But maybe it’s one that exemplifies the special nature of Cuba’s brand of politics.

Cuban political thinking, for example, is more pragmatic than it is doctrinaire. And, consistent with Martí’s teachings, it draws upon universal ideals and values as well as using economic parameters.

Martí put his mark on the socialist nation’s highly regarded practice of international solidarity. The title for his commentary in *Patria* on January 26, 1895 was “Homeland is Humanity.” Four days later he would leave for armed conflict in Cuba. For Martí, homeland is “that part of humanity that we see up close and into which we happened to be born.” What with Martí’s great concern about peoples and places everywhere, so-called proletarian internationalism took root in Cuba on well fertilized soil.

And with his close attention to the education and wellbeing of children, Martí had much to do with children in Cuba being, as is often noted, the “privileged class” there.

Notes:

1. Philip S. Foner, ed., *Our America* by José Martí, (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1975), p.84
2. José Olivia Jimenez, ed., *José Martí Ensayos y Cronicas*, (Grupo Anaya, Madrid, 1995), p.343.
3. José Martí, *Maestros Ambulantes*, (La América, New York, May, 1884).
4. Philip S. Foner, ed., *On Education* by José Martí, (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1979), p. 74.
5. *Ibid.*, pp.29, 30.
6. Deborah Shnookal, Mirta Muniz, ed., *José Martí Reader*, (Ocean Press, Melbourne, New York, 1999), p.43.
7. José Martí, *Versos Sencillos*, (Centro de Estudios Martíanos, Havana, 2001), p. 14.