

Doctor Guillermo Rodríguez del Pozo: a Villareño in the service of Cuba

Doctor Guillermo Rodríguez del Pozo: un villareño al servicio de Cuba

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ABSTRACT

Background: The history of public health in the central region includes personalities whose actions had national repercussions; however, the legacy of some of them is not well known or disseminated.

Objective: To assess the political and professional work of Dr. Guillermo Rodríguez del Pozo during the Neocolonial Republic and the Revolution in Power.

Methods: A historical investigation was conducted from 2022 to 2025 as part of the Research Project "History of Medicine in Santa Clara during the Neocolonial Republic and the Revolution in Power." Theoretical methods were used, based on the interaction of the historical and the logical and from the temporal and spatial dimensions; as well as empirical methods: documentary analysis and interviews with key informants. Information was processed from primary documents. Methodological triangulation was carried out to reach integrative considerations.

Results: The stages of the personality's life were addressed. His work of national relevance for the development of public health, including revolutionary military health, stands out. Rodríguez del Pozo is one of the most prominent personalities in the 1950s and 1960s in the former province of Las Villas. His work was decisive in the advancement of public health after the revolutionary triumph in Cuba.

Conclusions: An investigation was conducted into the work of Dr. Guillermo Rodríguez del Pozo, whose actions constitute a valuable source of knowledge for the formation of values in future health professionals through medical education.

MeSH: history of medicine; life history traits; culture; education, medical.

RESUMEN

Fundamento: la historia de la salud pública en la región central cuenta con personalidades con un accionar de repercusión nacional; sin embargo, el legado de algunos carece de conocimiento y divulgación.

Objetivo: valorar la labor política y profesional del Dr. Guillermo Rodríguez del Pozo durante la República Neocolonial y la Revolución en el Poder.

Métodos: se realizó una investigación de corte histórico de 2022 a 2025 como parte del Proyecto de Investigación "Historia de la medicina en Santa Clara durante la República Neocolonial y la Revolución en el Poder". Se emplearon métodos teóricos, sustentados en la interacción de lo histórico y lo lógico y desde las dimensiones temporal y espacial; y empíricos: el análisis documental y entrevistas a informantes clave. Se procesa la información a partir de documentos primarios. Se efectuó triangulación metodológica para arribar a consideraciones integradoras.

Resultados: se abordaron las etapas de la vida de la personalidad. Se destaca su labor de relevancia nacional para el desarrollo de la salud pública incluyendo la sanidad militar revolucionaria. Rodríguez del Pozo es una de las personalidades más destacadas en la década de 1950 y de 1960 en la antigua provincia Las Villas. Su quehacer fue decisivo en el avance de la salud pública a partir del triunfo revolucionario en Cuba.

Conclusiones: se indagó sobre la labor del Dr. Guillermo Rodríguez del Pozo, cuyo accionar constituye una valiosa fuente de conocimientos para la formación de valores en los futuros profesionales de la salud a través de la educación médica.

DeSC: historia de la Medicina; rasgos de la historia de vida; cultura; educación médica.

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INTRODUCTION

The study of the life and work of prominent persons is important for historical knowledge, although this topic is interesting in any branch of knowledge. It is not feasible to include all the work of these personalities in a general bibliography. This leads to the work of some not being sufficiently disseminated, which could undermine the knowledge and appreciation of their life and work. Such is the case of Dr. Guillermo Rodríguez del Pozo, who is the subject of this research.

Guillermo Rodríguez del Pozo was a radiologist from Villa Clara, born in 1929 during the era of the so-called Cuban Neocolonial Republic, in the former province of Las Villas. In this region, he stood out in the struggle against the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista, from the moment of his coup d'état, and later as part of the July 26 Movement (M-26-7) in that territory. Due to his actions, he was already known by the national revolutionary leadership and persecuted by enemies. He maintained ties with Frank País and Fidel Castro. When the

Revolution triumphed, he remained in his province, holding important responsibilities to promote the program of revolutionary transformations on several fronts. He led political tasks and worked as a health professional. His actions in the new ways of administering public health for the service of the majority had a significant impact on the provincial landscape.^(1,2)

Taking these outstanding results into account, towards the 1970s, it was decided to transfer him to Havana to fulfill commitments of national importance. His work, always close to Raúl Castro Ruz, led him to hold responsibilities linked to the Revolutionary Armed Forces both inside and outside Cuba. In the compendiums that reflect the historical summaries of Santa Clara and Villa Clara, this revolutionary is mentioned in relation to the founding and actions of the M-26-7 in Las Villas and in exile; however, his extensive work deserves dissemination and recognition.^(1,2,3) National historiography, including studies of Cuban public health, lacks a study of the professional and revolutionary work of this figure.

The former province of Las Villas in the 1950s, during the Neocolonial Republic, was characterized by underdevelopment within the framework of its agrarian-sugarcane structure. From a political point of view, a distinctive feature was the significant reaction of the youth of Las Villas to the 1952 coup d'état. This was a national characteristic; these young people gathered in several organizations, some of which were short-lived, but they denoted strong rejection of the de facto regime.⁽¹⁾

Notable in Las Villas—and especially in its capital, Santa Clara—was the diversity of associations that emerged in opposition to the political coup. When citing the antecedents of the M-26-7, several congregations are noted, precisely because of the diversity of youth organizations created against Batista. In this context, Dr. Rodríguez del Pozo stood out as part of the most prominent of that youth.⁽¹⁾ The authors aimed to: assess the political and professional work of Dr. Guillermo Rodríguez del Pozo during the Neocolonial Republic and the Revolution in Power, Cuba.

METHODS

A qualitative historical investigation was conducted from 2022 to 2025 at the Villa Clara University of Medical Sciences, whose object of study was the personality of Dr. Guillermo Rodríguez del Pozo, from his professional and revolutionary work.

Theoretical methods were used:

Analysis-synthesis and historical-logical methods, from the temporal and spatial dimensions, to study the conditions in Cuba from the last decade of the Neocolonial Republic and during the Revolution in Power: the context in which Dr. Rodríguez del Pozo developed, to assess the impact of his political and professional work.

Empirical methods:

Document analysis: primary sources such as official documents, press from the era, photographs, diplomas, and recognitions that provide original information and are located in the personal and family archives of the studied figure were used; in addition to secondary documents in provincial and national historical institution archives.

Interviews with key informants, conducted by the main author of this research:

- With Cristina López Calleja, widow of Dr. Guillermo Rodríguez del Pozo, in 2009 and 2025.
- With Division General Guillermo Rodríguez del Pozo, in 2004, 2012, and 2014.
- With José Ramón Machado Ventura, former Minister of Public Health, on January 25, 2025.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As a result of the applied methods, the following arguments were obtained that make up the presented article.

Childhood and youth

Guillermo Rodríguez del Pozo was born on November 19, 1929, in Matanzas, but resided in Jicotea, San Diego del Valle municipality, province of Las Villas. His father was a doctor and his mother a housewife. His father belonged to Joven Cuba—a revolutionary organization led by Antonio Guiteras—and raised his children with love for the homeland and the struggle for freedom and independence. At six years old, Guillermo learned to read and write with a private teacher in his town. He attended primary school in La Esperanza, a neighboring town that was the head of the municipality of the same name, to which they moved as a result of an improvement in the family's economic situation. They lived there until 1941 when, also as a result of the family's economic progress, they moved to Santa Clara.^(2,3)

He completed the first two years of high school at the Los Maristas school and the other three at the Instituto de Segunda Enseñanza in Santa Clara. At the latter, he participated in student struggles: strikes and protest demonstrations against the repressive activities and abuses of the police, representing corrupt politicians.⁽²⁾

After finishing high school, he enrolled in the School of Medicine at the University of Havana. The spirit of rebellion, already awakened in Guillermo, was encouraged at that institution as a reflection of the effervescent youth combativeness. He participated in student struggles against the anti-popular measures of the governments of Grau San Martín and Carlos Prío Socarrás. In the University Student Federation (FEU), he belonged to the Pro-Dominican Republic and Pro-Independence of Puerto Rico committees. At 21, he joined the Orthodox Party of Eduardo Chibás.^(2,3)

When Batista's coup d'état occurred on March 10, 1952, he participated in the student protests at the University of Havana, and two days later he traveled to Santa Clara. There he collaborated in writing the manifesto titled "Batista is not the solution," signed by the Las Villas Youth Resistance Movement. He helped distribute it in workplaces, schools, and social institutions in Santa Clara. He later returned to Havana, where he continued participating in protest acts and conspiratorial activities at the university until May 20, 1952, when he participated in the founding of the anti-Batista organization Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR), led by Professor Rafael García Bárcenas. On his instructions, Guillermo moved to Santa Clara to organize the movement in Las Villas.^(1,2,3)

In June of that year, he contacted Dr. Allán Rosell Anido, who had accepted the position of provincial coordinator, and together they created the provincial leadership of the MNR in Las Villas. He participated in its organization in the various municipalities of Villas. The work in the MNR was recognized by the national leadership, as Las Villas was one of the provinces where that organization gained the most strength. It also constituted an important antecedent of what would later become the M-26-7. Its structure was based on the work and scheme of what the MNR had been.^(2,3,4)

He collaborated in the organizational tasks of the MNR at the University of Havana with Faustino Pérez and Armando Hart; while Hart served as head of the movement at the University of Havana, Guillermo assumed that commitment at the School of Medicine.⁽⁵⁾

When the attack on the Moncada Barracks occurred in 1953, he participated in acts of support from the FEU for the brave action of those young men. When Fidel and the other combatants left the Isla de Pinos prison, several University of Havana students contacted him to join the M-26-7, which was beginning to organize; among them was Rodríguez del Pozo. At that time, he was already a prominent young man in the anti-Batista struggle both in Havana and Santa Clara. Therefore, in June 1955, Faustino Pérez told Guillermo that, on Fidel's instructions, he should send for Dr. Allán Rosell to meet with him. The meeting took place at the home of Melba Hernández's parents, and there were Fidel Castro, Faustino Pérez, Allán Rosell, Gustavo Arcos (traitor), and Guillermo. The objective was to guide the founding of the M-26-7 in Las Villas before Fidel's departure into exile in Mexico. Allán expressed that he did not agree with his plans to leave the country; Fidel explained in detail the reasons for going, but given Rosell's insistence, he decided not to waste more time with "such a stubborn comrade" and appointed Gustavo Arcos to organize the M-26-7 in Las Villas, with Guillermo to assist him.^(2,4) Thus, from Santa Clara, they began to organize that movement throughout the province based on what the MNR had been.

The historic meeting in which the movement was organized took place at the home of Ignacio Guerra, in the then Capiro neighborhood—today Brisas del Capiro. There, the Provincial Leadership of the organization was established. At that meeting, besides Ignacio,

the following comrades were present: Gustavo Arcos, Osvaldo Rodríguez, Reynaldo González, Quintín Pino, Carlos Martínez Reyes, and Guillermo Rodríguez. Afterwards, "... the municipal leaderships were created, for which they went to all the municipalities and interviewed the most outstanding comrades".⁽²⁾

The year 1956 holds singular importance for the history of Cuba: Fidel had promised, "We will be free or martyrs." In October of that year, Guillermo obtained his Doctor of Medicine degree, issued by the University of Havana.⁽¹⁾

Young Doctor and Revolutionary

Upon receiving Fidel's coded message announcing the landing of the Granma yacht, at the home of Haydee Leal—located on what was then Nazareno Street in Santa Clara—the young people working with Guillermo prepared to support that action; the plan was for support for the landing to be not only in Santiago de Cuba. Their mission was to await some weapons in Camagüey. Although the intended objective of supporting the landing failed, there were notable exploits on November 30, 1956, in Santa Clara. This episode, although less widespread in historiography, deserves recognition, because in Santa Clara, the clandestine fighters carried out daring actions.^(2,3,5)

On December 21, 1956, comrades Faustino Pérez and Frank País arrived in that city with the aim of reorganizing the struggle after the events of November 30. According to Cristina López-Calleja in 2009, who was then his girlfriend and later his wife, Guillermo and the other revolutionaries met at her house. She lived 6 km from Santa Clara on the road to Placetas. That momentous visit of Frank País to Santa Clara was continuously guided by Guillermo as a young man of proven revolutionary loyalty.^(2,5)

In January 1957, the leadership of the M-26-7 was completed, in which Guillermo did not hold a specific position as before, but remained there carrying out specific tasks.

In June, comrade Julio Camacho Aguilera arrived in Santa Clara, appointed by Frank País (National Chief of Action and Sabotage) to the position of Provincial Chief of Action and Sabotage. Guillermo worked directly with Camacho Aguilera throughout his time in this

province of Las Villas, until the first days of October when the latter was transferred to Havana.⁽⁵⁾

On September 4, 1957, while the uprising in the city of Cienfuegos was being prepared, Guillermo was assigned the responsibility of Action and Sabotage within the M-26-7. In early January 1958, Enrique Oltuski was appointed provincial coordinator of the M-26-7, and Guillermo was appointed provincial sub-coordinator. At that time, the movement was reinforced in the province. Work was intensified on the collection of weapons and preparations were made for the actions to be carried out in the general strike planned throughout Cuba for April 1958.^(4,5,6)

As part of the preparation, Guillermo made risky trips to mountainous areas where there were groups of insurgents. He went to Escambray to coordinate actions to support the strike with the group of the Directorio Revolucionario, commanded by Faure Chomón, which was located near Sancti Spíritus.⁽⁵⁾

During an interview conducted in 2004 with Dr. Guillermo Rodríguez del Pozo, he expressed that after the glorious episodes of the strike on April 9, 1958, he was betrayed by an American who presumably came to join the struggle. After spending some time in hiding awaiting notice to go up to the Sierra Maestra, the national leadership of the movement decided that he should leave the country to send weapons that would be used in the creation of a guerrilla front in Escambray. He left as an exile and arrived clandestinely in Miami in July 1958. This fact is also referred to by Oltuski in his work *Gente del llano*.⁽⁷⁾

Activities during exile in Miami

There he managed to buy a good quantity of weapons, but when he and several comrades were coming with the shipment, a storm surprised them, and the very old ship sank near an oil well in the Cay Sal bank. They were rescued by a tugboat and taken prisoner to the Bahamas; they escaped from there and upon reaching the vicinity of Cayo Largo, south of Florida, he was taken prisoner. He was imprisoned in Miami for approximately one month and was released on "parole." In November, he was able to send a new shipment of

weapons, but he could not come because he was heavily watched. This shipment was received by Camilo Cienfuegos.

According to an interview conducted in 2012 with Guillermo Rodríguez del Pozo, in mid-December 1958, he received a letter from Dr. Osvaldo Fernández López, who had remained as coordinator of the M-26-7 in Las Villas. He was informed that Fidel was summoning him to a meeting with Che in Las Villas, with the aim of addressing matters related to revolutionary unity. It was necessary for him to join the guerrilla troop as a representative of the M-26-7 and thus try to improve ties among the insurgent revolutionaries. Haydee Santamaría, who represented the highest authority of the M-26-7 in Miami, authorized him, but he had to return with a shipment of weapons. While he was making preparations for the trip, he was surprised by the triumph of the Revolution. Other combatants have referred to this passage of the struggle, where the relevance of the mission in Miami has been verified.⁽⁶⁾

Public health and political work in the Revolution in power

Upon arriving in Santa Clara, he presented himself to Che, who was at the provincial offices of the Ministry of Public Works—currently the Provincial Committee of the PCC. There he met Aleida March, who took him to Che's office and introduced him, saying: "... look, Che, this is el Gallo (the Rooster)." That was the jocular nickname his friends used because his voice, according to them, resembled that of a hoarse rooster. Che treated him very amicably and explained that he was preparing to move to Havana, so Guillermo rejoined his work in his province. He reintegrated into the Provincial Leadership of the M-26-7, carrying out assigned tasks. A few days later, Enrique Oltuski informed him of Fidel's arrival in the Caravan of Freedom. The brief rest Fidel took in Santa Clara before heading to the public event on January 6, 1959, was at the home of Guillermo's parents.⁽⁸⁾

Guillermo Rodríguez del Pozo, in an interview conducted in 2014, recalls that with the implementation of revolutionary measures starting January 1, 1959, Captain Calixto Morales, governor of Las Villas, assigned him the task of visiting all the municipalities to organize the municipal and provincial governments with the main leadership positions. The

Declaration of the Provincial Leadership of the July 26 Revolutionary Movement: "El Villareño," dated February 4, 1959, confirms Dr. Rodríguez del Pozo as a founder of the first provincial leadership of the M-26-7 in Las Villas after the revolutionary triumph.⁽⁹⁾

In this stage, he played a leading role in the execution of the great economic, political, and social transformations. He harmonized tasks as a young political leader, as he had done in the pre-revolutionary stage, and also excelled in the public health sector. He dedicated commendable efforts to his province to improve the deteriorated health indicators in the territory. Along with a group of public health workers, he achieved significant results due to his commitment and defense of the new ideals of equity.^(2,8)

This merit is accentuated considering that the important transformations in the Cuban health system during the 1960s were achieved in a context marked by open confrontation with the vestiges of the capitalist regime and strong ideological confrontation. These transformations, aimed at creating the new Ministry of Public Health, with the nationalization of the pharmaceutical industry, were conditioned by the emigration of a high percentage of public health professionals, the reform of medical education, the ideological struggle within the Medical Association, the creation of the Rural Medical Social Service, the incorporation of socialist principles in public health, and the development of primary health care.^(10,11)

Dr. Rodríguez del Pozo worked on different fronts: he worked in the organization of the Medical Militias and in the campaign for the elections of the Medical Association with the Medical Party of the Revolution, and he held the position of president of that association in Santa Clara. He was also appointed provincial head of the Medical Militias, which constituted the medical services within the MNR.

In 1960, he was elected to preside over the Provincial Health and Maternity Board. He held this position for approximately one year, and Santa Clara had the honor of being the first to organize this type of board in the Republic. In all these tasks he performed, he defended and implemented the new approach given to the practice of the profession, championing social medicine. He belongs to the generation that assumed its defense, leading a struggle

against the capitalist structure characterized by assuming the practice of curative and elitist medicine.⁽¹²⁾

He participated in the mobilization prior to the change of president in the United States and later joined the fight against bandits in Escambray until the end of March 1961, with then-Captain Orlando Lorenzo Castro (Pineo).

On April 4, the Army of the Center was created, under the command of Commander Juan Almeida Bosque. Commander Faustino Pérez was appointed Chief of Medical Services of the Army. Guillermo joined him, working as second-in-command. He participated with Faustino in the organization of medical support at Playa Girón in the eastern region, which corresponded to the Army of the Center. In June 1962, he was appointed Chief of Army Medical Services. While holding that position, in June 1964, the need arose to replace the Provincial Director of Public Health of Las Villas. This decision is known through an interview conducted on January 25, 2025, with Commander José Ramón Machado Ventura—then Minister of Public Health—and the Minister of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR), who proposed him to occupy that position temporarily. According to his statements, the task of directing public health in the province responded to the virtues shown by Dr. Rodríguez del Pozo. For both that ministry and the FAR, he had become an indispensable revolutionary.

The former province of Las Villas ranked last in the socialist emulation of the health sector. Due to the work carried out, its indicators progressively improved until it ranked first nationally. In June 1965, Dr. Guillermo was appointed second chief of the Medical Services Directorate of the FAR Rear Headquarters, and in 1966 he became Chief of Medical Services, replacing then-Commander José Ramón Balaguer Cabrera, who had been assigned to a command position in a military unit. Even amid such honorable responsibilities, in 1967 he obtained his specialty in Radiology (First Degree), the diploma for which is shown in Figure 1.



Fig. 1. Diploma for the First Degree specialty in Radiology

Source: Personal archive of the researchers, from the personality's family archive.

According to statements made in a 2025 interview with Cristina López-Calleja, also a veteran of the clandestine struggle and wife of Dr. Rodríguez del Pozo; the stage of directing public health was a challenge as difficult as that of the liberation war, because he had to face adverse work and personal circumstances as a young leader and father of a family, at a time when the revolutionary transformations demanded great dedication; a criterion with which Muñoz Ruiz agrees in his master's thesis.⁽⁵⁾

Subsequently, he fulfilled several internationalist missions assigned by the FAR in Angola and Ethiopia, as well as other special missions in the Republic of Guinea, the Congo (Brazzaville), Vietnam, and Syria. In February 1982, he was appointed alternate to the Minister of the FAR and Chief of the National General Staff of Civil Defense; he received

recognition for his active collaboration in the development of seismology in Cuba, as illustrated in Figure 2. In October 2000, he went into retirement. ⁽⁵⁾



Fig. 2. Recognition from the National Center for Seismological Research for his collaboration in the development of seismology in Cuba. 1999

Source: Personal archive of the researchers, from the personality's family archive.

He was a deputy to the National Assembly of People's Power and president of its Defense and Internal Order Commission. In 1983, in recognition of his accumulated merits and a virtuous record of service to the Revolution, he was promoted to Division General, as the interviewee stated in 2014. As evidence of this ceremony, Figure 3 and Figure 4 are published.



Fig. 3. Promotion of Dr. Guillermo Rodríguez del Pozo to Division General. 1983
(He appears at the front of those decorated)

Source: Personal archive of the researchers, from the personality's family archive.



Fig. 4. Promotion of Dr. Guillermo Rodríguez del Pozo to Division General. 1983
(He is positioned to the left of Fidel Castro)

Source: Personal archive of the researchers, from the personality's family archive.

Another of his notable merits was his appointment as Honorary Member of the Cuban Society of Hygiene and Epidemiology in October 1985, for his influence on the progress of science and his contribution to the objectives of Cuban public health for the preservation of the people's health. On that occasion, the scientific council of the Cuban Ministry of Public Health awarded him the diploma shown in Figure 5.⁽²⁾



Fig. 5. Title of Honorary Member of the Cuban Society of Hygiene and Epidemiology. 1985
Source: Personal archive of the researchers, from the personality's family archive.

In 2005, he achieved the scientific degree of Doctor in Military Sciences. In his later years, he also served as an advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and President of the Center for International Information and Security Studies.⁽⁵⁾

He passed away on July 22, 2016, victim of a cardiac complication. His body was cremated and his ashes were deposited in the Veterans' Pantheon at the Colón Necropolis in Havana, Cuba.

Scientific Contribution

The research allowed for the systematization of the work of the personality of Dr. Guillermo Rodríguez del Pozo as part of Cuban local and regional political and public health history.

Unpublished data are presented that allow completing aspects of his life history and assessing his performance with elements that were previously unknown or incorrect.

CONCLUSIONS

Dr. Guillermo Rodríguez del Pozo is one of the most prominent personalities of the second half of the 20th century in Cuba. His patriotic, scientific, and professional work constitutes a valuable source of knowledge for the formation of values in health professionals through medical education.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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