

## Part 1: The Puerto Rican Independence Movement

*Note: This activity was adapted from an earlier curriculum draft written by Prentis Hemphill.*

The movement toward Puerto Rican independence has been a long fought battle against colonialism. In 1898, following the Spanish-American War, the United States acquired many of the Spanish territories, including Puerto Rico. Leaders in Puerto Rico sought independence, but the US government asserted colonial control. This history of colonization sets the stage for a more modern struggle for Puerto Rican liberation and the US repression of such movements.

- 1. Definition & Grounding:** Divide class into groups. Have each group answer one of the following questions and how it impacts both the colonized and the colonizer:
  - What is colonialism?
  - Who benefits from this relationship? How?
  - Who loses in colonization? How?
- 1. Discussion:** Lead a discussion of the recent history of the Puerto Rican independence movement using these guide questions:
  - What is the difference between a commonwealth, colony and independent state?
  - What is the nature of the United States and Puerto Rico's economic, political and social relationships?
  - The history of Puerto Rico is a history of colonization, how is it also a history of resistance?
  - What role have women played in the resistance and struggle for independence?
  - Which tactics did the U.S. government use to undermine the Puerto Rican independence movement during COINTELPRO?
  - What was the effect of these tactics? Why were they used?
- 2. Research Groups:** Break the class into pairs or have them work individually. After discussing the history of the independence movement in class, have the students research leaders or individuals who played a role in the struggle for Puerto Rican independence. (See the "Puerto Rico Research Suggestions" and "Resources and Possible Student Readings on Puerto Rico" to assist students in their research).
- 3. First Person Narrative:** An alternative to presenting an oral report on their activists, students could write a short narrative, play, speech or another piece of creative writing. The narratives should be in first person as the students should adopt the voice of their activist. Each piece of creative writing should answer questions, such as:
  - What significant events in this person's life shaped their social commitment to the Puerto Rican independence movement?
  - What were the individual's goals? What did they hope to accomplish or change in the short term and/or long term?
  - How did they accomplish those goals? What methods did they use?
  - What obstacles did they face?
  - What did they accomplish? What were the impacts of their actions?
  - Include at least five important quotations from this individual.

*Optional:* Students can present or act out their pieces of creative writing.

- 4. Debrief:** Students discuss their thoughts and feelings following the Puerto Rican struggle and about the individuals they researched. Discuss why it is important we continue to student the movement today.

**Possible Extension Idea:** Have student groups consider the history and current status of these three outcomes, and discuss/debate their pros and cons from the point of view of the welfare of the people of Puerto Rico: (1) Puerto Rico as an independent nation (2) The status quo—Puerto Rico as a “Commonwealth” (3) Puerto Rico as a US state.

## **Brief History of Puerto Rico**

While many people in the mainland US might think of colonialism as a thing of the past, generally associated with European powers, the residents of Puerto Rico, Hawai'i, Guam, and Samoa recognize a different reality. In Puerto Rico, the struggle toward self-determination has been long and protracted—starting with the resistance of the native Taíno people to Spanish conquest and brutal occupation of the island in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The horrendous genocide that took place there was but the first in a series of military conquests, leading to the colonization of the Western hemisphere by Spain, Portugal, France, and Britain.

As has been the case across numerous locations and time periods, Indigenous peoples formed resistance movements that responded to foreign domination. The capture, transport, and enslavement of African slaves added major new elements to the fight towards liberation. There were notable slave rebellions and resistance movements against slavery and colonialism, including the victory of Toussaint L'Ouverture in Haiti, defeating Napoleon's France, and the Latin American independence movements led by or inspired by Simon Bolivar. The Spanish monarchy and empire, although long in decline, and eclipsed by British and French colonialism, managed to hold on to some of its foreign colonies until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The emerging US Empire saw an opportunity for further expansion as the Cuban independence movement challenged the Spanish empire. Using an explosion on the US battleship Maine in Havana harbor as a pretext, the US launched the Spanish-American War in 1898, against Spain in both the Caribbean and the Pacific. The Spanish were defeated and the US assumed colonial authority over Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines, as well as nominal independence but total economic and political control over Cuba.

Immediately after World War II, on-paper independence was granted to the Philippines on July 4, 1946, but with numerous strings attached. The US retained dozens of military bases, and the US Congress passed legislation to assure economic domination. In the Caribbean, it was not until the Cuban Revolution triumphed on January 1, 1959 that full independence for Cuba was achieved. Despite centuries of struggle for national self-determination, Puerto Rico remains a US colony.

## **PUERTO RICO RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS**

Here are some suggested names and events students can research to learn more about the history of Puerto Rico. You may want to substitute or add other names or events.

**El Grito de Lares (1868)**

**Puerto Rican Nationalist Party—Don Pedro Albizu Campos**

**The Rio Piedras and Ponce massacres**

**Ley de la Mordaza (Gag Law)**

**Commonwealth Status: Jayuya and other Uprisings**

**Oscar Collazo & Griselio Torresola: Attempted Assassination of Truman**

**Attack on US Congress: Lolita Lebrón, Irvin Flores, Rafael Cancel Miranda, Andrés Figueroa Cordero**

**Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP)**

**Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (FALN)**

**The Puerto Rico Independence Party (PIP)**

**Cerro Marivilla: Carlos Enrique Soto Arriví & Arnaldo Darío Rosado José Solís Jordan**

**The Young Lords Party**

**José López**

**The 11 political prisoners released after pardon in 1999, including Ida Luz (Lucy) Rodríguez, Carlos Alberto Torres**

**Blanca Canales**

**Oscar López Rivera**

## **Resources and Possible Student Readings on Puerto Rico Helpful Websites:**

Puerto Rico Is a Colony

<http://www.peoplesworld.org/puerto-rico-is-a-colony-not-a-commonwealth/>

Puerto Rico: The Last Colony

[http://www.isreview.org/issues/03/Puerto\\_Rico.shtml](http://www.isreview.org/issues/03/Puerto_Rico.shtml)

Puerto Rico and COINTELPRO

<http://www.isreview.org/issues/49/cointelpro.shtml>

[http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/FBI/COINTELPRO\\_Untold\\_Story.html](http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/FBI/COINTELPRO_Untold_Story.html)

Secret FBI Files on Puerto Ricans

<http://www.puertorico-herald.org/issues/vol4n22/FBI-en.html>

Decades of FBI Surveillance of Puerto Rican Groups by Mireya Navarro From The New York Times, November 28, 2003

[http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Caribbean/FBI\\_PuertoRicanGroups.html](http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Caribbean/FBI_PuertoRicanGroups.html)

Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pedro\\_Albizu\\_Campos](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pedro_Albizu_Campos)

Interesting summary of Puerto Rican independence history

[http://nylatinojournal.com/home/puerto\\_rico\\_x/history/puerto\\_rico\\_s\\_october\\_revolution.html](http://nylatinojournal.com/home/puerto_rico_x/history/puerto_rico_s_october_revolution.html)

Newscast video on the 1950 and the 1954 attack on US Congress

<http://www.latinorebels.com/2014/03/01/march-1-1954-when-puerto-rican-nationalists-attacked-washington-updated/>

Brief historical summary and audio file of Lolita speaking in Spanish and related links

[http://www.freedomarchives.org/audio\\_samples/Lolita\\_Lebron.html](http://www.freedomarchives.org/audio_samples/Lolita_Lebron.html)

Oscar Lopez Rivera – Political Prisoner

<http://www.latinorebels.com/2014/05/13/oscar-lopez-rivera-the-invisible-man-and-his-invisible-nation/>

The Young Lords Party: 13 Point Program and Community Health Program

[http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML\\_docs/Resources/Primary/Manifestos/Young\\_Lords\\_platform.html](http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Primary/Manifestos/Young_Lords_platform.html)

The Pro-Libertad Freedom Campaign:

<http://www.prolibertadweb.org/who-are-the-prisoners>

Article about the José Solís case, with several quotations from him and his attorney:

<http://revcom.us/a/v20/960-69/960/solis.htm>

A Look at the Movement to Free Puerto Rico: Ronald Fernandez' *Prisoners of Colonialism*—  
Book Review by Bertha Husband <http://sandpaper.tripod.com/99-Spring/PrisonersofColonialism.html>

“Death at Cerro Maravilla”

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cerro\\_Maravilla\\_murders#The\\_incident](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cerro_Maravilla_murders#The_incident)

Autobiographical statement by and account of the FBI murder of Filberto Ojeda-Rios

<http://upsidedownworld.org/main/caribbean-archives-45/49-political-murder-in-puerto-rico>