“A howling wilderness” in Samar

US imperialism returns to the scene of a crime

Joseph Santolan
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By massively deploying its forces to the islands of Samar and Leyte after their devastation by Typhoon Haiyan, US imperialism is returning to the scene of one of its historic crimes.

At the dawn of the 20th century, during Washington’s bloody 1899-1909 war to suppress anti-colonial resistance in the Philippines, these islands were the targets of brutal US repression.

The Philippines was the United States' first, and only, official colony. Washington purchased the islands for $US20 million from defeated Spain at the end of the Spanish-American war in the Treaty of Paris. The aim was to develop the Philippines as a source of raw materials, and Manila harbor as a base to gain access to Chinese markets.

Approximately 20,000 US troops and 200,000 Filipinos were killed during the war, and nearly one and half million Filipinos died due to the devastation and disease produced by the conflict. The US military enforced strict censorship on all reports about the war. Prisoners of war were routinely tortured and executed, villages were burned to the ground, and their inhabitants massacred.

In the summer of 1901, US Brigadier General Robert P. Hughes moved to break the guerrilla resistance in the region by ordering the re-concentration of the entire population of Samar into five US-controlled zones and the wholesale destruction of crops throughout the region. He banned the importation of rice, giving the occupying forces a monopoly over its sale.

On September 28, 1901, the townspeople of Balangiga, Samar, rose up and attacked the US garrison stationed there, killing 48 US troops, including all of the officers. It was the worst US military defeat since the Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876.

Major General Adna Chaffee, commander of the US Forces in the Philippines—fresh from helping to suppress the 1899 anti-colonial Boxer Rebellion in China—chose General Jacob H. Smith to lead the repression in Samar, due to Smith’s known brutality in dealing with the “*insurrectos* .”

Smith led his Sixth Brigade to Tacloban, where he issued his famous order: “I want no prisoners. I wish you to kill and burn. The more you kill and burn the better you will please me. The interior of Samar must be made a howling wilderness.”

Smith stated that he “wanted all persons killed who were capable of bearing arms.” When asked by Major Waller for a definition of “capable of bearing arms,” Smith responded: “Every male over the age of 10.”

At least 2,500 residents of Samar were killed during this terror campaign. When word of the slaughter broke in the US press as a result of soldiers’ letters home, there was a mass outcry against Smith. Smith was ordered home to Washington and court-martialed “for "conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline.”

He was found guilty and sentenced to be “admonished.” He retired without any punishment.

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