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PUERTO RICAN WOMEN NATIONALISTS VS. U.S. COLONIALISM: AN EXPLORATION OF THEIR CONDITIONS AND STRUGGLES IN JAIL AND IN COURT

MARGARET POWER*

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I examine several Puerto Rican women who were members of the pro-independence Nationalist Party and the United States legal system during the 1950s. The relationship between them was the result of a direct confrontation between two opposing forces: these women's determination to end what they considered to be the U.S. government's illegal occupation of Puerto Rico and the U.S. government's refusal to relinquish its control of the island. My exploration of the legal relationship necessarily involves a discussion of the political relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States. The inevitable and unequal confrontation between the Nationalist Party and the United States government took place in two successive moments, which I briefly describe below. In both, the U.S. government triumphed, at least militarily, over the Nationalist Party. The U.S. victory led to the arrest and extended imprisonment of thirteen female members of the Nationalist Party, whose story is the subject of this paper. What follows is a preliminary discussion of this topic and these women.

I. BACKGROUND

In 1898 the United States took possession of Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Philippines, and Guam, as a result of its victory over Spain in the Spanish American War. Puerto Rico, unlike the other former Spanish colonies, became (and remains) a direct U.S. colony. In 1917 the U.S.

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government made Puerto Ricans citizens, although to this day those who reside on the island cannot vote in any federal elections. They were, however, drafted and served in the U.S. armed forces.

In 1922, the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party (PN) was founded.¹ During most of the 1920s the party promoted cultural identity, intellectual discussions, and an ambivalent but fundamentally friendly relationship with the United States. The 1930 election of Pedro Albizu Campos as president of the Nationalist Party radically transformed the party's politics, mission, and relationship to the United States. Henceforth, the PN publicly and vociferously rejected U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico and actively sought to end U.S. domination of the island.² In 1932 the PN declared that it would no longer cooperate with the United States, and in 1935 "it declared war on the Empire."³ The U.S. government, for its part, viewed the Nationalist Party with hostility and employed various measures to weaken and eliminate the party, ranging from surveillance to imprisonment and even assassination.⁴

The U.S. government also employed political means to undermine support for independence, both on the island and globally. It sponsored two significant political changes in Puerto Rico beginning in the late 1940s. International sentiment against colonialism increased following the end of World War II and the defeat of fascism. The Cold War erupted simultaneously with the global push for national liberation. The U.S. government sought to position itself as the leader of the "free world," but its colonial possession of Puerto Rico generated skepticism and weakened its ability to do so. The alterations in Puerto Rico's status and the election of a Puerto Rican government would allay, if not dispel, questions about the U.S. government's commitment to democracy, or so the latter hoped. Thus, the U.S. government worked with forces on the island to change Puerto Rico's status and, at least nominally, granted the island more self-government. In 1948 Puerto Ricans elected their governor, Luis Muñoz Marín, for the first time. Second, the U.S. Congress adopted Law 600, which gave Puerto Rico the right to create

1. MIÑI SEIJO BRUNO, *LA INSURRECCIÓN NACIONALISTA EN PUERTO RICO*, 1950, at 12 (Rio Piedras: Editorial Edil 1989).

2. LUIS ANGEL FERRAO, *PEDRO ALBIZU CAMPOS Y EL NACIONALISMO PUERTORRIQUEÑO* 39, 48-49 (San Juan: Editorial Cultural 1990).

3. SEIJO BRUNO, *supra* note 1, at 13.

4. *See generally* PUERTO RICO UNDER COLONIAL RULE: POLITICAL PERSECUTION AND THE QUEST FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (Ramon Bosque-Pérez & José Javier Colón Morera eds., Univ. of N.Y. Press 2006) [hereinafter *PUERTO RICO UNDER COLONIAL RULE*] (especially chapters one and four).

its own constitution, and opened the door to making Puerto Rico a "Free Associated State."⁵

The Nationalist Party considered this law a direct threat to the right of Puerto Rico to obtain its independence and strongly urged all patriotic Puerto Ricans to oppose it. As Pedro Albizu Campos said on October 27, 1950,

[t]hey [the U.S. government] are attempting to establish a legal basis in the eyes of the world to dismiss the accusation made by the Nationalist Party that after fifty-two years [of U.S. colonial rule] we are no longer Puerto Ricans, rather we are Yankee citizens. They call on us to give up our right to be Puerto Rican.⁶

Three days later, on October 30, 1950, units of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party attacked institutions representing the U.S. colonial government across Puerto Rico. Fighting broke out in eleven towns across Puerto Rico and in San Juan. According to Miñi Seijo Bruno, 140 Nationalists actively participated in the fighting. Of the 140, 137 were men and three were women: Blanca Canales, Carmen Pérez, and Doris Torresola.⁷ Blanca Canales led the attack in Jayuya after the designated commander, Carlos Irizarry Rivera, was killed. In Jayuya, the Nationalist Party took over the town and held it for three days. After the Nationalists captured Jayuya, Canales climbed to the balcony of the Palace Hotel, whereupon she hoisted the Puerto Rican flag, shouted "Viva Puerto Rico Libre!" and declared the Republic of Puerto Rico.⁸ Carmen Pérez and Doris Torresola served as Pedro Albizu Campos's bodyguards and were arrested in San Juan in the general roundup that followed the insurrection.

Oscar Collazo and Griselio Torresola (Doris Torresola's brother), two members of the Nationalist Party in the United States, traveled from New York City to Washington, D.C. to attempt to kill President Harry Truman on November 1, 1950. Torresola was killed in the attempt and Collazo survived. The police arrested him and the FBI questioned the two men's wives, Rosa Collazo and Carmen Torresola, along with other family members and several dozen members or supporters of the Nationalist Party in New York City. Lydia Collazo, Oscar Collazo's

5. Ivonne Acosta-Lespier, *The Smith Act Goes to San Juan: La Mordaza, 1948-1957*, in *PUERTO RICO UNDER COLONIAL RULE*, *supra* note 4, at 60-61.

6. MARISA ROSADA, *LAS LLAMAS DE LA AURORA: ACERCAMIENTO A UNA BIOGRAFÍA DE PEDRO ALBIZU CAMPOS 335* (San Juan: Ediciones Puerto 2006).

7. SEIJO BRUNO, *supra* note 1, at 225-26, 262-63.

8. BLANCA CANALES, *LA CONSTITUCIÓN ES LA REVOLUCIÓN* 25-29, 39-40 (San Juan: Comité de Estudios, Congreso Nacional Hostosiano, 1997); HERIBERTO MARÍN TORRES, *ERAN ELLOS 122* (Rio Piedras: Ediciones Ciba 2000).

stepdaughter, remembers that as the police were taking her mother, her two sisters, and herself off to be questioned, her mother, Rosa Collazo, the treasurer of the party's New York City chapter, said to them, "Don't cry and don't sign anything."⁹

By November 3rd, the National Guard had defeated the uprising in Puerto Rico. Twenty-one Nationalists and one National Guard were killed, five Nationalists and eleven National Guard wounded; 1,106 Puerto Ricans were arrested in the initial roundup and held for several weeks afterwards.¹⁰ The majority of those arrested were released soon thereafter. However, as of July 1951, 173 Nationalists were still imprisoned, seven of whom were women.¹¹

Lolita Lebrón, easily the most famous Nationalist woman prisoner, was not arrested in Puerto Rico in 1950 but in Washington, D.C. four years later. On March 1, 1954, four members of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, led by Lolita Lebrón, attacked the U.S. Congress in Washington, D.C. The Nationalist Party launched these assaults in order to demonstrate to the world that Puerto Rico was still a colony and there were Puerto Ricans willing to sacrifice their lives, if necessary, to protest this. The four Nationalists climbed to the visitor's gallery of the House of Representatives, fired shots, and Lebrón shouted, "Free Puerto Rico."¹² All four were subsequently arrested, tried, and sentenced to lengthy terms in U.S. prisons.

II. WHO WERE THESE WOMEN?

The ten women imprisoned for a lengthy period of time in Puerto Rico following the 1950 uprising were Blanca Canales, Juana Ojeda, Juana Mills, Carmen María Pérez, Doris Torresola, Isabel Rosado, Olga Isabel Viscal, Carmen Rosa Vidal, Leonides Díaz Díaz, and Ruth Reynolds, a North American.¹³ Two of these women, Blanca Canales and Isabel Rosado, were social workers; three of them, Olga Isabel Viscal,

9. Interview with Lydia Collazo, in Levittown, Puerto Rico (May 25, 2008); *CHÉ PARALITICI, SENTENCIA IMPUESTA: 100 AÑOS DE ENCARCELAMIENTOS POR LA INDEPENDENCIA DE PUERTO RICO* 155 (San Juan: Ediciones Puerto 2004).

10. *PARALITICI*, *supra* note 9, at 106. Not all the arrested were from the Nationalist Party; members of the Communist Party, the Puerto Rican Independence Party, and labor leaders were also detained. *Id.* at 108.

11. See The FBI Files on Puerto Ricans, *Partido Nacionalista de Puerto Rico (PNPR) #SJ-100-3, Vol. 19*, http://www.pr-secretfiles.net/binders/SJ-100-3_19_019_153.pdf (last visited Jan. 25, 2012) [hereinafter *The FBI Files on Puerto Ricans*].

12. Interview with Lolita Lebrón, in Chicago, Ill. (Sept. 9, 2004).

13. To date I have not been able to find out more information on Carmen Rosa Vidal or Juana Mills.

Carmen María Pérez, and Doris Torresola, were students. Pérez and Torresola also served as bodyguards for Pedro Albizu Campos, which was an atypical role for women at that time, in Puerto Rico or elsewhere.¹⁴ Ruth Reynolds was a North American pacifist who worked with the Nationalist Party, and Juana Ojeda was the treasurer of the Nationalist Party.¹⁵

These ten women, like their male comrades, were convicted of felony charges stemming from the unsuccessful uprising. All the women were convicted of violating Insular Law 53.¹⁶ The Legislative Assembly of Puerto Rico promulgated this law in 1948, which made it a felony to “foment or advocate the need to overthrow, destroy, or paralyze the Insular Government by means of force or violence.”¹⁷ Ché Paralitici characterizes this law as “the first anti-subversive legislation established in Puerto Rico following World War Two and during the Cold War.”¹⁸

Blanca Canales and Doris Torresola were additionally convicted of “attack to commit murder.” Canales was further convicted on federal charges of “Conspiracy; Damaging Government Property; Destruction of Mail Matter; Forcibly Breaking and Entering a U.S. Post Office; and Destroying records of a Federal Office” as a result of her actions in Jayuya.¹⁹ These women were all sentenced and served time in prisons in Puerto Rico.

TABLE 1: PRISON AND WOMEN NATIONALISTS FOLLOWING THE 1950 REVOLT

Name	Charge(s)	Length of Sentence	Prison	Release Date/Notes
Blanca Canales	Pub. L. 53, three counts attempted murder, attempt to	Three sentences between 6 and 14 years and	First in Vega Alta, Puerto Rico, then	Aug. 18, 1967

14. Most accounts of the time referred to them as his “secretaries.” See, e.g., *Weak Case Frees Assassin’s Widow*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 28, 1950. However, subsequent descriptions, including the women’s self-descriptions, define them as bodyguards. See *Una mujer valiente*, CLARIDAD, Oct. 4–10, 2002, at 2; PARALITICI, *supra* note 9, at 117.

15. SEIJO BRUNO, *supra* note 1, at 276–277; CANALES, *supra* note 8, at 5; Interview with Isabel Rosado, in Ceiba, Puerto Rico (Mar. 20, 2006); PARALITICI, *supra* note 9, at 145–46.

16. The Insular Government was the government of Puerto Rico. The FBI Files on Puerto Ricans, *supra* note 11; PARALITICI, *supra* note 9, at 424–25, 428, 430.

17. Acosta-Lespier, *supra* note 5, at 13.

18. PARALITICI, *supra* note 9, at 103.

19. The FBI Files on Puerto Ricans, *supra* note 11, at 27.

	burn the Jayuya post office	one of life imprisonment ²⁰	Alderson, West Virginia; in 1956 back to Vega Alta. Served 17 years ²¹	
Rosa Collazo	Detención	2 months	Women's House of Detention, New York City	
Leonides Díaz	Pub. L. 53; four cases 1st degree murder; six cases intent to commit murder ²²	Life without parole (496 years in prison) ²³	Women's prison in Vega Alta; ²⁴ served 7 years at forced labor ²⁵	July 19, 1957
Juana Mills	Pub. L. 53			
Juanita Ojeda	Pub. L. 53	8-13 months	Arecibo District Jail	Sept. 18, 1952
Carmen Pérez	Attempted assassination	22 months	La Princesa (San Juan) and Arecibo District Jail	
Ruth Reynolds	Pub. L. 53	2-6 years	Arecibo District Jail	June 21, 1952
Isabel Rosado	Pub. L. 53	1 year, 3 months	Humacao District Jail	Apr. 4, 1952
Carmen Torresola	Arrested	2 months	New York City	
Doris Torresola	Pub. L. 53	10 years	San Juan District Jail	Aug. 25, 1953

20. José Enrique Ayora Santaliz, *Blanca Canales*, CLARIDAD, Aug. 2-8, 1996.

21. CANALES, *supra* note 8, at 52.

22. MARÍN TORRES, *supra* note 8, at 68. Numerous sources say that she was arrested because she had prepared food for her husband and three sons who took part in the uprising.

23. *Partial List of the Political Prisoners Serving Sentence on the Penitentiaries of the United States of America in Puerto Rico and the Continental U.S.*, United Methodist Church Archives, Madison, New Jersey, 1253-4-1:08 Ralph Templin Papers, at 2 (P. R. (2)) [hereinafter *Partial List of Political Prisoners*].

24. MARÍN TORRES, *supra* note 8, at 67.

25. *Id.*

Olga Viscal	Pub. L. 53; 37 cases of contempt of court ²⁶	1–10 years; 31 months	La Princesa (San Juan) and Arecibo District Jail	
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Source: PARALITICI, *supra* note 9 (unless otherwise noted).

In New York City, Rosa Collazo and Carmen Torresola were arrested, charged with having “Conspired . . . [to] harm a member of the Government,” and imprisoned in the Federal House of Detention in Manhattan.²⁷ Rosa Collazo shared a jail cell with Ethel Rosenberg, with whom she became good friends.²⁸ A judge ordered both Puerto Rican women released in December 1950, due to the “flimsy evidence” against them presented by the U.S. attorney. It is likely that the judge was also influenced by the fact that Carmen Torresola, only twenty-two years old at the time, was the mother of a six-month old infant and expecting another child.²⁹ However, the charges against Rosa Collazo, who had been an active member of the Nationalist Party since 1937, were not dropped until 1951.³⁰

The U.S. government rearrested Rosa Collazo and Carmen Torresola after the Nationalist Party attacked the U.S. Congress in March 1954.³¹ In 1950 and 1951, the media had referred to Rosa Collazo as “the wife of Oscar Collazo,” in 1954 the *New York Times* identified her as “the secretary of the women’s section of the [Nationalist] party.”³² The change could be due to the leading role that Rosa Collazo played in mobilizing domestic and international opposition to the death penalty her husband received. Rosa Collazo was subsequent-

26. *Partial List of Political Prisoners, supra* note 23, at 4.

27. *Assassins’ Kin and Friends are Rounded up in Bronx*, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 2, 1950.

28. Interview with Lydia Collazo, *supra* note 9; Telephone Interview with Robert Meerepol (July 30, 2009).

29. *Weak Case Frees Assassin’s Widow*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 28, 1950.

30. Comité Pro-Homenaje a Rosa Collazo, *Homenaje a Rosa Collazo* (Impresos Puerto Rico: San Juan, 1984).

31. *91 Puerto Ricans Rounded up Here: Nationalists Are Subpoenaed for 3 Federal Grand Juries in Capitol Shootings*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 9, 1954, at 1. The U.S. government subpoenaed ninety-one Puerto Ricans to appear before grand juries following the attack. Rosa Collazo “brought lunch for a number of party members” as they waited to be questioned in the grand jury witness rooms in New York City. *Id.* at 21.

32. *Id.* at 1, 21. The article quoted the prosecutor in the case who lauded the FBI that “did an amazingly good job in locating these people,” and noted that “no witness had been threatened by contempt in any of the panels for failure to cooperate or answer questions.” *Id.* It also added that “it was said that Mrs. Collazo brought lunch for a number of party members.” *Id.*

ly charged with seditious conspiracy, as were seventeen other Nationalists.³³ She was convicted and sentenced to six years in prison.³⁴

Isabel Rosado, Carmen Pérez, and Doris Torresola were also arrested following the 1954 attack on Congress. They were in the Nationalist Party headquarters in Old San Juan when the police came to arrest Pedro Albizu Campos. They, like Albizu Campos, resisted the arrest. In order to subdue them, the police fired tear gas and bullets into the room they occupied. After two hours, the police entered the headquarters and carried out Doris Torresola, bleeding and unconscious as a result of the shots and tear gas fired by the police. Isabel Rosado and Albizu Campos were also removed, unconscious, from the building. Carmen Pérez and José Rivera Sotomayor were also arrested at the same time.³⁵ The three women, along with Angelina Torresola and two female members of the Communist Party, were jailed together in general population in the Arecibo District Jail.³⁶

TABLE 2: PRISON AND WOMEN NATIONALISTS FOLLOWING THE 1954
ATTACK ON CONGRESS

Name	Charge	Sentence	Release Date	Time Served
Rosa Collazo	Conspiracy	4-6 years		
Lolita Lebrón	Intent to kill; conspiracy	56 years ³⁷	Sept. 1979	25 years
Juana Mills	Pub. L. 53	7-10 years		
Juanita Ojeda	Pub. L. 53	7-10 years		
Carmen Pérez	Weapons	60 years		15 years ³⁸
Isabel Rosado	Weapons;	1-15 years; 1-	1965 ³⁹	10 years

33. The charge of seditious conspiracy means conspiring to overthrow the U.S. government by force. See 18 U.S.C. § 2384 (1994).

34. Edward Ranzai, *Anti-U.S. Plot is Laid to 17 Puerto Ricans*, N.Y. TIMES, May 27, 1954, at 14; *13 Puerto Ricans Get 6-Year Terms: Leaders of Terrorist Group Under Maximum Sentences for Seditious Conspiracy*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 27, 1954; Comité Pro-Homenaje a Rosa Collazo, *supra* note 30; interview with Lydia Collazo, *supra* note 9.

35. *Capturan Albizu y Otros Tres*, EL MUNDO, Mar. 6, 1954, at 1.

36. *6 Acusadas de Subversión Comparten la Misma Sala*, EL MUNDO, Mar. 9, 1954. Angelina Torresola, Doris and Griselio's sister, was arrested in her mother's house in Puerto Nuevo by the Negociado de Seguridad Interna.

37. Sources differ on the length of her sentence. See, e.g., PARALITICI, *supra* note 9 (56 years); CONRAD LYNN, *THERE IS A FOUNTAIN. THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A CIVIL RIGHTS LAWYER* 136 (1993) (54 years). See also Vanguard Betances, *Tragedia Hispanoamericano, Presos Políticos de Puerto Rico en Carceles de Estados Unidos*, 1961, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Ruth Reynolds Papers, Box 20, File 87.

38. *Muere una líder Nacionalista*, EL NUEVO DÍA, Apr. 5, 2003.

39. Mildred Rivera Marrero, *Un siglo de lucidez*, EL NUEVO DÍA, Jan. 30, 2007.

	attack with intent to kill	5 years		
Angelina Torresola	Pub. L. 53	7-10 years		
Carmen Torresola	Conspiracy	4-6 years		
Doris Torresola	Pub. L. 53	7-10 years		

Source: PARALITICI, *supra* note 9 (unless otherwise noted).

III. GENDER IN SENTENCING

The 1950 and 1954 attacks carried out by the Nationalist Party took place during a period of intense anti-communism in the United States. Indeed, the government initially attempted to link the Communist Party to the 1950 revolt.⁴⁰ They also took place during a time when conservative ideas about women and their role in society were both part of U.S. cold war ideology and defined many people's ideas and conceptions of gender in the United States.⁴¹ Given this context, the prominent positions held by some Nationalist Party women were especially remarkable. As mentioned above, Doris Torresola and Carmen Pérez served as bodyguards for Pedro Albizu Campos. Blanca Canales became the leader of the Jayuya revolt, albeit by default. Lolita Lebrón led three other male members of the Nationalist Party to attack the U.S. Congress. How did the U.S. government respond to these women, both as anti-colonial fighters and as women? As the two cases I examine below illustrate, it is not so easy to answer this question.

The majority of the over 1,000 Puerto Ricans arrested following the 1950 uprising, as well as the several dozen detained after the 1954 attack on Congress, were released shortly thereafter. The women that were sentenced to longer prison terms, like the men, were those who had demonstrated a deep and long-standing commitment to the party

40. For example, when John Foster Dulles, U.S. Secretary of State, spoke at the meeting of the Organization of American States in Caracas, Venezuela shortly after the 1954 attack on U.S. Congress, he claimed that the communists had influenced the Nationalist attack. *Opina Rojos han influido Nacionalismo*, EL MUNDO, March 5, 1954, at 1. Although the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party did have some connection, and Communist Party lawyers defended the arrested or convicted Nationalists, the two organizations also differed on many issues. This is a topic on which I have only conducted preliminary research. It will be part of the larger study that I am making on the Nationalist Party.

41. See ELAINE TYLER MAY, *HOMEWARD BOUND: AMERICAN FAMILIES IN THE COLD WAR ERA* (New York: Basic Books 1999).

and the struggle for Puerto Rican independence. Although the U.S. government, along with the media, branded both male and female Nationalists as terrorists, not all members received the same sentences, even when they were charged with the same crime. Although gender played a role in the amount of time the Nationalists were given, so too did one's role in the actions that gave rise to the charges against them.

Since this is a preliminary study, I do not have information on all the charges and sentences of all the Nationalist Party members. Therefore, I will limit my analysis to two cases: that of the Nationalist Party members arrested in Jayuya in 1950 and that of the four Nationalists who attacked the U.S. Congress in 1954. I have chosen these two cases because there is sufficient information on them, because both Blanca Canales and Lolita Lebrón were military leaders in the attacks, and because both women were given extraordinarily long sentences.⁴²

Fourteen members of the Nationalist Party were convicted of a variety of federal charges for their role in the 1950 uprising in Jayuya. Heading the list was Blanca Canales, who the media of Puerto Rico designated as "the leader" of the Jayuya attack.⁴³ Canales, along with Mario Irizarry, received eight years for one set of charges; however, Ramon Robles and Elio Torresola, the brother of Griselio and Doris Torresola, received eleven years for a similar set of charges.⁴⁴ All four received higher sentences than the other ten Nationalists, four of whom received either six or seven years and six of whom were indicted by the Grand Jury.⁴⁵

Canales was also convicted of attack to commit murder, possession of an unregistered firearm, carrying weapons, murder, and arson. She received a variety of sentences, one of which was life in prison. Mario Irizarry, who I discussed in the previous paragraph, was charged and convicted of the same crimes as Canales, as well as robbery and second degree murder. They were both sentenced to roughly the same amount of time for their shared charges, which indicates that perhaps gender did not play a significant factor in determining the length of the sentences. However, as the publicly designated "leader" of the Jayuya

42. Jan Susler studied the very lengthy prison sentences given to the FALN prisoners following their arrests in the Chicago area in the early 1980s. She found that their sentences were highly disproportionate to those of other people convicted during that same time for far more serious offenses. See Jan Susler, *Puerto Rican Political Prisoners in U.S. Prisons*, in *PUERTO RICO UNDER COLONIAL RULE*, *supra* note 4, at 123.

43. *Blanca Canales Alegó Ayer Inocencia*, *EL MUNDO*, November 9, 1950, at 1, 2.

44. The FBI Files on Puerto Ricans, *supra* note 11.

45. *Id.* I have not yet been able to determine if or for what they were convicted.

attack, I find it notable that in general she received either the same or lighter sentence than her male comrades. Certainly, the fact that she came from a locally prominent family could have influenced the judge.⁴⁶

In the case of Lolita Lebrón it is clear that gender played a role in determining the length of the sentence she received. Lolita Lebrón, the acknowledged leader of the attack on Congress, was convicted of assault with intent to commit murder and, in a trial held nine months later, of conspiracy to murder the congressmen. She was sentenced to fifty-six years in prison.⁴⁷ The three men who accompanied her, Rafael Cancel Miranda, Irvin Flores, and Andres Figueroa Cordero, however, were convicted of the same charges and each sentenced to seventy-five years in prison.⁴⁸ Lebrón had no prior federal convictions or charges.⁴⁹ Rafael Cancel Miranda had been convicted and sentenced to two years in prison in 1948 for refusing to register with the military service, but the other two men had no previous records.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, they all received the same sentence, which suggests that Cancel Miranda's prior record did not influence the length of his sentence.

Conrad Lynn, Lebrón's attorney, offers an explanation for her lighter sentence. The day before she was to stand trial, a priest had visited her and told her that her twelve-year old son had drowned. She was distraught when she appeared in court. The judge responded to her grief and allowed her to tell the court the story of how, when her

46. Mario Canales, her brother, was a representative in the Puerto Rican Congress. He obtained a lawyer who wanted to sever her case from that of the other Jayuyense Nationalists arrested following the uprising. Blanca Canales rejected the effort and said, "I don't want a separate trial. I want to run the same risks as the revolutionary compañeros of Jayuya." Ayora Santaliz,, *supra* note 20.

47. *Time* magazine, for example, first described her as "an attractive woman" accompanied by "two dark young men." *Puerto Rico is Not Free*, TIME, Mar. 8, 1954. It subsequently characterized her as "the fiery divorcee who organized and led the armed assault on Congress." *THE CONGRESS: Aftermath*, TIME, Mar. 15, 1954. The popular weekly magazine also reported, erroneously, that Lebrón "is a convicted thief and forger who has spent much of her adult life in prison." *Id.* The same article referred to Pedro Albizu Campos as a "crackpot" who was arrested in San Juan after he was found "cowering on the floor with two women friends." *Id.* The women were Doris Torresola and Carmen Pérez. The claims that Lebrón had a prior criminal record were disproved when her records were searched. See *Nada le Imputan Archivos de Corte Federal de la Isla*, EL MUNDO, Mar. 5, 1954, at 3; see also *Boricuas Tirotean Congreso*, EL MUNDO, Mar. 2, 1954, at 1. It described the attackers as "four fanatics led by a 34-year old woman." *Id.*

48. Rafael Cancel Miranda did have a felony conviction, but neither Irvin Flores nor Andres Figueroa Cordero had any prior convictions and they all received the same sentence. So their previous records, or lack thereof, could not have been the critical factor that determined the different length of sentences between the three men and Lebrón.

49. *Nada le Imputan Archivos de Corte Federal de la Isla*, EL MUNDO, Mar. 5, 1954, at 3.

50. SEIJO BRUNO, *supra* note 1, at 19.

son had lived with her in New York City, she was out of work and money and she desperately searched the streets looking for money to feed her son. According to Lynn, when she finished recounting her story, "the judge was blowing his nose and the defense table and the jury were in tears."⁵¹ Although she, like her male comrades, was found guilty, perhaps the sympathy she inspired as a bereaved and loving mother influenced the difference in sentences.

Lolita Lebrón served twenty-five years in prison, most of them spent at Alderson Federal Prison Camp in West Virginia. Her lengthy term of incarceration meant that she was the longest-held woman political prisoner in the history of the Americas. President Carter released her in September 1979, along with Oscar Collazo and the three male Nationalists who attacked the U.S. Congress.

IV. TREATMENT AND CONDITIONS IN PRISON

Very little has been written about the conditions these women endured during their many years of imprisonment.⁵² The portrait of their confinement that follows is based on information that I have gathered from interviews, letters, reports, memoirs, and some secondary sources.

Conditions in the cells were primitive. Many of the women (as well as a number of the men) were held at La Princesa, in San Juan, which one of their attorneys, Conrad Lynn, described as "the forbidding old Spanish fortress that served as a prison for the Nationalists." In December 1950 Lynn met with Ruth Reynolds in her cell at La Princesa, which he described as follows: the cell "was windowless, there was no bed, and an overflowing pail served as the latrine. The stench was horrible, not sharp and pungent like a stockyard but heavy and pervasive. There seemed to be no air to breathe."⁵³

Blanca Canales served much of her sentence in Alderson, after first being held in Vega Alta, Puerto Rico. In Alderson, her cellmate was none other than Tokyo Rose! Following the 1954 attack on Congress, Lolita Lebrón, Rosa Collazo, and Carmen Torresola were also impris-

51. LYNN, *supra* note 37, at 136.

52. Blanca Canales ends her memoir, *La Constitución es la Revolución*, in 1950. See CANALES, *supra* note 8.

53. LYNN, *supra* note 37, at 129.

oned in Alderson. In Alderson, Canales worked making curtains until she was transferred back to Vega Alta.⁵⁴

After the 1950 revolt, Isabel Rosado was convicted of violating Law 53. She served fifteen months in prison. In her memoirs, *Mis Testimonios*, Isabel Rosado wrote about her life in prison and that of the other Nationalist women prisoners she was incarcerated with. At first she, like the other Nationalists, was not allowed to receive or send letters. And, like the other Nationalists, she completely ignored this prohibition and sent many "clandestine missives from jail."⁵⁵ The prisoners were, however, allowed to receive packages with things they needed, like soap, and treats, like cake. Rosado remembers that one of the Nationalists, Leonides Díaz, spent her time knitting. Díaz gave any money that she raised from the sale of her work to help her imprisoned husband, three sons, brother, and cousin. The only visitor Rosado, or any of the women, received was that of their lawyer. The women were allowed out of their cells at three o'clock in the afternoon to "get some sun" and to bathe.⁵⁶ On top of the quotidian miserable conditions of confinement, it is also possible that some of these women suffered torture, as I explore in the next section.

V. TORTURE

The accusation that Pedro Albizu Campos was subjected to radiation while imprisoned is well known. The charges made by several women prisoners that they were tortured have received much less attention. Some of the Nationalist women prisoners have written or recounted their treatment in prison. This next section draws heavily on their words as they describe what happened to them in prison.⁵⁷

In 1951 Doris Torresola wrote an account of her time in the Arecibo District Jail; La Princesa, a jail in San Juan where many of the Nationalist prisoners were held, including Pedro Albizu Campos; and her return to Arecibo. Doris Torresola was first arrested in 1950 and

54. Ayora Santaliz, *supra* note 20. Canales and Tokyo Rose planned and carried out a hunger strike that "paralyzed the prison." *Id.*

55. Rivera Marrero, *supra* note 39.

56. ISABEL ROSADO, *MIS TESTIMONIOS* 5-6 (2007).

57. See, e.g., MARÍN TORRES, *supra* note 8, at 19. He took part in the Jayuya uprising. He describes being taken back to prison in Arecibo, where he was subjected to sleep deprivation. "It was like returning to hell. Once again the *apretujamiento* (squeezing) and the flashes of light, the wattage of which I don't know, were turned on all night long, directly on our faces." Later, he says explicitly, "The tortures Jones [the North American warden of the prison] [subjected us to] were huge. They tortured us both physically and spiritually. It was so bad that later, some [of the Nationalist prisoners] went crazy." *Id.* at 26.

then rearrested in the Nationalist Party headquarters in Old San Juan after the 1954 attack on Congress. Convicted of violating law 53, she was sentenced to ten years in prison. Held in Arecibo District Jail, she was taken to La Princesa prison to testify in a trial. While she was there, she experienced a series of disturbing, painful, and disorienting attacks.

She recounted her experiences in La Princesa a little over two months after the events occurred. In August 1951, when she lay down on her bed in her cell in La Princesa in San Juan she began "to hear the sound of a motor and vibrations." She heard them again the next day. She called on Carmen Pérez, who was in the same cell, to put her head on her pillow to see if she heard the same noises, which she did. The sounds disappeared for a while, however when she lay down the next night, she "felt them again." She continued, "I couldn't sleep, my head hurt, and I felt dizzy." The noise and vibrations continued and grew stronger.⁵⁸ She no longer felt them after she was transferred back to Arecibo.⁵⁹

Ruth Reynolds, the North American pacifist who supported independence for Puerto Rico and the Nationalist Party, was in jail with the Nationalist women. When they were transferred back to Arecibo, the guards told her to stay behind in La Princesa because she had a visitor. When Reynolds did return several days later, "she was unrecognizable. She was so thin and so nervous that we all felt sorry for her. Her attitude was very strange. She started to speak and then stopped talking. She had the look of someone who is deeply worried about something."

While Ruth Reynolds was still in La Princesa, her attorney Conrad Lynn visited her in her cell. He wrote about his first encounter with her in one of his memoirs: "The light was dim, and it took me a while before I could see her sitting on the cold limestone bench. She was unable to stand up. She inched sideways on the stone bench, and as she came nearer the light of starvation was visible in her eyes."⁶⁰

What had happened? Reynolds, like Doris Torresola, wrote about the strange vibrations she experienced while she was being held in La Princesa. However, she also spoke of hearing voices, "invisible voices that I and only I could hear." When Conrad Lynn came to visit her, she confided what she had heard to him. She told him that the voices,

58. Doris Torresola, 1-4 (Nov. 8, 1951)(archival material)(on file with the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Ruth Reynolds Papers).

59. *Id.* at 5-6.

60. LYNN, *supra* note 37, at 129.

whose origin she could not detect, spoke of different themes. Recently, she had heard the voices “speculating as to whether or not she had had sexual relations with Albizu Campos.” She further confessed that she had not told many people about these voices because they would “naturally consider me crazy.”⁶¹

When she went back to her cell, the voices spoke to her about what she had just said to Conrad Lynn. “My God, this woman has condemned herself because she told Conrad Lynn about us. Doesn’t she know that the life of this black idiot [Conrad Lynn was African-American] is in danger?” After hearing this, she concluded that all of her conversations in La Princesa had been overheard. “How can I describe the next four days and nights of horror?”⁶² At the end of the four days, Reynolds was shipped back to Arecibo, where she rejoined the women Nationalists imprisoned there.

There are various ways to interpret what these women described. One could attribute their words to the product of nerves, fear, and the poor conditions in prison. Or, perhaps, one could dismiss them as nothing more than a transparent effort to foment criticisms of the United States and those forces in Puerto Rico that backed U.S. rule. Or, perhaps, they sought to generate sympathy for themselves and their plight. Certainly, any and all of these explanations are possible, but I do not think they are likely.

The U.S. government mounted a campaign to isolate the imprisoned Nationalists and to ridicule them and their actions. It persistently portrayed them as nothing more than a small band of fanatics and terrorists whose beliefs and actions the majority of Puerto Ricans opposed. For years, it had characterized Pedro Albizu Campos as “crazy.”⁶³ It is certainly possible that the U.S. government would attempt to drive people crazy in order to buttress its argument that no one in their right mind would want Puerto Rico to be independent.⁶⁴

61. LAURA DE ALBIZU CAMPOS, *ALBIZU CAMPOS Y LA INDEPENDENCIA DE PUERTO RICO* 128 (Hato Rey: Publicaciones Puertorriqueñas 2007).

62. *Id.* at 128–129.

63. This is reminiscent of the Soviet Union’s practice of categorizing those who opposed the socialist system as insane and confining them to psychiatric hospitals.

64. There is a long, sordid history of the U.S. Bureau of Prisons conducting tests on inmates. See, e.g. Barron H. Lerner, *Subjects or Objects? Prisoners and Human Experimentation*, 356 *NEW ENG. J. MED.* 1806, 1806 (2007), available at <http://www.nejm.org/doi/pdf/10.1056/NEJMp068280>; Allen M Hornblum, *They Were Cheap and Available: Prisoners as Research Subjects in Twentieth Century America*, 315 *BMJ*, 1437, 1438 (1997).

VI. RELATIONSHIPS AMONG THE WOMEN

Housed in difficult conditions, possibly subjected to torture, these women not only survived prison, they also maintained their political beliefs intact. How did they do it? I believe that several elements offered them comfort and strengthened their will. First, several of the women were very religious and some, such as Lolita Lebrón, became if anything more devout while in prison. Second, these women were in the positions they were in, leaders of military assaults, bodyguards to Pedro Albizu Campos, because of the tenacity of their commitment to an independent Puerto Rico. This belief, which does not appear to have wavered, sustained them. Third, and the factor that comes through in all their writings and interviews, is that they had each other. Many of them were housed in the same prison, even in the same cell at times or in contiguous ones. They implicitly trusted, cared for, and loved each other. Their profound friendship, which lasted them the rest of their lives, helped them to survive the extremely challenging life they confronted daily and the prospect of spending many years, perhaps much of the rest of their lives, in prison.

When I interviewed her, Isabel Rosado talked about how much she admired Ruth Reynolds and how important she and the other women who served time with her were to her.⁶⁵ When Ruth Reynolds walked into the Arecibo District Jail, Doris Torresola and the other Nationalist women were waiting there for her and did all she could to help her recover from her ordeal. These women, who were not married and did not have male partners, looked to each other for solidarity and understanding.

CONCLUSION

This is a very preliminary study of a group of Puerto Rican Nationalist Party women who were imprisoned in Puerto Rican or U.S. prisons. What strikes me most about these women is the strength and conviction with which they confronted the U.S. government in Puerto Rico or in the United States. Despite the long years many of them spent in jail and the physical, emotional, and psychological privations they suffered while incarcerated they came out of prison just as committed to obtaining an independent Puerto Rico as they went in. They all participated actively in political activities and movements as long as they

65. Interview with Isabel Rosado, *supra* note 15.

lived.⁶⁶ I last saw Isabel Rosado last November, when she celebrated her 103rd birthday. At the party, which representatives from a range of political parties and organizations attended, she got to her feet and called for the independence of Puerto Rico and the release of all Puerto Rican political prisoners. When Blanca Canales was released from prison, prison authorities wrote the following notes on her record, “we give up on her, she cannot be rehabilitated.”⁶⁷ If the goal of the U.S. government had been to weaken these women’s resolve or to shake their faith in themselves, it failed miserably.

66. There was one exception: Doris Torresola. She burned herself to death a few years after she was released from prison.

67. Ayora Santaliz, *supra* note 20.

