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Sowing the Seeds of War in Uruguay

By Brandon Jordan
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Uruguayan President Tabaré Vázquez announced, on his first day in office earlier this year, an investigation into the military dictatorship of 1973 to 1985. The investigation, led by the Truth and Justice Working Group, would look into crimes committed by the dictatorship:

This group will analyze the existing archives and will search information relevant to the material, organize the registry of testimonies by victims or families about crimes against humanity, monitor the compliance of judgments against the state both nationally and internationally, and address other actions leading to the objective raised.

In spite of a previous investigation under former President Jorge Batlle Ibáñez in the early 2000s, the dictatorship of Uruguay is still an important issue, especially for families of the “disappeared.”

This is because lawmakers, in 1986, passed the Expiry Law, which limited prosecutions against leaders of the dictatorship. It was done out of necessity for fear of rebellion among military officials as pointed out by researcher Francesca Lessa. The Uruguayan public voted twice, in 1989 and 2009, on upholding or ending the law. In both cases, they kept the law.

Yet the “Switzerland of the Americas,” a nickname given to Uruguay, still cannot escape the memories of the dictatorship, which was not spontaneous. Rather, for decades, structures

eventually created conditions, mostly anti-communist, for the rise of a dictatorship in the first place. Of course, it would not be easy to dismantle such structures—or attitudes—in short time.

A “Switzerland of the Americas”?

Uruguay’s history among its Latin American neighbors can best be captured through its nickname as the “Switzerland of the Americas.” Even former Uruguayan President José Mujica called Uruguay “the little Switzerland of the Americas,” while speaking in Guayaquil, Ecuador, on December 4, 2014.

The origins may result from policies enacted José Batlle y Ordóñez, the country’s president from 1903 to 1907 and again from 1911 to 1915. Under his administration, many top-down progressive reforms, inspired by the Europeans, were implemented, including a strong welfare state for workers and legalizing divorce for women. This period is known as *Battismo*, in honor of Battle’s reforms leading to strong economic growth and prosperity for the next few decades. Battle came from the Colorado Party, one of the two famous parties—the other being the White Party—that helped liberate Uruguay from Brazil.

Parties in Uruguay, during the Nineteenth and Twentieth century, provided more than ideological comfort for Uruguayans. It was a way of life as documented by author Christine Ehrick in *Shield of the Weak: Feminism and the State in Uruguay, 1900-1933*:

While the Colorados tended to be more liberal and secular, and the Blancos more conservative and Catholic, it would be a mistake to see these partisan divisions as fundamentally programmatic or ideological. For the most part, men took up a divisa, or political color, because of family loyalty, region, revenge, patronage, or simple self-preservation.

Interestingly, the Colorado Party worked with the dictatorship as three of the four presidents during that time were Colorados. Between the Colorados and the Whites, the former were the most powerful party in Uruguay. It was so powerful that it held the presidency from 1865 to 1959.

In spite of the Colorados dominance in Uruguayan politics, the U.S. viewed both major parties favorably. A State Department document, dated December 13, 1938, by Leslie Reed, a State Department official, reported the Colorados and Whites as favoring the U.S. in contrast to other parties:

The two political parties mentioned have consistently supported American foreign policy during the administrations of President [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt and have continued to do so even more strongly during the recent discussion regarding the Pan American Conference at Lima [in 1938].

The comparison with Switzerland is an exaggeration considering Uruguay, throughout its history, closely identified with the white Europeans when enacting policies.

A Spectre Haunting Uruguay

After World War II, Uruguay, as with the rest of Latin America, entered into a bipolar world with American-led capitalism facing Soviet-led communism. For the American empire, it inherited the role of managing global capitalism from the United Kingdom and viewed communism as a force threatening U.S. interests.

At the same time, Uruguayan elites, specifically security officials, viewed communism as a threat to their power. Luis Battle Berres, a Colorado who became president two years after World War II, carefully understood not to openly choose a side. Still, while a document written by an advisor emphasized the country should be “neither United Fruit nor communist,” Battle focused more on the dangers of communism

In a world where communism is a danger, we, giving freedom, have defeated [it] because in this country, when *Battismo* works, communism does not have a function [and] nothing to do.

In order to ensure communism would not work, the Intelligence and Counterespionage of the State (SIE), its intelligence service, was created in September 1947. *Espionage and Politics* documents much of the activities of this young intelligence agency, in addition to other actors, paranoid about communism during the Cold War. During testimony to lawmakers, SIE commissioner Jose P. Doderá, referred to the SIE’s job as dealing with “crimes against the homeland...for example, anti-national activities.”

Roberto García Ferreira, one of the authors of *Espionage and Politics*, placed the origins of anti-communism among, but not limited to, Uruguayan intelligence in the 1920s after the Mexican and Russian revolution. These two revolutions, especially the latter, frightened capitalists of a possible global revolution overthrowing the capitalist order. Furthermore, the global economic depression in 1929 helped lead to the rise of military governments throughout Latin America:

During the 1930s, the setting changed on the international level as the effects of the 1929 crisis provided substantial challenges to liberal democracies and, adding what happened to Europe with the eruption of fascist states and the Spanish Civil War, translated into successful military coups in Latin America. Uruguay was not alien to this and it was then-President Gabriel Terra, who launched a coup [dissolving Parliament] on March 31, 1931. The coup was repressive and many of the figures around that time later, in the Cold War, helped designed the SIE.

The Soviet Union, meanwhile, did not pay much attention to Uruguay or Latin America in general. *Espionage and Politics* cite three factors for this: the distance from the USSR, assuming the region was under American hegemony and focusing on other places to combat U.S. influence like Southeast Asia. As a result, when Soviet officials toured Latin American countries like Uruguay in 1958, they identified themselves not as communists, but as “representatives of the Soviet Union.”

Regardless, the SIE focused on two threats to the state—students and the working class. As documented in the book, The National Movement for the Defense of Liberty (MONDEL)—an anti-communist and far-right group associated with the SIE—wrote in a pamphlet how both acted as agents spreading communism against the state:

[T]he students and workers [are] two forces that can immobilize our economic and social life if they wish.

Naturally, when the military dictatorship came into power in 1973, both groups were immediately crushed by the state.

Sowing the Seeds

The blame cannot solely rest in the hands of the SIE as mainstream newspapers also stoked communist fears similar to the role American institutions and lawmakers, like Joseph McCarthy, played during the 1950s.

Major outlets like *El País* or *El Día*, tied to the major parties, warned of a communist conspiracy against the construction of a dam at the Rincón de Baygorra. The latter warned the sabotage of the project, based on evidence it reviewed, possibly had “communist ties.” Of course, much of it was an exaggeration and evidence suggests such allegations were actually created by the business community.

Simultaneously, the U.S. inflamed fears of communism in Uruguay, which could be found in military aid given to the country. In an essay for *When States Kill: Latin America, the U.S., and Technologies of Terror*, Jeffrey J. Ryan, a professor at the University of Arkansas, detailed how Uruguay rose up the ranks for U.S. military aid:

In the three years leading up to the 1973 golpe, the coup d'état that brought the military to power, the United States dedicated an average of 9.5 percent of its total Latin American military-aid budget to Uruguay, and in one year (1970) it was the second largest military aid recipient in the hemisphere...Between 1960 and 1976, Uruguay's average rank among Latin American military aid recipients was seventh of twenty-four, while among economic aid recipients it averaged about fourteenth.

The CIA, meanwhile, played an active role on anyone they viewed as dissenters. García said the “CIA station [in Montevideo] worked with intensity in Uruguay” as, for example, the CIA secretly sent columns to newspapers across the country to influence the public. Of course, this intensity was driven by an external actor—the Soviet Union.

CIA agents knew Uruguay had relations with communist countries. It helped, however, when Uruguayan police authorities who shared the same vision as the agency.

After the Cuban Revolution, President Dwight Eisenhower toured four Latin American countries—Uruguay, Chile, Argentina, and Brazil—in 1960 to ensure they did not pivot toward Cuba. As a result, the four countries dismissed concerns about U.S. intervention in the region. Furthermore, the four countries snubbed a Cuban-hosted event on hunger and strengthened ties to the U.S. CIA whistleblower Philip Agee verified this U.S. strategy on an appearance for *Democracy Now!* on October 2, 2003 as U.S. policy “was to isolate the Cuban Revolution in Latin America.” Interestingly, the CIA planned this trip after the rise of Jacobo Árbenz in Guatemala, although the exile of Árbenz to Uruguay led them to scrap the idea.

Additionally, the CIA station in Montevideo submitted a document to Uruguayan officials and suggested groups like the Communist Party of Uruguay or Revolutionary Workers Party should not receive “permission to assemble or [hold] public rallies” the day Eisenhower visited. Uruguayan officials complied and broke up any demonstration it deemed a threat to Eisenhower’s visit.

The CIA’s role in Uruguay did not end there as, on October 20, 1960, a note sent to a SIE official provided the location of a school for local communists. Tom Flores, a CIA agent stationed in Montevideo, possibly submitted the note, although no definite proof exists. Regardless, the school did exist and communists did attend. Although, youths there primarily learned Marxist material. While the SIE assumed weapons were stored at the school, none were ever found.

All of this, consequently, made youths more committed to the cause of communism. As noted in *Espionage and Politics*, youths like Ismael Weinberger (later tortured by the military regime) “became militant communists for the rest of their lives.” The state’s decision to constantly monitor, harass and wage an anti-communist campaign against youths led to committed leftist revolutionaries like the Tupamaros. Thus, the cycle continued until the rise of dictatorship coinciding with Operation Condor throughout Latin America.

“Democratic Strength”

Uruguayan officials, on August 5, held a ceremony to reflect the three decades since the dictatorship. Vice President Raúl Sendic, son of late Tupamaros founder Raúl Sendic, cited Uruguay’s “democratic strength” ever since the fall of the military government. Sendic praised the resilience of Uruguay for sustaining itself for “three decades without exceptional measures, without suspension of individual rights, without interruptions and great frights.”

Uruguay achieved a remarkable level of stability relative to its neighbors since 1973. Although, the same can be said during the early twentieth century where SIE’s anticommunism fears, along with experience in spying and repressing students as well as workers, helped build the path for a military dictatorship in Uruguay. Indeed, Mario Aguerrondo and Alberto Ballestrino were just two who participated in such activities and later played a role in forming the dictatorship.

While a dictatorship is hard to imagine in Uruguay’s future, it will take more than a commission to remove the decades of anti-communism hysteria in the shadows of its institutions.