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José Martí

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About this Person

Born: January 28, 1853 in Havana, Cuba
Died: May 19, 1895 in Cuato, Cuba
Nationality: Cuban
Occupation: Revolutionary
Other Names: Martí y Pérez, José Julián; Martí, José Julián
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José Martí (1853-1895) was a Cuban revolutionary, poet, and journalist. Martí was an important figure in Latin American literature. The principal organizer of Cuba's war against Spain, he was the apostle of Cuban independence.

Early Life

José Martí was born in Havana on Jan. 28, 1853, of Spanish parents. In school, where he was an eager student, his teachers aroused in him a devotion to the cause of freedom, and he achieved early recognition as a writer. At the age of 15 he composed several poems; at 16 he published a Havana newspaper, *La Patria Libre*, and wrote a dramatic poem, *Abdala*. Arrested for political reasons, Martí served several months at hard labor before he was deported to Spain in January of 1871.

In Exile

There Martí published a political essay, *El presidio político en Cuba*, an indictment of Spanish oppression and conditions in Cuban jails. The young revolutionary also resumed his studies, and in 1874 he received a degree in philosophy and law from the University of Saragossa. Martí then traveled through Europe and in 1875 went to Mexico, where he worked as a journalist. After a short visit to Cuba in 1877, he settled in Guatemala, where he taught literature and philosophy. That same year he married Carmen Zayas Bazán, daughter of a Cuban exile, and shortly afterward published his first book, *Guatemala*.

Unhappy with Guatemala's political conditions, Martí returned to Cuba in December of 1878. The Peace of Zanjón, which ended the Ten Years War (1868-1878) against Spain, had just been signed, and Martí felt that conditions on the island would be propitious for his return. Spanish authorities, however, soon discovered his continued revolutionary activities and again deported him to Spain. He escaped to France and from there moved to the United States and Venezuela.

Journalist and Poet

In 1881 Martí made New York the center of his activities, although he continued to travel and to write about the many problems of Latin American nations. Through regular newspaper columns for *La Opinión Nacional* of Caracas and for *La Nación* of Buenos Aires, he gained recognition throughout Latin America.

Martí was noted not only for his journalistic abilities but also for his poetry and prose. He was a precursor of the modernistic movement in poetry. In 1882 his most significant poems, composed for his son, were published in a book called *Ismaelillo*. Martí's best-known poems appear in *Versos sencillos* (1891) and emphasize the themes of friendship, sincerity, love, justice, and freedom. Martí also won the hearts of Latin American youngsters with his *Edad de oro* (1889), a magazine especially devoted to children. His greatest contribution to Spanish American letters was his essays. Written in a highly personal style, they brought about an innovation in prose writing.

Revolutionary Activities

Martí realized very early that independence from Spain was the only solution for Cuba and that this could be achieved only through a war that was sudden and that would at the same time prevent United States Intervention in Cuba. His fear of a military dictatorship after independence led in 1884 to a break with Máximo Gómez and Antonio Maceo, two generals who at the time were engaged in a conspiracy against Spain. Martí withdrew from the movement temporarily, but by 1887 the three men were working together again, with Martí assuming political leadership. In 1892 he formed the Cuban Revolutionary party in the United States and directed his efforts toward organizing the war against Spain.

In 1895 Martí gave the order for the resumption of hostilities against Spain and landed in Cuba to lead the war. He was killed in a skirmish with Spanish troops at Dos Rios, Oriente Province, on May 19, 1895.

What distinguished Martí was his ability to organize and harmonize. His oratory inspired his listeners, his honesty and sincerity inspired faith, and his conviction in the ideas he was pursuing gained him the respect and loyalty of his followers. His writings were not mere rhetorical exercises but moral teachings aimed at making man better, and their impact was felt not only in Cuba but throughout Latin America. Like Simón Bolívar, he thought in terms of a continent and advocated the unity of Latin America.

FURTHER READINGS

Martí has generated an extensive body of literature. Four good studies are Jorge Mañach, *Martí: Apostle of Freedom* (1933; trans. 1950); Felix Lizaso, *Martí: Martyr of Cuban Independence* (1940; trans. 1953); Juan de Onís, ed., *The America of José Martí: Selected Writings* (1953); and Richard B. Gray, *José Martí: Cuban Patriot* (1962).

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