

BEHIND BARBED WIRE

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A History of Concentration Camps from the
Reconcentrados to the Nazi System 1896–1945

Deborah G. Lindsay



Universal Publishers
Irvine • Boca Raton

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“I cannot see the faces of those beautiful young men and women who were murdered, so full of joy and energy and promise, without my heart wanting to break ... even though I never met them. We must do whatever we can to give substance to the lives they never had. We must think of them every day, keep their image alive within us. And we must be resolute, we must say, ‘Never again, only over our dead bodies will it happen again.’”

—John Maxwell Coetzee¹

*For
my family*

Table of Contents

Foreword	ix
Introduction	xi
CHAPTER 1	
The Origination of Concentration Camps: <i>Reconcentrados</i> in Cuba	1
CHAPTER 2	
The U.S. Military vs. the Filipinos	19
CHAPTER 3	
American Indian Reservations	39
CHAPTER 4	
British Refugee Camps during the Boer War	59
CHAPTER 5	
German Concentration Camps in South West Africa	73
CHAPTER 6	
The Soviet <i>Gulag</i>	95
CHAPTER 7	
Military Necessity and Institutional Extremism	111
CHAPTER 8	
A Climate of Bigotry: The Persecution of European Jews	127
CHAPTER 9	
The “Aryan Race” vs. the “Undesirables”	147
CHAPTER 10	
The Nazi Concentration Camp System	167

CHAPTER 11

Yellow Peril: The Japanese Internment Camps 189

CHAPTER 12

Lesser Known Concentration Camps 209

Conclusion 231

Acknowledgements 237

Notes 239

Selected Bibliography 351

Index 359

Foreword

As Deborah Lindsay notes in the introduction to *Behind Barbed Wire*, the horror and enormity of the Holocaust, perpetrated by the Nazis between 1933 and 1945, has tended to overshadow the real history of “concentration camps”—as they came to be called—over the past two centuries.

While these earlier camps have been separately examined by historians of conflict, from Cuba and the Philippines to the American West and South Africa, there has not, to my knowledge, been any attempt to provide a more comprehensive, comparative, analytic and narrative account. This, Lindsay has now done—and not a moment too soon, for the somewhat fragile “world order” that Franklin Roosevelt bequeathed the world in 1945, at the end of the Holocaust, is fast fraying. Against the backdrop of an American retreat into armed isolationism and virulent nationalism, of global warming, drought, widespread wars, ever-growing economic disparities, religious differences, and failing moral and political leadership, we are witnessing what can only be described as demographic mayhem, with migration and immigration crises that are not easy to resolve.

As two “caravans” of Honduran refugees made their long trek across Mexico towards the frontier with the United States in the fall of 2018, the U.S. President ordered 4,000 extra troops to man the border—the vanguard of 15,000 he claimed: as many American troops, in fact, as were serving in Afghanistan, and backed, moreover, by possible volunteer “militias” to support them in confronting the threatened “invasion”...

Clearly, in the context of other forced or fleeing migrations in Africa, Syria, Myanmar and elsewhere, this is no isolated phenomenon—and cries out for a reminder of how nations have handled the treatment of civilians *en masse* in the past—especially in “concentration camps.” Targeted, corralled and often annihilated through hunger, disease and execution, these civilian victims of circumstances not of their own making deserve not only to be remembered, but their example be kept in mind, lest in ignorance of the danger we unwittingly close our eyes to crimes against humanity.

As such, Deborah Lindsay's brief but moving and accessible account will be, I believe, a sobering and important documentation of man's modern history.

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Introduction

The comprehension of the concentration camp system may be approached best by studying the “professional military culture and the process of war-fighting.”

—Jonathan Hyslop²

Despite the fact that countless books detail the atrocities committed by Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime, particularly by its concentration camp system, far less attention focuses on the camps employed by other governments. For instance, the United States established Indian Reservations in the Southwest in order to house an undesirable portion of the American population, the Native Americans, effectively removing them from the predominately white European inhabitants. A clear parallel exists between these reservations and the later Nazi camps. In fact, Hitler studied the American isolation program when launching his own policy against European Jews. However, most people rarely make this connection, including me. This book germinated from my curiosity about Hitler’s study of the American Indian Reservation, which I had never considered as a concentration camp.

Nonetheless, the *Oxford Dictionary* describes a concentration camp as a “place where large numbers of people, especially political prisoners or members of persecuted minorities, are deliberately imprisoned in a relatively small area with inadequate facilities, sometimes to provide forced labor or to await mass execution. The term is most strongly associated with the several hundred camps instigated by the Nazis in Germany and occupied Europe in 1933–45, among the most infamous being Dachau, Belsen, and Auschwitz.” Furthermore, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum describes the term as “a camp in which people are detained or confined, usually under harsh conditions and without regard to legal norms of arrest and imprisonment that are acceptable in a constitutional democracy.” Camps, almost always perpetuated and controlled by military personnel,

function primarily to remove threats—internal or external, real or perceived—against a populace, a government, or an army. In fact, the role of the military cannot be overstated in both inaugurating and monitoring the camp system.

Several countries operated concentration camps well before Germany.³ Typically used by Western powers against the native inhabitants in their colonies, the prior camps confined large numbers of civilians under dubious justifications. The Spanish Army ostensibly established *reconcentrados* as a military counterinsurgency tactic to isolate Cuban nationals in order to circumvent civilian interference during the Cuban Revolt (1895–98).⁴ Besides the Indian Reservations, the U.S. Army utilized the tactic as a containment policy against Filipino civilians, which empowered the American military to conduct hostilities more effectively against the guerilla-style warfare of the islanders during the Philippine-American War (1899–02).

The British military provided so-called safe havens during the Second Boer War in South Africa (1899–02), presumably to protect the Dutch civilian refugees. Imperial Germany employed camps to subjugate native Africans during the Herero and Nama rebellions (1904–07), particularly in the German South West Africa colony.⁵ Vladimir Lenin, leader of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, created the *Gulag* to protect his fledgling government from political dissenters.⁶ His system continued well into the 1950s. Furthermore, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 in February 1942, which called for the internment of all West Coast Japanese Americans, many of whom were U.S. citizens, during World War II. All these facilities qualify as concentration camps no matter how benign they may seem compared to the Nazi death camps.

The geopolitical concepts evident at the end of the nineteenth-century—colonization, imperialism, expansionism, nationalism, military might, social Darwinism, and racial supremacy—contributed significantly to the practice of concentration camps. In each case, save the World War II-era Japanese internment camps, these policy procedures were realized decades before Hitler and the National Socialists assumed power in Germany. Nevertheless, the significance of these early examples becomes apparent when juxtaposed against the cataclysm that occurred forty years later. Not until the rise of Fascism and totalitarianism did these attitudes, greatly influenced by anti-Semitism and racial inequality sentiments, morph into the circumstances that created the notorious Nazi system and rendered the term “concentration camp” synonymous with annihilation.

The notoriety of the Nazi system almost completely obliterates the memory of earlier camps. Invariably, the thought of concentration camps invokes World

War II-era graphic images of emaciated men clad in pajama-like uniforms who were interned simply because the regime deemed them unworthy of citizenship in the Third Reich. Compared to the vast scholarship available regarding World War II, the Holocaust, and the Nazi camps, the general public receives little exposure to the widespread use of the system during the past two centuries.

While certainly no apologist for Nazi Germany, I find that the constant hyperbolic barrage that equates some natural disaster to the Holocaust as an affront to the mass murder of 6 million Jews. Similarly, labelling an obnoxious politician as “Hitler-like” not only dilutes the Führer’s reprehensible actions, it dismisses other arguably worse tyrannical rulers, such as Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot, and altogether ignores lesser known characters, such as Valeriano Weyler, Elwell S. Otis, Horatio Herbert Kitchener, and Lothar von Trotha. Such comparisons devalue an egregious example of human suffering and give credence to Stalin’s remark, “A single death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic.”

The Nazi genocide of some eleven million persons should be examined within the framework of other murderous regimes.⁷ The Soviet *Gulag* annihilated over sixty-one million persons under Premier Josef Stalin; in Communist China, Chairman Mao Zedong caused the deaths of over thirty-five million citizens; and, a total of almost twenty million persons died in Japan, Cambodia, Turkey, Yugoslavia, and other countries by more obscure mega-murderers.⁸ Yet rarely do you hear some odious person compared to Mao or Tito.

These various regimes cited a number of reasons for internment, ranging from religious persuasion, ethnicity, political propensities, and sexual inclinations, to pure inconvenience. However, bigotry and prejudice motivated the targeting of an overwhelming majority of victims. The concepts of the “White Man’s Burden,” civilized man as opposed to the savage beast, the “us” versus “them” mentality, Social Darwinism, and the faux science of eugenics all supported the notion of white supremacy. This attitude encouraged Westerners to consider their Anglo-Saxon heritage sacrosanct, believing that the “three Laws of Civilization”—the white race founded all civilizations; when the white race maintains its whiteness, civilization is maintained; and when the white race loses its whiteness, civilization is lost—should govern the world.⁹

These “laws” instilled a xenophobic mentality and generated the idea of imperialism, particularly in the political and economic arenas, and propelled the practice of colonialism, whereby a nation assumes control over another country. In the late nineteenth-century, white majority nations such as Great Britain, France, Spain, the United States, and to a lesser degree, Germany, existed as “small

rays of light” overwhelmed by the more populous dark races. Unable to eliminate the vast numbers of “inferior” dark peoples of Africa and Asia in order to establish superior civilizations in the lands inhabited by natives, the “benighted” countries eyed the two continents with the purpose of developing white settlements. Exploiting the local “primitives” enabled the dominant nations to increase their territorial possessions and prestige, provide expansion for its citizens, and enhance their national wealth from the vast natural resources of their colonies.¹⁰ Besides the primary goal to appropriate a better life for white settlers, some persons, perhaps influenced by the “White Man’s Burden” philosophy, expressed an altruistic desire to “save the Indians from extinction,” enlighten native populations, advance the “superior” white culture, and introduce Protestant Christianity. Beyond the French notion of “civilizing missions,” the Western nations gave little thought to the needs of the indigenous people they conquered.¹¹

In the United States, President George Washington had urged the new nation to wage a “war of extermination” against Native Americans who should be “hunted like beasts.” President Andrew Jackson, asserting that he held no animosity towards the Indians as a race, believed that his experience as an Indian negotiator during his army career better qualified him to determine their welfare than the Native Americans themselves. Union cavalry commander Philip Henry Sheridan, who infamously stated, “The only good Indian is a dead Indian,” ruthlessly campaigned against the Plains Indians after the Civil War and used total war tactics to force the vanquished onto reservations.¹² Sheridan’s colleague, Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman, agreed with his viewpoint saying, “The more Indians we can kill this year the fewer we will need to kill the next, because the more I see of the Indians the more convinced I become that they must either all be killed or be maintained as a species of pauper. Their attempts at civilization is [sic] ridiculous...”¹³

During the Philippine-American War, General Arthur MacArthur, father to General Douglas MacArthur of World War II fame, touted the virtues of the white man’s “Aryan ancestors” while warring against the natives. President William McKinley, a proponent of Manifest Destiny, suggested a “benevolent assimilation” of the Filipinos after “the Philippines had dropped into our laps.”¹⁴ McKinley’s Secretary of War, William Howard Taft, later the 27th U.S. president, explained that the islanders needed supervision since the “Filipinos are not capable of self-government.”¹⁵

Woodrow Wilson's views present a complexity of contradictions not widely known. Reared in a Southern slave-owning family, the progressive Democrat supported eugenics and signed a sterilization bill into legislation as acting governor of New Jersey.¹⁶ During his presidency, Wilson championed Jim Crow laws and defended his administration's segregation policy. He also rebuked women's suffrage, but eventually endorsed the idea and oversaw the passage of the 19th Amendment.¹⁷ During his 1916 bid for reelection, Wilson used slogans such as "He kept us out of war" to appeal to those voters who wanted to avoid a war in Europe but, one month after his second inauguration, he committed the military to the Allied effort. Additionally, his pet project, the League of Nations, never received the support of the United States. All the same, Wilson received the Nobel Peace Prize.¹⁸

During World War II, polarizing propaganda depicted both the Allied and the Axis powers in highly negative terms to heighten the hatred of the fighting forces against their enemy. As an example, wartime president Franklin Delano Roosevelt has been accredited with remarking, "The [Japanese], whose skull pattern being less developed than that of the Caucasians might be responsible for their aggressive behavior."¹⁹

Conversely, the Japanese people adopted a superiority attitude of their own. When white Christian missionaries first arrived in the sixteenth century, the Japanese soon gauged "Christianity [as] a conquest religion in the service of state militaries."²⁰ Banishing the clergy, Japan instigated a policy of *sakoku*, or closed country, that effectively shuttered the island nation from outside influences and produced two centuries of isolation and peace. By cloistering the country, the policy eliminated the need for military defenses and allowed government officials to invest in developing national culture entities such as Kabuki theater, haiku poetry, and its traditional tea ceremony.

Peace and prosperity abruptly ceased in 1853 when U.S. Navy Commodore Matthew Perry sailed his fleet into the Tokyo harbor and forced the Japanese to sign a trade treaty. Realizing that Americans viewed Asians as racially inferior, the Japanese people vowed to emulate Westerners and endeavored to become "Honorary Aryans."²¹ Encouraged to adopt a "Japanese Monroe Doctrine for Asia," they strategized a plan to dominate their neighboring nations, a subsequent regional dominance that culminated in the invasion of China in 1937, the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, and the use of concentration camps during the war.

The prevailing societal attitudes of the late nineteenth century enabled various countries to subjugate “inferior” peoples. In order to fully appreciate the phenomenon of the Nazi system, we must understand the origin of concentration camps and realize that even otherwise decent, republican governments have unjustly controlled groups of “undesirable” people. This book provides a brief history of concentration camps with a particular emphasis on how military conflicts enable and facilitate the system. Hopefully, it will broaden the reader’s scope of tyrannical rulers and autocratic administrations and offer a better understanding of the victimization of Jews, as well as many other minorities.

Oftentimes confusion arises concerning the various types of camps, especially between concentration camps and prisoner of war (POW) camps. To be clear, concentration camps imprison civilians, almost always during military hostilities. Prisoner of war camps billet enemy combatants seized through surrender or capture by the opposing belligerent during armed conflicts.²² Throughout World War II, the Germans imprisoned civilians in concentration camps and detained captured Allied troops in POW camps called *Stalags*, the German contraction of *Stammlager*, or base camp (although many POWs, especially the Russian captives and recaptured Allied escapees, were housed with the civilians in concentration camps). Military personnel guard both camp types.

Other facilities include military prisons, which incarcerate officers and enlisted men found guilty of serious crimes or those persons deemed a national security risk by the military or national authorities (used not only during war but also in peacetime). These facilities can be used to confine captured enemy combatants for extraneous or surreptitious reasons during hostilities. A refugee camp temporarily accommodates displaced civilians who have been forced from their homes due to war, nature disaster, religious persecution, or political reasons. Usually an international organization, such as the Red Cross or the United Nations, maintain these facilities.

Bear in mind when analyzing concentration systems, from *reconcentrados* to current facilities like those reportedly used in North Korea, the camps always contain the following elements:

- ❖ Civilians targeted as inferior or worthless in the society or political dissenters who pose a threat, real or perceived.
- ❖ Military personnel perpetuate and continually control the camps and employ defensive measures, such as barbed wire fences, watchtowers, and guard dogs, to prevent escape.

- ❖ Victims suffer imprisonment without conventional due process of law, maintain little expectation of release, and lose their property, which is confiscated, looted, or destroyed.

Most often concentration camps exist under the cover of armed conflict. In fact, as you will see, an argument can be made that camps can be implemented *only* under the guise of war.

As this monograph demonstrates, in the majority of instances, camps and war enjoy a symbiotic relationship reliant on the entanglement to achieve the dual goal of military superiority by “superior peoples” and the subjugation or elimination of “undesirable peoples” and the threats they represent. Hitler carried this objective to the extreme, attempting to use military might to achieve world dominance as the conflict he created provided camouflage for the annihilation of inferior peoples to attain domestic tranquility and the promotion of the Third Reich.

Chapter One

The Origination of Concentration Camps: *Reconcentrados* in Cuba

*Starvation is killing the 'concentrados' by tens of thousands.
Hunger is doing what Spain's 200,000 soldiers cannot accomplish.*²³

—The *San Francisco Call*

Decades before Nazi Germany structured a campaign to segregate and eventually annihilate “undesirable” persons, other nations had pursued policies to confine certain components of their populations. Although Spain, Great Britain, Imperial Germany, and the United States employed concentration camps prior to the Nazis, most historians agree the concept originated in Cuba. There the Spanish military implemented a *reconcentrado* strategy to diffuse an insurrection mounted by the island nationals during the Cuban War of Independence (1895–98).²⁴ This *Guerra de Independencia cubana* trailed two other attempts for liberation from Spain, the Ten Years' War (1868–78) and the Little War (1879–80).

Because the Cuban nationals lacked the matériel and finances to wage conventional war against Spain's traditional army of 100,000 trained soldiers, the freedom fighters resorted to guerrilla tactics.²⁵ Led by Cuban General Máximo Gómez y Báez, a Spanish military defector, the resisters attacked in small, mobile groups, demolishing businesses and sugar plantations, wreaking havoc on key bridges and other crucial infrastructures, and destroying lines of communication.²⁶ In short, they used every means possible to control the rural areas and neutralize the effectiveness of the Spanish forces.²⁷

Gómez, born in the Dominican Republic in 1836, began his military career at age sixteen after rejecting the clerical path his mother had encouraged. He joined

the Cuban revolution, and, as a master strategist, organized the guerrillas against the well-resourced Spanish Army during the Ten Years' War, which began in 1868.²⁸ General Antonio Maceo Grajales served as his second-in-command.²⁹ Maceo, dubbed "the Bronze Titan," which reflected the mixed heritage of his Venezuelan mulatto father and Afro-Cuban mother, also had fought for liberation during the Ten Years' War. When the insurrection failed to obtain independence or even the abolition of slavery, Maceo fled from Cuba to avoid surrender. He returned when hostilities with Spain again erupted in 1895.

Gómez, along with his two brothers, joined José Julián Martí Pérez to command the rebels, and the four men became the main insurgent protagonists in the renewed Cuban war.³⁰ With Maceo as his executive officer, Gómez established a chain of command that created an effective cohesiveness and coordination among the rebels. This solidarity allowed Maceo to instigate an east to west invasion, weakening the Spanish-held positions across the island. Leading a band of mostly Afro-Cuban men on horseback, his makeshift army invaded western Cuba, traveling for ninety-two days over more than one thousand miles, largely unhampered by the Spanish-built *trochas*, or lines of fortification. The revolutionists, alternately using guerrilla tactics and open warfare, engaged the enemy on twenty-seven separate occasions, ultimately exhausting the quarter million Spanish troops who had enjoyed overwhelming technical and numerical superiority.³¹

Meanwhile, the island combatants attempted to thwart any Spanish exploitation of their resources by raining destruction upon the sugar and tobacco plantations held by Spanish landowners and/or sympathizers. The ruined fields forced the farm laborers to seek jobs in urban locales, where they mostly congregated in major coastal cities that were controlled by the Spanish. Although the renegades had inadvertently caused this loss of homes and job opportunities for their fellow countrymen, they insisted that the farmers return to the rural areas that remained under rebel control while threatening to shoot any Cuban national who remained in the Spanish-controlled villages.³²

General Arsenio Martínez-Campos y Antón commanded the Spanish forces.³³ After he had pacified the Cubans by negotiating the Pact of Zanjón in 1878 following the Ten Years' War, the Spanish government trusted Campos's ability to resolve this new situation. However, Prime Minister Antonio Cánovas del Castillo recognized that neither the new democratic regime nor the national treasury could afford political concessions in Cuba.³⁴ Nevertheless, Cánovas permitted General Campos to implement his own initiatives. By that time, the

rebellion had garnered physical and emotional strength among the nationals, maturing beyond any military suppression and, perhaps, the scope of a political solution. Predictably, Campos soon discovered the limitations of his policies.

The hostilities now culminated into a struggle for dominance over the civilian population. Recognizing the military necessity to sequester the noncombatants to prevent them from abetting the rebel forces, Campos placed the entire island under martial law, an action that exceeded the limits of his own personal ethics. Refusing to impose such extreme measures as segregating civilians or exercising ethnic cleansing that would inflict “horrible misery and hunger,” he stated, “I cannot, as the representative of a civilized nation, be the first to give the example of cruelty and intransigence. I have to wait for them [the insurgents] to begin.”³⁵

Cánovas then opted for the more ruthless General Valeriano Weyler y Nicolau.³⁶ Tasked with repressing the Liberation Army, reinstating political order, and, hopefully, restoring the Cuban sugar industry decimated by the rebels, the prime minister ordered Weyler to crush the insurrection before any possible military intervention by the United States. With assurances from Cánovas that he would have a free hand in dealing with the insurgents, Weyler summarily rejected Campos’s hesitations and devised his own plans. Campos resigned his post and returned to Spain.³⁷

Following military school graduation, Weyler had volunteered for duty in Cuba, hoping the assignment would advance his career. His stint on the island gave him three invaluable opportunities: he fortuitously won the national lottery, which afforded him financial security; less luckily, he contracted



*Valeriano Weyler*³⁸

yellow fever, but gained a life-long immunity; and, lastly, when war erupted, he was provided a vehicle to exhibit his military prowess.³⁹

When the people of the Dominican Republic had revolted against Spain in the fall of 1863, the mother country recruited troops from Cuba, Weyler among them. Although still recovering from yellow fever, combat confirmed his ability to command and he received an award for bravery.⁴⁰

Returning to Cuba he realized that while most islanders wished to continue under Spanish rule, they also advocated social reforms, specifically the abolishment of slavery. Spanish authorities capitulated to some of their demands but ultimately failed to comply with the agreement, eventually driving the islanders to rebellion.⁴¹ Spain, heavily dependent on the island's resources, fiercely resisted.⁴²

Demanding independence rather than appeasement, Cuban-born planters and other wealthy natives led the uprising that became known as the Ten Years' War (1868–78). Weyler organized and led a volunteer column from the zealous, pro-Spain faction in Havana. Ignoring any rules of engagement, he gave his enemy no quarter and viewed all civilians as “fair game” if they failed to retire from the combat zone. When criticized for his cold-bloodedness, he countered, “What do you think war is? In war men have only one job: to kill.”⁴³ This “sinister dwarf” shaped his soldiers into the most feared unit in the Spanish Army while earning a reputation as “the most brutal counterinsurgent”—a reputation that would morph into the legend of “Weyler the Butcher” in the American press.⁴⁴

The insurrection ended in stalemate and the belligerents signed the Pact of Zanjón on 11 February 1878. Although the agreement freed slaves who had fought on either side of the struggle, it did not abolish slavery and Cuba remained under Spanish rule.

Now tasked with suppressing another revolt, General Weyler seemed more than capable of handling the job. Standing at a mere five feet, Weyler, nevertheless, earned respect as he exhibited characteristics that somewhat reflected his German heritage: authoritative, taciturn, dry-witted, stern, and, above all, courageous, a quintessential warrior who disregarded any personal danger or hardship. Puritanical in his habits, Weyler smoked no tobacco, drank no hard alcohol, and slept on a standard-issued army cot. Though frequently merciless with his men, he displayed extreme passion towards his horses.⁴⁵

Weyler plotted his “Reconstruction Plan” as he quickly identified the major military problem: the guerrilla warfare tactics of the island combatants and their lack of rules of engagement simply baffled his Spanish forces. His troops were further confounded by the unaccustomed tropical heat. Moreover, many traditional military strategies were complicated by the insurgents' ability to assimilate among the ordinary citizens. Because they wore no standard uniform, the renegades often went unrecognized and unchallenged by the Spanish soldiers when maneuvering

between their communities and their paramilitary encampments. Yet, determined to succeed, Weyler expected to quash the rebellion within two years.⁴⁶

When Weyler arrived in Havana on 10 February 1896, what he encountered shocked even him.⁴⁷ Maceo and his men, in an effort to compensate for their inadequate number of troops, low supply of ammunition, and total lack of artillery, had systematically burned businesses and plantations to divest the occupying government of its financial assets. With the island in shambles and its economy wrecked, the conflict had devolved into a civil war. The rebels, encroaching the very city limits of Havana, had been unable to breach the fortifications but the close call had terrorized the colonists, prompting Campos to declare military rule as thousands of inhabitants fled the Spanish-held towns.⁴⁸ The arrival of “the Butcher” reassured the loyalists—he may have been a brute, but he was *their* brute. As their savior, he would restore order and racial hierarchy, i.e., slavery, with his decisive actions.⁴⁹

Weyler developed his Reconstruction Plan as a three-part strategy. First, he announced that garrisons located in indefensible positions would be jettisoned and its military personnel consolidated into larger fighting units. Then, placing the capture and containment of Maceo as his main priority, his army would focus on one zone at a time, moving eastwardly towards the *trocha*, starving the revolutionary army of resources and allowing the Spanish forces to destroy the dissidents at leisure.⁵⁰ The general instructed that machetes be issued in lieu of the traditional sabre, enabling his soldiers to hack their way through the jungle dense.⁵¹ Finally, the native civilian population would be relocated into *reconcentrados*.⁵² Weyler claimed the measure would sequester and protect the Cubans (mainly rural peasants) from harm’s way until the defeat of the insurgents. In reality, he intended to harness the Cuban natives into submission.

Plainly blaming the civilians for the insurgents’ success, Weyler argued that women and children, possessing no neutrality, spied on the Spanish forces and relayed pertinent information to the rebels—in many cases, their husbands and fathers. In fact, an American newspaper quoting an observer stated, “If he cannot make successful war on the insurgents, he can make war on the noncombatants.”⁵³ This stance led to Weyler issuing three proclamations: those who disparaged “the prestige of Spain” or supported the rebels would be tried by court-martial; in order to curtain their movements throughout the countryside, authorities not only would require rural inhabitants to provide identification, but would launch

limited *reconcentrados* for those who failed to comply; and, anyone captured during the armed conflict could be subjected to execution.⁵⁴

The fifty-six-year-old military veteran considered the advantages of concentrating the noncombatants in a *reconcentrado*. Logistically, the action afforded Weyler the opportunity to develop his strategy to defeat Maceo; increased his army's mobility throughout the island communities; and, allowed him to engage in more aggressive measures such as the "scorched earth" policy.⁵⁵ Additionally, the concentration camps essentially severed the freedom fighters' supply lines. The internees, as friends and family of the revolutionists, would no longer be able to provide essential supplies, matériel, and, most importantly, food, a major consideration since the abandoned farms and the torched countryside greatly hampered the rebels' ability to live off the land.⁵⁶

Furthermore, the camps acted as a demoralizing counter-insurgency strategy. Imprisonment prohibited the internees from obtaining valuable intelligence, such as Spanish troop movements, and delivering any such information to the Cuban nationals. Conversely, the isolation prevented radical guerrillas from distributing propaganda or recruiting new warriors. Weyler also hoped that he could break the will of the island combatants by subjecting their loved ones to the humiliation and degradation of incarceration, thus concluding the conflict more quickly.

After Weyler ordered the implementation of *reconcentrados*, his soldiers transferred the Cubans to central locations where they were interned under constant military supervision.⁵⁷ The general then ordered the destruction of everything of value—homes, farm buildings, livestock, crops, and business properties. Determined to impose steely discipline on both the civilians and his troops, Weyler enacted his previous proclamation regarding noncombatants. All persons who undermined Spanish authority would be remanded to military jurisdiction and subjected to the harshest of penalties.⁵⁸ Civilians who refused to relocate into the camps would be treated as hostile entities and shot immediately. The threat notwithstanding, many farmers surreptitiously enlisted with the rebel forces rather than helplessly joining their families in the *reconcentrados*. A fair number of women insisted on accompanying their husbands to the makeshift guerrilla encampments where they nursed the sick and wounded. Some women even participated in combat at times, "fighting like the Amazons of old," preferring to die for freedom rather than face the deprivations in the camps.⁵⁹

Although Weyler issued his relocation orders through official government channels and published notices in the local newspapers, many rural inhabitants first learned of the decree when troops appeared at their door demanding that they vacate their homes within eight days. The Spanish troops forced the surrender of all livestock and destroyed crops before they herded the captives into “cultivation zones.” The authorities, keenly aware that efforts must be made to protect the refugees and restore the island’s economy, tried to convince the incarcerated that, if they showed loyalty to the Spanish administration, “they would not be worse off than if they remained in the mountains.”⁶⁰ To entice cooperation from the wealthy Cuban landowners, they were allowed to remain on their property, if their taxes were current and they resisted the insurgency.

Concentrating the large rural population into crowded urbane areas quickly created a dire predicament. Abruptly uprooted from their homes, the civilians had been forced to leave behind all their belongings—clothing, household goods, farming tools, and even gardening seeds. They had no resources with which to provide themselves even the barest existence. Where Campos had realized that the “unavoidable duty of humanity and of government” required that these captives not be left “to hunger and misery,” Weyler apparently failed to shoulder this duty or plainly ignored it all together. More perceptive army officers issued orders that uncultivated fields would be “worked and enjoyed by the immigrants” and even requested that enlisted men volunteer their time and donate some of their pay to help those incarcerated.⁶¹

Charles W. Russell, an attaché with the U.S. Department of Justice, arrived to inspect the Cuban situation shortly after the *reconcentration* order. Russell reported that during his two weeks in the country, he observed Havana, San Domingo, Santa Clara, as well as about thirty or forty towns along the railroad line.

The spectacle ... of women and children emaciated to skeletons and suffering from diseases produced by starvation, was sickening ... I saw some sick and emaciated little girls in a children’s hospital, started three days before by charitable Cubans, and saw a crowd of miserable looking *reconcentrados* with tin buckets and other receptacles getting small allowances of food doled out to them in a yard. In the same city, in an old sugar warehouse, I saw stationed around the inside walls the remnants of twenty or thirty Cuban families.