



# URUGUAY'S URBAN GUERRILLAS

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Among the many protests staged by Latin Americans to demonstrate their opposition to us policies during Governor Nelson Rockefeller's 1969 visit was the destruction of the General Motors offices in Montevideo, Uruguay, by a commando of the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional (MLN), also known as the Tupamaros. Despite extreme security measures, four men, dressed as police officers and armed with machine guns, broke into the GM office building and tied two night watchmen. They sprayed fuel in several rooms and on some six cars and set the building on fire. The pamphlets found at the scene bore the five-pointed star of the Tupamaros and protested the visit of Rockefeller, agent of imperialism.

Since the Cuban Revolution overthrew Batista in 1958, many Latin American revolutionaries have become convinced that the only means to achieve power is guerrilla warfare. They agree that the '*foco*' can create the 'subjective conditions' for the revolution and have forsaken other possible strategies. The main disagreements have centred on the evaluation of 'objective conditions' and on the role of political parties in the revolutionary process. The type of guerrilla best suited for each individual Latin American country has also been a topic of discussions. In certain countries, notably Venezuela, revolutionaries have tried both urban and rural warfare. On the whole, rural guerrilla warfare, advocated both in writing and in political action by Ernesto Che Guevara, Régis Debray and numerous Latin Americans, among others Douglas Brayo (in Venezuela) and Luis de la Puente Uceda (in Peru), has been the more widely accepted strategy. In fact, urban guerrillas were considered to be totally inadequate for Latin America, especially after the failure of the Venezuelan *guerrilleros* in the early 'sixties.

The Tupamaros have done a good deal to advance the opposite case in Uruguay. Almost at the same time that urban guerrilla warfare was abandoned in Venezuela, the Tupamaros adopted that strategy as the most adequate for the 'objective conditions' existing in their country. The Tupamaros discarded rural guerrilla warfare because Uruguay lacks the mountains or jungles where a '*foco*' can be organized. On the

other hand, it is highly urbanized, at least 70 per cent of its 2,560,000 inhabitants live in cities and almost half in Montevideo alone. The capital also dominates Uruguay's economic life, handles most of the international trade, consumes 75 per cent of the electricity, and contains most of the industry. Montevideo was considered a far better setting for a guerrilla base than the flat, sparsely populated countryside.

Although police estimate that there are some 100 hard-core Tupamaros, the exact number is unknown. A recent publication indicates that the total is 1,000 but with only 50 or a 100 participating in commando operations. The members are divided into completely independent cells of six or seven men, co-ordinated through the leaders, and each Tupamaro ignores the real identity of his fellow cell members. Decisions for commando operations are put to a vote, individually or by cells. Leaders meet once a year to discuss their units' instructions and evaluations. It is not known whether the MLN has both a military and a political leadership or whether they are united in one person.

MLN prefers single men, but both men and women are accepted. The future *guerrillero* must be sponsored by a Tupamaro, who has to write an exhaustive report on the candidate. The Tupamaros who participate in commando operations must undergo intensive training. They must be in perfect physical shape; smokers are encouraged to cut down, and drinking is forbidden. Part of their preparation includes learning how to handle weapons and explosives, how to escape, how to start a car without a key, and how to sabotage police cars.

The Tupamaros train at bases for the most part located outside Montevideo, often at one of the numerous beaches along Uruguay's south-eastern coast. Some of these bases also contain hospitals, manned by medical students. In December 1968 a police raid uncovered a base where eight Tupamaros lived in two shacks and a barn which was part hospital, part laboratory for the fabrication of bombs, and part garage. On the premises, the police found 12 weapons (machine guns, rifles, shotguns and pistols), 700 rounds of ammunition, medical instruments, medicines, licence plates, a Volkswagen (the Tupamaros' favourite car), a VW hood and seats, guerrilla handbooks, correspondence, 14 false identity cards, uniforms and a list of police headquarters cars.

In the last three years, the police have uncovered some eleven Tupamaro bases. Several were hide-outs, others were makeshift ammunition factories, and still others provided services. In one of them, a photographer's shop, the raiders found equipment to make ID cards similar to those issued by Uruguay's police. All the machines used in the forgeries and even the paper were legitimate and had been obtained from police headquarters. The type of equipment found in Tupamaro hide-outs has led observers to believe that the movement provided Guevara with the false Uruguayan passport he used in his way to Bolivia.

### The Origins of the Tupamaros

The origins of the MLN are still very obscure. Very little is known publicly about the Tupamaros, how they came into being as a group,

who the leader or leaders are. The name comes from Tupac Amaru, the 18th century Inca *cacique* who led an unsuccessful rebellion against Spain. The Tupamaros first identified themselves as a revolutionary group on August 9th, 1965, when shortly before midnight a high calibre bomb exploded in front of the offices occupied by Bayer, the chemical concern. A leaflet with the following message was found nearby: 'Death to Vietnam's Yankee assassins. The assassin's intervention in Vietnam must be answered by the union of all oppressed people. The common enemy must be crushed. Bayer, a Nazi enterprise, provides gas for the gringos' intervention. Viva Vietnam. Viva la Revolución. (Tupamaros)'.

The beginnings of the MLN, however, go back at least to 1962 and are connected with the activities of a prominent union organizer, Raul Sendic. Between 1959 and 1962, Sendic, a former law student in his mid-thirties and long-time member of the Socialist Party, organized first the sugar beet workers of Paysandu and then the sugar cane workers of Salto and Artigas, in northern Uruguay. In June 1962, Sendic led the *cañeros*, their wives and children on a 350-mile march to publicize their demands. His long and arduous struggle, reminiscent of Cesar Chavez's drive with California's grape workers, finally paid off. He organized the UTAA (Unión de Trabajadores Azucareros de Artigas) and obtained the implementation of legislation long ignored by the local landowners. Other new UTAA demands, for better working conditions and the expropriation of 30,000 hectares left uncultivated by absentee landowners, were not met despite repeated marches to Montevideo in 1964 and 1965. The *cañeros* still use the slogan, 'For the Fatherland and with Sendic,' although he has not been officially connected with UTAA since mid-1963.

The transformation of Uruguay's left-wing militants into Tupamaros took place somewhere between 1962 and 1963. That year, Sendic and the Socialist Party militants who had been organizing the non-unionized workers of Uruguay's countryside, became convinced that both tactics and strategy had led them to a dead end. Thus they decided to form a paramilitary group, independent of the official line adopted by the Socialist Party. That group was the Tupamaros and their first hold-up, at Nueva Helvecia, was carried out without the support or knowledge of the party. The Tupamaros have not explained this transformation, but observers agree that the *cañeros'* struggle was crucial. The cane workers and their organizers faced not only the indifference of the government but that of the leftist parties as well. Furthermore, they met with the violent opposition of a labour union, now extinct, the Confederación Sindical del Uruguay. The death of a passer-by during a confrontation between the CSU and the UTAA in 1962, exposed the increasing radicalization of trade unions and political groups. This incident is regarded as one of the probable direct antecedents of the Nueva Helvecia rifle 'expropriation' the following year.

On July 31st, 1963, a small group of men broke into the Rifle Club of Nueva Helvecia, a sleepy town in Uruguay's hinterland, and stole 31 rifles and two carbines, most of which had been lent to the club by the Uruguayan armed forces. At first, the police attributed the robbery to

common criminals, but gradually concluded that it had been a political act and singled out Raul Sendic as the leader.

The Nueva Helvicia robbery marked the beginning of a long series of attacks against arsenals. Dynamite, rifles, guns, military and police uniforms have disappeared in swift commando operations. On January 1st, 1964, the customs office of Bella Union, a town on the border of Brazil, was attacked by a handful of men who escaped with 19 rifles. In February 1966, a commando broke into a theatre showing an Arnold Wesker play and stole 10 Mausers and 18 military uniforms lent by the Uruguayan armed forces for the performance.

Banks have been another target. On October 14th, 1964, a branch of the Banco de Cobranzas was held up by two armed men. They managed to get away with a few thousand dollars, but were later arrested. The Tupamaros have been far more successful since then—in their last bank holdup they got away with almost \$10,000. Their most profitable 'expropriations', however, have been from Uruguay's casinos. On November 29th, 1968, six men entered Montevideo's Casino Carrasco at 3.45 p.m. and left with \$25,000. On February 18th, 1969, seven men dressed in the Tupamaros' favourite disguise, police uniforms, forced their way into Punta del Este's elegant Casino San Rafael and escaped with some \$200,000.

Besides 'expropriating', the Tupamaros attack us business concerns. When Uruguay broke diplomatic relations with Cuba on September 18th, 1964, they placed bombs in a Montevideo bank, in the offices of the Moore-McCormack Lines, in a building owned by Coca-Cola, and burned two official American cars parked in front of the us Embassy. To protest Governor Rockefeller's visit, they not only set fire to General Motors (causing \$1 million worth of damage) but started at least a dozen blazes in businesses connected with us capital—Coca-Cola was again one of the targets. Montevideo's main radio stations have also been attacked by the Tupamaros. The sabotage of Radio Ariel, owned by Jorge Batlle, a close advisor of Pacheco Areco, was particularly effective. The station was raided a few minutes before the President was to address the nation and the damage was so great that it had to be closed for several days. The Tupamaros escaped, taking some short-wave transmitters with them. A subsequent Tupamaros raid was that of the 'Hunger Commando'. The group held up a truck owned by a food-store chain on December 24th, 1963, and distributed its chickens, turkeys and sweets to the inhabitants of a slum for their Christmas dinner.

The second stage in their evolution came about when the Tupamaros decided that a paramilitary group connected with a specific party was not an adequate solution. Whether the Tupamaros attempted to engage the Socialist Party in revolutionary action and failed, or decided that it was to their advantage to dissociate themselves from a party, the fact that the group's ties with the Socialists were severed. They became the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional, which welcomes all militants who agree with its strategy and tactics.

The only document stating the ideology and strategy of the MLN was published in the leftist Chilean magazine, *Punto Final*. The July 2nd

1968 issue carried a long article, still the major source of information on the evolution of the movement, and an appendix entitled 'Thirty Questions to a Tupamaro'. The 30 answers, given to a magazine the Tupamaros could trust (Fidel Castro also chose *Punto Final* for the Latin American edition of Guevara's Bolivian diary) are considered to be the movement's official position.

The basic principle which has guided the MLN is that 'revolutionary action in itself, that is, the process of arming and preparing oneself, acquiring equipment and finally carrying out actions that violate bourgeois legality, generates revolutionary consciousness, organization and conditions.' This principle is what separates the MLN from all other Uruguayan leftist organizations. Platforms and documents are important, but they are not sufficient to make a revolution. Furthermore, the principles of a Socialist revolution have been spelled out and tried out in countries like Cuba. They cannot be discussed any longer.'

Their position concerning strategy is quite clear. 'Although the efforts to create a party or a mass movement before initiating the armed struggle cannot be disregarded, there is no doubt that armed struggle quickens and precipitates mass movements. Both Cuba and China are examples of this. . . . In other words, the rigid formula advanced by certain theoreticians, "first create the party and then start the revolution," has more exceptions than applications, historically. Nobody can doubt any longer that the smallest armed group has more chance to become a popular army than the group that limits itself to taking "revolutionary positions"'. This rejection of the debate among numerous Latin American leftists over the role of the political party in the revolutionary process is typical of the Tupamaros and stems from their lack of dogmatism in everything except their ultimate goal, socialism. They have even managed to remain outside the usual bitter fighting of the Left. They place themselves in the Marxist-Leninist camp, consider their struggle to be part of a continental strategy aimed at creating 'more Vietnams', but they are not sectarian. *Punto Final* described the MLN's relationship with the Uruguayan Left in these terms: 'Their work receives fraternal treatment from the Socialist Party, the MRO (Movimiento Revolucionario Oriental) and the FAU (Federación Anarquista del Uruguay) and respectful treatment from the Communist Party.'

The Tupamaros declare their 'conviction that the present crisis, far from ending, is worsening every day. Our country is bankrupt. A capitalist development plan aimed at increasing production of export goods, were it feasible, would give meagre results and only in a long range. In other words, people will continue to tighten their belts for many years. . . . The second basic fact in our strategy is the high degree of unionization among Uruguayan workers. All unions are not equally combative—either because of their composition or their leadership—but the fact that practically all the employees of the government-owned services, banking, industry and commerce are unionized constitutes by itself a highly positive factor, unparalleled in America. The possibility of paralyzing the state services has created and can create a very promising situation from a revolutionary point of view. . . .'

In effect, by the mid-fifties, Uruguay's economy was faltering and the two-party system organized by José Batlle y Ordóñez at the beginning of the century showed signs of strain. As the economic situation deteriorated, the anti-inflationary measures applied by the government in the early 'sixties met with increasing opposition. In June 1968, after the cost of living had increased 160 per cent in 13 months, President Pacheco Areco sought to stop inflation and obtain credits from the International Monetary Fund by establishing wage and price controls. The decision was preceded by a month of violent clashes between the police and workers, civil servants, teachers and students (striking for more money for education and a lower bus fare). Before setting up wage and price controls, Pacheco Areco declared Uruguay under limited martial law, which empowered him to close labour unions, ban public meetings, establish press censorship, and jail any political agitator. This state of siege did not calm the situation and strikes went on. In September 1968, hundreds of students clashed with the police and three students were killed: the government closed the university and all schools on September 22nd. In January 1969, striking civil servants clashed with the police in Montevideo. One person was killed and 32 were injured.

Thus the basic factor that prompted the Tupamaros to launch their strategy in the early 'sixties was their belief that Uruguay had entered a deep and prolonged crisis. The measures adopted to cure Uruguay's economic ills have hit the middle class particularly hard. As it saw its standard of living go down, it joined the workers in protests against the rising cost of living. Civil servants, bank employees and students have defied martial law and gone on strike. Some have joined the Tupamaros. The two Tupamaros arrested after a Banco de Cobranzas holdup in 1964 proved to be a professor of the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes and an ex-student of that institution. The police subsequently arrested an engineer who had provided the arms for the robbery. The Tupamaros say: 'Most of the people may not be ready to take part in our struggle, but at least they are not willing to get killed defending a government that harms them.'

### Guerrilla Actions and Popular Aspirations

Since 1963, the Tupamaros have carried out at least 60 commando raids, displaying a showmanship that is comprised of humour, audacity and good planning. Their most spectacular initial feat was exposing the operations of the Financiera Monty, an investment activity of the sort not legal in Uruguay, since such financing is reserved to banks. On February 16th, 1969, Montevideo's broadcasting stations and newspapers received a statement signed by the Tupamaros indicating that two days earlier an MLN commando had broken into the offices of the Financiera Monty in downtown Montevideo and had 'expropriated' some \$25,000, three packages containing stocks and six account books. The Tupamaros demanded an official statement, saying why the public had not been informed of the holdup, and promised to publicize the contents of the account books at a later date. The police then issued a statement acknowledging that the robbery had indeed taken place and that an investigation was already under way. On February 23th, the

MLN sent another leaflet to Montevideo's news media giving a list of the assets and the people connected with the company. The latter included a minister, politicians and figures prominent in Uruguay's business community. This second note was accompanied by photostatic copies of the pages from which the information had been drawn.

On March 1st, a mysterious fire in the Monty offices burned most of the documents that could have either refuted or substantiated the Tupamaros' accusations. A few days later, the company books were deposited at the door of the attorney in charge of the investigation.

The Tupamaros did not attack the government frontally, but rather sought either to expose its corruption, i.e., the Monty holdup, or force it to display its weakness and respond with irrational repression. On August 7th, 1968, a commando kidnapped Dr Ulises Pereira Reverbel, president of the state-owned Electricity and Telephone Services, a close friend of President Pacheco Areco and one of the ideologues of the hard anti-labour line followed by the government. MLN issued a statement taking full credit for the kidnapping and warning the police not to search for the prisoner. Despite strenuous efforts on the part of Montevideo's police force, Pereira Reverbel was not found until he reappeared five days later, haggard, unshaven but unharmed, in a Land Rover parked near Montevideo's main football stadium. The kidnapping was not done only for publicity, like Fidel Castro's kidnapping of Juan Manuel Fangio, the Argentine racing champion. It sought to create support among the workers who had been subjected to Pereira Reverbel's anti-labour policies. In its efforts to locate him, moreover, the government ordered the search to include the university. The police entered some buildings without a warrant and without requesting permission from the rector. Students opposed the search and violent clashes ensued.

The Tupamaros thus achieved the first stages of their strategy without terrorism. They fought with the police only when they were forced. Whenever their raids might hurt civilians, they made a point of protecting them. During a bank holdup, the Tupamaros helped an elderly lady who had fainted. Afterward, even Montevideo's chief of police had to admit 'the perfect organization, the good manners of the robbers and their humane behaviour.' On another occasion, when the Tupamaros blew up the transmission room of Radio Ariel, they first took time to warn the people in a nearby house that they might be hurt by the explosion. Consequently, Uruguayans have not been seriously harmed by the Tupamaros raids, although on occasion passers-by have been wounded. Thus to a certain extent and without necessarily approving its goals, they admire the MLN's audacity and expertise.

In the last nine months, the tempo of struggle has sharply intensified in Uruguay. In September 1969, Gaetano Pellegrini Giampietro, a financier and newspaper owner who had represented the bankers in their negotiations during the great bank-strike then under way, was kidnapped 100 yards from the Presidential Palace. He was only released a month later, after the payment of a donation of \$60,000 ransom to a workers' hospital and a primary school in Montevideo. By Presidential

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Decree, the press and radio were now forbidden to mention the word 'Tupamaros', and all foreign periodicals with coverage of their activities were seized by the customs.

On October 8th, in a new and unprecedentedly audacious raid, the Tupamaros entered the small town of Pando, some 30 kilometres from Montevideo, in a line of cars disguised as a funeral cortege. Forty armed men swiftly divided up and seized the police station, telephone exchange and electricity plant; simultaneously, three banks in the town were taken over and \$400,000 expropriated from them. The Tupamaros then retreated in good order, and announced to the population that this attack was timed to commemorate the second anniversary of the death of Che in Bolivia. Unsurprisingly, a Gallup Poll a few weeks later revealed that the Tupamaros enjoyed the esteem of the majority of the Uruguayan population, above all of the proletariat.

The next major coup of the Tupamaros was a raid on the stores of a tobacco company in the countryside, which resulted in a haul of 200 kilos of gold—worth \$250,000; this action once more proved very popular, since the company was shown to have been evading taxes over the years, and legal proceedings had to be instituted against it. Within a few days, the MLN struck again—this time, directly against the State apparatus of repression itself. Hector Moran Charques, chief of Uruguay's special 'anti-subversion squad'—notorious for its use of torture and widely hated by all popular classes—was machine-gunned to death in the streets of Montevideo. Switching tactics, in May a group of MLN militants commandeered a cinema in the city during the screening of a film, locked policemen in the box-office, confiscated the till, and distributed leaflets to the audience explaining the reasons for the Tupamaros' fight against exploitation and oppression. Finally, in their last major action to date, in late May, 50 men disguised in naval uniforms infiltrated the naval training centre in Montevideo, helped by a sailor working from within the base, and expropriated 450 rifles and automatic weapons. In the present stage of their campaign, the Tupamaros have thus amply demonstrated that the inner sancta of the bourgeois State itself are not immune from their attacks.

The Tupamaros have shown that urban guerrillas can be organized and survive over time in Latin America. Above all, they have proved that an urban guerrilla vanguard *can organically link its actions to the concrete demands and aspirations of the masses*. By winning donations for hospitals and schools, by exposing financial corruption, by punishing torturers, by backing workers on strike, and by respecting the uncommitted and innocent in their actions, the Tupamaros have won wide sympathy and popularity among the Uruguayan proletariat and petty-bourgeoisie. Despite a draconian state of siege that has now governed Uruguay for more than a year, Pacheco Areco has failed to rout or repress the MLN successfully. If the crisis of the bourgeois State should develop further, the Uruguayan ruling class might well ask either the USA or—more probably—one of its powerful neighbours, Argentina or Brazil, to intervene. Far from showing concern at this possibility, the Tupamaros stress that it would only benefit them in the long run.

