




# HIS HOUR HAD COME

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 José Martí sat on a hilltop near Dos Ríos, Cuba, writing a letter to a friend. Martí was a famous poet and writer who, in his lifetime, had written thousands of letters. This was to be his last, and it was never finished.

The letter was dated May 18, 1895. A little more than one month before, Martí and four other men had landed on the eastern coast of Cuba. Their purpose was to begin a war of independence to free Cuba from Spain. They had marched 140 miles westward from their landing place, joining with other groups of men along the way. By the



time they reached Dos Ríos, they had a small army of more than four hundred men and three hundred horses.<sup>1</sup> They had fought many small battles along the way, and had won most of them. However, they had not yet met a large enemy army.

Martí wrote in his letter: "I am in daily danger of giving my life for my country and duty, for I understand that duty and have the courage to carry it out."<sup>2</sup> Martí, a thin, frail man who walked with a slight limp, had spent most of his life studying, writing, teaching, and making speeches. But now he was a general in the army that he had inspired to rise up against the Spanish government.

His duty, as he saw it, was to gain Cuba's independence from Spain and to prevent any other country from taking it over. He wrote: "All I have done so far, and all I will do, is for this purpose."<sup>3</sup> He never finished his letter because word came that there were many Spanish soldiers nearby and a battle would soon take place.

The next day—May 19, 1895—the commanding general of the rebel army, Máximo Gómez, decided to attack the Spanish. This could be their largest battle yet, so he ordered Martí to stay behind in the camp with a small group of soldiers. Many believed that if the revolution were successful, Martí would be the new president of



José Martí, 1853-1895.

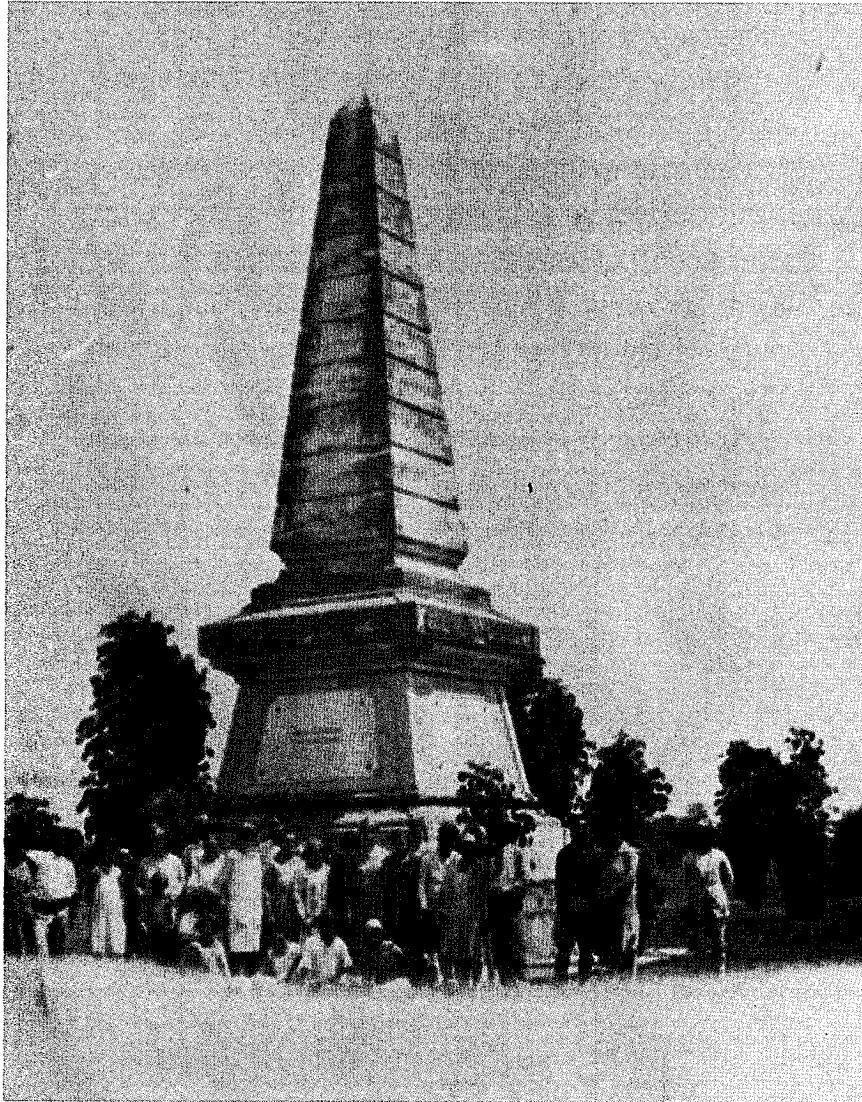
the Republic of Cuba. Therefore, he was much too valuable to risk his life in battle. Besides, even though Martí had been made a major general by Gómez, he had no military training or experience.

Martí, however, was anxious to see action. He also wanted to prove to the Cuban people that he was not a man "who preached the need of dying and then did not begin by risking his life. Wherever my first duty may lie . . . there I will be. . . . But my one desire would be to stay there close beside the last tree, the last fighter, and die quietly. For my hour has come."<sup>4</sup>

Soon after the main army left the camp, Martí heard heavy firing. Gómez and his men had run into heavy enemy resistance. Martí leaped onto a white horse and rode toward the sound of the gunfire. In the confusion of battle, both the rebels and the Spanish were surprised to see Martí ride headlong into the midst of the fighting. A Spanish soldier recognized Martí and shouted for his comrades to fire on him. A bullet struck Martí in the chest, and he fell from the saddle. He died almost immediately.

The rebels tried to recover Martí's body, but were unable to fight through the enemy lines. The Spanish buried the body nearby, but when they learned that it was the famous José Martí, they





A monument was built at the site where José Martí was killed in battle, at Dos Ríos, Cuba.

dug it up and took it to nearby Santiago de Cuba. There they buried him with respect.

In the years to come, a shrine would be erected over Martí's grave, and statues of him and monuments to him would be erected throughout Cuba, including a huge structure in the central square of Havana. His carved likeness can be found in every public school, and all cities and towns of any size in Cuba have at least one street named after him.

Today, many historians and political writers have concluded that José Martí did more for the liberation of Cuba than any other Cuban who ever lived.