

Book Reviews

Barcia, Manuel (2012) *The Great African Slave Revolt of 1825: Cuba and the Fight for Freedom in Matanzas*, Louisiana State University Press (Baton Rouge, LA), + 234 pp. \$42.50 hbk. \$32.50 epub.

By 1825 the Spanish Empire in the Americas had all but collapsed. At the same time, colonial authorities and planters in Cuba were busy transforming the island into the most productive sugar colony in the Atlantic world. Based on a wealth of archival sources, Manuel Barcia's *The Great African Slave Revolt of 1825* demonstrates how Cuba's ascendancy was, nonetheless, fraught, as enslaved Africans with knowledge of warfare resisted their enslavement through highly organised large-scale rebellions.

Barcia's book tells the story of a slave rebellion that occurred in the jurisdiction of Matanzas, a region rapidly developing into the centre of plantation slavery in Cuba. Beginning on 15 June 1825, approximately 200 slaves participated in a coordinated uprising that spread to 25 plantations and left fifteen whites dead. From a vast and disparate collection of correspondence, testimonies and court records, Barcia reconstructs the rebellion in detail, from the planning stages, through the unfolding of the actual revolt, to the investigations and trials that followed.

The strength of Barcia's study lies in the Atlantic framework within which he situates the world of plantation slavery in Matanzas. Barcia delves deep into the archives to reconstruct the Atlantic itineraries of the planters whose slaves participated in the rebellion and whose plantations were destroyed. Most of these planters were foreigners who had come to Cuba from such places as the United States, the Netherlands, England and the former French colony of Saint-Domingue, to make their fortunes in one of the Atlantic's most dynamic slave economies. Based on the reports of officials investigating the rebellion, Barcia argues that these foreigners subjected their slaves to a form of slavery that was less severe than that normally practiced in Cuba, thus affording the enslaved enough autonomy to organise the rebellion in secret across multiple plantations.

Barcia's treatment of the enslaved at the heart of his study is similarly situated in an Atlantic framework. Barcia observes that the vast majority of those involved in the 1825 slave rebellion, including all of its leaders, were born in Africa. Although historians have shown the problems of relying on the 'national' labels commonly attached to the Christian names of the enslaved – such as Pablo Gangá and Lorenzo Lucumí – to say anything precise about the ethnic origins of enslaved Africans, Barcia is probably

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on firm ground when he argues that the variety of such labels among the names of the enslaved implicated in the rebellion points to the heterogeneity of the enslaved population in Matanzas in 1825. Barcia then suggests that, by resisting their enslavement through a shared knowledge of warfare learned in Africa, the enslaved forged a common identity based on their experience of enslavement and resistance to it that transcended their ethnic differences.

The book is not without flaws. Precision and accuracy are concerns. For instance, Barcia begins the introduction by recounting how Ferdinand VII of Spain issued a decree on 25 May 1825 establishing a military tribunal in Cuba for the purpose of suppressing political dissent. A review of the cited source reveals that Ferdinand's decree was actually issued on 13 January 1824 and only established military tribunals in the provincial capitals of Spain. It was the Captain General in charge of Cuba who announced the creation of a military tribunal on the island on 4 March 1825. While this type of error has no bearing on Barcia's central arguments, it does undermine the veracity of the entire work.

The main problem with the book rests in the underdevelopment of its most important contributions. In a study that claims to take seriously the African origins of its enslaved protagonists, for instance, it is unfortunate that the only substantive treatment of Africa is relegated to four pages in the introduction, in which Barcia maps the 'national' labels assigned to enslaved Africans onto regions of West and West Central Africa where political strife and war were endemic. This observation certainly supports Barcia's argument that the rebels of 1825 were knowledgeable in the strategies and tactics of war. But when those strategies and tactics are described as 'the beating of African drums before and during the rebellion; the dancing and jumping; and the ruthless murders of their victims' (p. 119), one wonders if Barcia could not have further engaged with the increasing amount of scholarship on the African side of Atlantic slavery in order to provide readers with a more nuanced and rich depiction of the enslaved Africans attempting to resist their enslavement in Cuba.

Specialists of Cuban history will find *The Great African Slave Revolt of 1825* to be a useful study of a long-neglected episode in the history of slavery in Cuba. The archival research underpinning Barcia's account should also serve to highlight the breadth and depth of documentary sources regarding the history of Atlantic slavery that reside in Cuban archives.

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