



JOSÉ MIGUEL GÓMEZ STATUE

La Habana, Cuba

23.1336338, -82.3856699

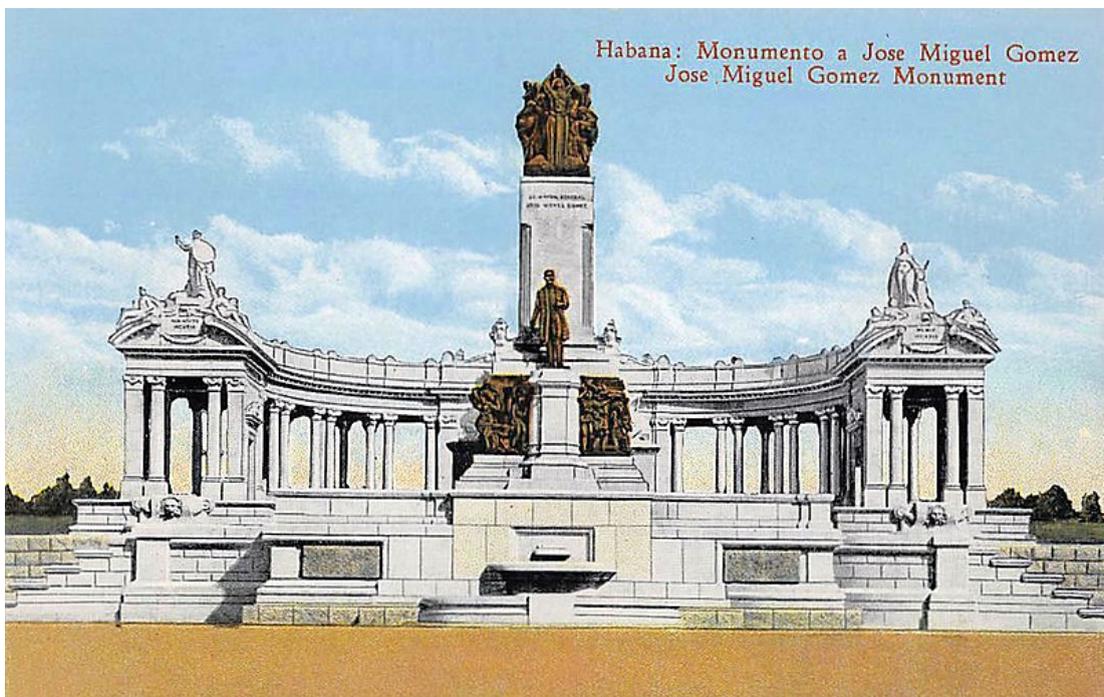


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Executive Summary

José Miguel Gómez was a celebrated military general who led Cuban forces during the wars of independence against Spain in the 19th century and served as Cuba's second president between 1909 and 1913. The monument was first inaugurated in 1936. The statue has consistently been a source of contention. It was taken down in 1959 after the Cuban revolution, restored in 1999 and, more recently, underwent renovation in 2020. The statue has come under increasing scrutiny due to Gómez's involvement in suppressing AfroCuban rebels who rose against the Cuban Government in 1912. The violence perpetrated by the government forces is estimated to have led to between 3000-6000 deaths, leading to accusations of ethnic cleansing against Gómez. However, this is highly contentious, and his place in Cuban national history has been defended. There are currently no initiatives in Cuba to address the issue.

Introduction

The recent Black Lives Matter protests in the United States have prompted many national and public history questions. Cuba has been no exception to this. In 2020, a growing backlash against a monument on the infamous Avenida de los Presidentes of Cuba's second President, José Miguel Gómez. The lavish monument is the main tourist attraction in La Habana, which cost 125,000 pesos (4539,58€) when it was initially constructed in 1936.¹ The source of contestation stems from J.M. Gómez's relationship with the Afro-Cuban community. Under his presidency in 1912, the *Partido Independiente de Color* (Independent Colour Party - PIC) launched a violent rebellion against the Cuban government in response to the worsening situation in Cuba for Afro-Cubana since independence. The Morúa Law, passed in 1911, banned political parties based on race, pushing the PIC into adopting a more militant stance.² However, the crackdown on the militants was incredibly violent and oppressive, resulting in the deaths of thousands of Afro-Cubans.³ This led many to accuse J.M Gómez of racism and ethnic cleansing.⁴ The push to remove the statue began online, with articles and blog posts criticising the monument and asking how Cuba could deal with the complex issues of racism and public commemoration. This case study will examine the conflict between Cuba's national history and its relationship with its Afro-Cuban population.

History of the Monument

At the heart of Havana, on the infamous *Avenida de los Presidentes* (Presidents Avenue), lies the monument to former Cuban President José Miguel Gómez. Described as 'one of the most beautiful monuments' in the capital, it was designed by the Italian architect and sculptor Giovanni Nicolini and inaugurated on May 18, 1936.⁵ The statue is surrounded by a half-moon of columns around a central obelisk with Gómez on its plinth made out of bronze and stands at 3.5 metres high.⁶ The statue celebrates his efforts during the wars of independence and his time as president. The monument was removed in 1959 after the revolution and was restored in 1999. It is unclear what happened to it or where it was kept during those thirty years. Since its restoration, it has been a source of contention due to Gómez's poor historical relations with the Afro-Cuban community.

José Miguel Gómez's Legacy in Cuba

José Miguel Gómez was the second-ever president of the Cuban Republic between 1909-1913. Despite being largely considered a national icon as both president and a hero of

¹ Maria Calvo, 'Conjunto monumental dedicado al Mayor General José Miguel Gómez', *Radio Havana Cuba*, July 11, 2020.

² Louis A. Pérez, *Cuba : Between Reform and Revolution*. 3rd ed. Latin American Histories, New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 168.

³ Frank García Hernández, 'Monumentos al racismo en Cuba', *comunistacuba*, June 15, 2020.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Maria Calvo, 'Conjunto monumental dedicado al Mayor General José Miguel Gómez', *Radio Havana Cuba*, July 11, 2020.

⁶ *Ibid.*

the Cuban wars of independence, his actions toward the Afro-Cuban community have left him with a contested legacy.

*Gómez's presidency was extremely important in the Cuban national narrative as he was the first president to be elected after the brief second US intervention in Cuba between 1906-1909. Although he originally agreed with the Platt Amendment, Gómez made sure to reduce overt US influence in Cuba and prevent another direct intervention. His presidency also saw the beginning of major flagship infrastructure investments in the capital. For example, between 1909 and 1913, he built the Marina Nacional, which manufactured Cuba's first-ever navy cruiser, *The Cuba*, and the *Patria (Fatherland)* gunboat.⁷*



Figure 1: 'Portrait of José Miguel Gómez' Image by Harris & Ewing via Wikimedia CC 1.0

Under his presidency, the USS Maine was finally removed from the port in Havana. This was both a practical and symbolic act that gained popularity for Gómez as it was seen as a symbol of the ending of US influence on the Island. It also solved the logistical issue of the boat taking up too much space in the busy port.⁸

Nicknamed '*El Tiburon*' (The shark), Gómez was also infamous for ushering in a new era of political corruption. Under his presidency, cockfighting and the national lottery were reintroduced. These were previously considered 'colonial vices,' and the lottery, in particular, became 'an efficient machine of political debasement.'⁹

After his term in office, he rose against President Menocal in 1917 and was subsequently placed under house arrest until March 1918, when he was released under an amnesty bill. Following another failed attempt to run for president in 1920, he went into exile to the United States, where he passed away, aged 63, in 1921. After his death, his remains were taken back to Cuba to be placed in the Colon Cemetery in Havana.

Ideas of racial hierarchies were rife in this period of Latin American history. The period 1870-1914 was a period of mass immigration in which Latin American countries, Cuba included, promoted the immigration of white Europeans to 'whiten' their populations. In Cuba, this was an attempt to prevent the republic's 'Haitianization' or 'Africanization.'¹⁰ This coincided with the creation of the PIC, which became the main vehicle for black participation and the fight against racial injustice on the Island.

⁷ Vidal, Morales y Morales & Isidro Perez Martinez, *Resumen de la historia de Cuba*, Boston Public Library, 1918, 126.

⁸ *Ibid*, 125 & 126

⁹ Luis E. Aguilar, 'Cuba C.1860-1934', in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 251.

¹⁰ George R. Andrews, '*Afro-Latin America, 1800-2000*', Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, 131.

The Afro-Cuban rebellion in 1912 was perceived as a threat, so the government cracked down excessively harshly, particularly in comparison to past armed uprisings. Gómez himself was central to this crackdown, and the evidence shows that he attempted to stoke racial tensions to suppress the PIC. *El Triunfo* reported his proclamation on June 7, 1912, declaring, 'Those manifestations of fierce savagery carried out by those who have placed themselves, especially in the eastern province, outside of human civilisation.'¹¹ Even before the rebellion took place, the authorities cracked down on PIC politicians and prominent members to thwart their campaign due to government concern about rising support for the PIC. In 1910, the government ordered the mass arrest of the PIC leaders because of an article published in the party newspaper, *Prevision*, which read that 'Any man of colour who does not kill instantly the cowardly aggressor who persecutes him in a public place is a wretch, unworthy of being a man, a dishonour to his homeland and his race.'¹² In just three days, 59 suspects were arrested, including 24 of the movement's senior leaders.¹³ Unusually, the bail was set at an inflated cost of US \$10,000.¹⁴ These actions forced the PIC into the deadly rebellion of 1912. The actual fighting of this conflict was short-lived, but its ramifications would be huge. To punish the rebels, the government executed the rebellion's leaders and murdered upwards of 3000 Afro-Cubans, many of whom were affiliated with the PIC or the rebellion.

The massacre of Afro-Cubans profoundly affected Gómez's reputation and that of the Cuban Liberal Party. The party itself lost the next election in late 1912 and did not regain the presidency again until twelve years later.¹⁵ The massacre also tainted Gómez's image. The Cuban Conservative Party repeatedly referred to him as 'the one who machine-gunned the coloured race' and encouraged black voters to 'remember the great slaughter of May 1912.'¹⁶

History of the Contestation

From 1935 to the 1950s

The contestation of the statue began in 1935 when plans to erect the statue were initially unveiled. The Cuban magazine *Adelante* was particularly opposed to the statue's creation. They argued that Cubans have the right 'to confer ... the everlasting glory of marble or bronze' and that 'blacks constitute more than one-third of the Cuban population. Thus, that black is also [...] the Cuban people. In the duty of a people and a conscious people, the black wishes to record his protest against this monument.'¹⁷ For them, Gómez's assault on the rebels of 1912 meant that he was unworthy of public adoration and celebration, especially in

¹¹ Julio César Guanche, "The Glory is theirs and nobody can take it away", *Oncubanews*, July 27, 2020.

¹² Alexander Sotelo Eastman, "The Neglected Narratives of Cuba's Partido Independiente de Color: Civil Rights, Popular Politics, and Emancipatory Reading Practices", *The Americas*, 76(1), 74.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Robert C. Nathan, 'The Blood of Our heroes: Race, Memory, and Iconography in Cuba, 1902-1962', North Carolina: University of North Carolina, 2012, 202.

a country with such a large non-white population. They argued that Gómez helped to foment anti-black sentiment. His actions resulted 'in the imprisonment of innocents; the massacre en masse of blacks uninvolved in the insurgency; and unleashing storms of hate between suspicious or worried whites and humiliated and persecuted blacks.'¹⁸

The same magazine protested the following year again in 1936 when it was announced that monuments would be to those who had fought against slavery.¹⁹ However, the proposal for the monument by Carlos Márquez Sterling, President of the *Cámara de Representantes* (Chamber of Representatives), did not include a single Cuban of colour, thus removing their agency in the abolition process.²⁰ The magazine commented, 'We believe that by an oversight, perhaps involuntary, Dr Márquez Sterling left off the great black fighters for the freedom of their brothers.'²¹ This instance was felt by *Adelante* to be another scenario in which black and mulatto Cubans were written out of Cuba's national history. They suggested that José Antonio Aponte, a free person of colour and key abolitionist, should be celebrated instead, or at least included in the plans for the monument.²²

1990s, the Restoration of the Statue

The contestation of the statue continued after the Cuban government restored it in 1990. The statue was initially removed, along with the statue of first Cuban President Tomás Estrada Palma, after the revolutionaries took power in 1959.²³ It was then later restored after decades of absence in 1999.²⁴ However, this appears to be a state-sanctioned action in both instances, and the decision-making process is obscured. The calls to remove the statue of Gómez began in 2011 with the Cuban hip-hop duo 'Obsesión' (Obsession). The duo wrote a song on their 2011 album *El disco Negro* (The Black CD) titled *Calle G* (G Street), entirely dedicated to this issue. The song repeatedly calls for the statue to be taken down due to the racism associated with Gómez and his involvement in the violent suppression of the Independientes movement. It includes lyrics such as 'Tumbenlo! ¿oye donde esta eso caballero?' and 'para mi está claro que está glorificando el racismo al descaro, hago un llamado al graffiti cubano' (Knock him down! Hey where is that guy? It is clear to me, that its glorifying racism in its shamelessness, I call on Cuban graffiti to do something about it).²⁵ They also discussed the song in an interview with the *Havana Times* in 2011. In response to being asked what would be gained by tearing the monument down, Magia (one half of the duo) responded, 'It would end the glorification of this guy who approved the killing of so many innocent people, especially black people. The monument reinforces the image of

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid, 204.

²³ Julio César Guanche, "The Glory is theirs and nobody can take it away", *Oncubanews*, July 27, 2020.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Alexy Rodriguez & Magia Lopez, "Calle G", *El Disco Negro*, Track 9, 2011.

racism...People do not have all the information, so this song makes them enquire.²⁶ For them, the statue represents a history of racism and glorifies the man who orchestrated the killing of thousands of Afro-Cubans. Moreover, they find the lack of popular knowledge about his actions troubling and seek to educate Cubans today about the country's relationship with its large Afro-Cuban community.

It was only after the murder of George Floyd in the United States in June 2020 did an online popular movement against Gómez's statue truly begin to gain traction. This was largely in response to the fact that local authorities had also launched a new project to restore the avenue of the Presidentes, including the Gómez statue.²⁷ The pushback began with an article written by Frank García Hernández titled 'Monumentos al racismo en Cuba' for the online website *comunistacuba.org*. The article opened with this statement 'While in the United States, Europe and Latin America. The anti-racist protests have torn their own statutes of slavers and Christopher Columbus. However, in Havana and Santa Clara, the monuments to José Miguel Gómez survive, even though in 1912, he massacred thousands of Afro-Cubans.'²⁸ The article argues that the restoration of the Gómez monument 'It is not only a racist offence, but it also represents, furthermore, a symbol of the bourgeois restoration [...] Behind it all lies a dangerous political intention.'²⁹ In the end, the article concludes that the monument to Gómez should be melted down, and in its place, a monument to the Afro-Cubans who were murdered should be erected.³⁰ The article also called into question the statue of Tomás Estrada Palma on the same avenue. This was because of his invitation to the US to take control of Cuba in 1906 following a heavily disputed election.

The article was the source of immediate controversy and faced significant backlash in several online media outlets like *Cubaencuentro*, *La República* and *Escambray*. On June 26, Vicente Morín Aguado published an article online for *Cubaencuentro* titled "Quiénes y por qué piden el derribo de estatuas en Cuba" (Who is asking for the statues in Cuba to be taken down and why), which attacked Hernandez's idea that the statue should be taken down, arguing that this would be erasing history.³¹ He argues that taking down the statue would be extreme vandalism, which would only feed into what he calls the Black Lives Matter craze.³² In the author's words, 'José Miguel Gómez's historical presence is indelible.'³³ The article highlights the achievements of the Gómez regime, such as establishing the national bank and the introduction, very early on, of a minimum wage.³⁴ It also looks at Gómez's impact on the study of History itself, with the expansion of historical and art academies and the creation of

²⁶ Yusmi Rodríguez, 'Cuba Hip Hop Has Its Magic', *Havana Times*, December 22, 2011.

²⁷ Abel Padrón Padilla & Deny Extremera San Martín, 'Intervención en la calle G: El espacio Público, pasado y presente con una visión integradora' *Cubadebate*, May 5, 2021.

²⁸ Frank García Hernández, 'Monumentos al racismo en Cuba', *comunistacuba*, June 15, 2020.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Vicente Morín Aguado, "Quiénes y por qué piden el derribo de estatuas en Cuba", *Cubaencuentro*, June 26, 2020.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

museums and the national archive.³⁵ It also suggests that he deserves to be remembered for his impact on the presidential code. The article ends with a quote from Gómez stating his refusal to seek re-election in 1912, thus allowing Cuban democracy to continue and thrive rather than falling into tyranny and corruption.³⁶

Aguado also penned another article in the online outlet *LaRepública* which accused those calling for the statue's removal of 'inciting cultural crime.'³⁷ He then warns of the punishment for those who would think of damaging the statue, reminding the readers that filming police officers and posting the videos on social media could incur a 3000 pesos fine and even a prison sentence if this is a repeated act.³⁸ There was also an article published in August 2020 in *Escambray* discussing the legacy of Eusebio Leal. Leal was a prominent Cuban historian who worked on public renovations in the La Habana area. The article directly references Leal's restoration of the Gómez statue in La Habana and his bust at the University of Havana. In response to criticisms of the statue's renovation, Leal commented that it 'is important because it constitutes a legacy for all historians and that it does not matter what purpose a building had at any given time, it does not matter what it was built for and what the history of a building is, but rather save the values that that building has.'³⁹ He argued that almost every statue anywhere could face some criticism, but if we give in to that, we would have to demolish everything. What is important is to 'rebuild and give those buildings a noble purpose.'⁴⁰

The backlash to the original post prompted a response from *Comunistascuba*, this time from the organisation's editorial council. They say they are shocked by the many criticisms their article faced, more so because the criticisms came from within Cuba.⁴¹ They reiterated their original argument that defending the statue means defending racism and minimising the massacre of Afro-Cubans in 1912. They also argued that defending the statue in the name of 'historical memory' goes against the revolutionary spirit of 1959.⁴² Instead of a statue to Gómez, they again expressed their desire for the bronze of his statue to be melted down and used to create a monument to the descendants of those killed in the 1912 massacre.⁴³

Decision Making Process

As of writing this case study, there have been no new developments concerning the statue of José Miguel Gómez on the Avenue of the Presidents in La Habana. However, in states like

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Vicente Morín Aguado, "Los cubanos sabemos que derribar estatuas es algo muy serio", *LaRepública*, June 22, 2020.

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Pastor Guzman, "Eusebio Leal: un modelo como historiador y como ser humano", *Escambray*, August 1, 2020.

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Consejo Editorial de Comunistas, "Contra las defensas a José Miguel Gómez y en defensa de Karl Marx", *Comunistascuba*, June 17, 2020.

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ibid

Cuba, there is a lack of transparency in decision-making processes such as these. This also coincides with a more general lack of media coverage. In the case of the Gómez Statue, it is almost impossible to know if there are, in fact, any plans. Given the recent restoration of the avenue in 2020, it is fair to suggest that the statue will remain where it is for the foreseeable future without any modifications, e.g. no plaque. Hip-Hop duo Obsession and Comunistascuba continue to protest against the statue's existence.

Summary and Conclusions

The statue of José Miguel Gómez remains on one of the busiest avenues in Havana and is visited by thousands of tourists and Cubans every year. The statue has a long history of contestation, from its original unveiling in 1936 to 2020 with the reverberations of the Black Lives Matter protests. Since 1936, the main reason for the statue's removal stems from Gómez's actions against the PIC before and after their rebellion in 1912. The government murdered the rebellion leaders, and thousands of Afro-Cubans were massacred. This exact cause was picked up again by Obsesion in 2011 and Comunistascuba in 2020. However, there has been significant pushback against the statue's removal from within Cuba itself. Many, including the prominent Cuban historian Eusebio Leal, argue that removing the statute would alter the country's national history and memory. Others, like Vicente Morín Aguado, argue that vandalising or removing the statue would give in to an international trend from the US and constitute an anti-social criminal act.

As it stands, the statue remains on Calle G with no sign of change. This case study highlights the dynamic between national histories and the inclusion or exclusion of minority groups. It shows us how public history (monuments, street names, statues) can be perceived as reinforcing racial prejudice and a lack of consideration for minority groups. As such, Gómez's legacy remains a hotly contested topic.

Research contributed by Stuart Mcloughlin

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https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:GOMEZ,_JOSE_MIGUEL._PRESIDENT_LCCN_2016857193.jpg. (Figure 1)

About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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