

The Cause of the War

by Prescott Holmes

On April 21st, 1898, a war began between the United States and Spain. All the other countries of the world felt an interest in it, but did not take any part in it. They were what we call "neutral"—that is, they did not help either side.

As soon as the war was proclaimed a great wave of excitement swept through the United States, from shore to shore. Flags were hung out in every city and town; thousands of men offered to serve in the army—volunteers they were called; and many persons offered to help in other ways. The people were not glad that war had begun, but they felt that their country was doing right, and that they ought to support her efforts.

And what was the cause of the war? Spain, a large country across the Atlantic Ocean, in the southwestern part of Europe, owned some of the islands, called "West Indies," near the United States. Spain had been unjust and cruel to the people living in one of these islands, for many years. Several times the unhappy islanders tried to drive the Spanish from the island, and set up a government of their own, but Spain sent so many soldiers there that they could not get their freedom. They fought bravely, however, but matters kept getting worse and worse, and at last Spain sent a very cruel general to take charge of affairs in the island. His name was Weyler, and he determined to conquer the islanders. After a while he found he could not do it by fighting them, so he sent his soldiers to drive those who were not fighting away from their homes and farms and make them live in or near the large cities. When he had done this, the people had no way to earn money to buy food for themselves and their families, and soon they began to get sick and to die of starvation. The cruel Weyler would not give them anything to eat, and so they died by thousands.

When this dreadful state of affairs became known in the United States, kind people sent several ship-loads of food and medicines and clothing to the sufferers. This did a great deal of good, but all the poor people could not be reached and they continued to die. Finally, the United States told Spain that she ought not to have such a cruel man at the head of affairs, and after a while Spain sent another general to take his place. This new governor's name was Blanco, and he really tried to help the poor people, but Spain had very little money to send him to buy food for them, and so they went on dying. The soldiers, too, were in a very bad condition; they had not been paid for a great many months; they did not have enough to eat, and so they too sickened and died by thousands. You can see that unless something was done to help the poor people, they would all die and their beautiful island would become a wilderness.

Besides being very proud, Spain was very poor. She had spent millions of dollars trying to conquer the islanders, and had no money to buy food for the sufferers that she had driven from their homes and huddled like cattle in yards and gloomy inclosures. So she asked the United States to help feed them, and the Red Cross Society, of which I will tell you later, sent hundreds of tons of food, medicines and clothing to them. These supplies were distributed by competent persons, and the relief was very great, but very soon some of the Spaniards began to say that the United States had no business to interfere in the affairs of the island, and to stir up the people. The feeling became so strong that our representative, Consul-General Lee, notified the authorities in the United States that, the lives and property of American citizens living in the island were not safe. It was for this reason that the battleship Maine was sent to Havana, the chief city of the island. I will tell you about this ship later.

Well, in spite of all that the United States had done to help Spain, matters grew worse, and finally the United States was obliged to tell Spain that, unless she took her soldiers away from the island and let the people govern themselves, she would help them to become a free and independent nation. When Spain received this message, she regarded it as a declaration of war, and both sides prepared for the conflict.

But before telling you about the war, shall I tell you something about the island and the group to which it belongs?

The island is called Cuba. It belongs to a large group of islands known as the West Indies; a changed form of the old name, West Indias, given by Christopher Columbus, who thought that by sailing westward he had reached islands off the shore of India. If you look on a map of the Western Hemisphere, you will find the West Indies between the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean.

Most of these islands are high and rocky, seeming like a chain of mountains in the ocean, with their tops above the waves. They are in the tropical regions, and the climate is very hot in the lowlands and on the coasts, but is delightful in the high parts all the year round. There are only two seasons—wet and dry. The rainy season begins in the spring or early summer, and lasts about six months.

What grows in these islands? Delicious fruits: mangoes, oranges, cocoanuts, limes, pineapples, and bananas; many other valuable crops: coffee, tobacco, maize, rice, sugar-cane, and cotton; immense forests of mahogany and other valuable trees. This beautiful vegetation makes these lands fair to look upon. Then, too, there are many birds with gorgeous plumage. The islands have gold, silver, copper, and iron mines; there are quarries of marble; and some kinds of precious stones are found.

But this region is not a paradise. Snakes and other horrid things crawl among the beautiful trees and foliage, and poisonous insects swarm in every place. Earthquake shocks are often felt, and fearful hurricanes sweep over the islands nearly every year, doing much damage.

A gentle race of Indians dwelt in these islands at the time of their discovery, but the Spanish settlers treated the natives so cruelly that after a few years they had ceased to exist. Many of the Indians were sent to Spain and other countries and sold as slaves; the rest were made to work in the mines, and as the Indians had never been used to such work, they died from the hard labor. In later times some of the islands were bought from Spain, others were captured, others were gained by treaty, by the nations to whom they now belong.

At the beginning of the war between the United States and Spain, in 1898, Cuba, as I have already said, belonged to Spain. Spain owned another large island, Puerto Rico, which we call Porto Rico, a name meaning "rich port." But I need not say anything more about Porto Rico at present.

Cuba is the largest and most valuable of the West India Islands. It was discovered by Columbus about two weeks after his first landing at San Salvador. According to his custom, he gave it a Spanish name, but somehow the old name clung to it, and to-day the whole world knows the island by its native Indian name, Cuba. On account of its position, it is often called the "Key to the Gulf of Mexico;" and Havana, the capital, has a key upon its coat of arms. Cuba looks very small upon our maps, yet it contains nearly as much land as the State of Pennsylvania.

Perhaps I should tell you just here that Spain is a kingdom. Its ruler, King Alfonso XII., died in

1885. His widow, Queen Christina, has ruled since then, but her son will be crowned king as soon as he is old enough. The "little king," as he is often called, was twelve years old when this war began. Christina is a good and noble woman, and it is not her fault that the people in distant islands have been badly treated.

Source:

Holmes, Prescott. "The Cause of the War." *The Young People's History of the War with Spain*. Philadelphia: Henry Altemus Company, 1900. Electronic.