



HOW TERRORISM CEASES THE TUPAMAROS IN URUGUAY

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Before approaching our subject a preliminary remark seems to be in place. I am sure that the title of this article would not have pleased the protagonists of the movement analyzed here. Rather it would have aroused irritation and anger because they saw themselves as urban guerillas, not terrorists. Leaving polemical discussion aside, is there an objective criterion for distinguishing between these two ascriptions? Generally, urban guerillas are primarily interested in the mobilizing effect of their violent acts. They want to wake people up and push them to action. By contrast, the typical terrorist strategy is to spread fear and panic, that is, to paralyze the public.¹ Like other urban guerilla movements the Tupamaros could not resist the temptation of substituting at a certain point their original mobilization strategy with a strategy that relied on the alarming and frightening aspects of violence. On the whole, however, we can still accept its self-description as an urban guerilla group.

The article falls into four sections. The first section outlines the general context in which the Tupamaros operated. Next I will describe the emergence and development of their movement. Some of its structural traits will be presented in the third section, while the last section will try to answer the question why, in spite of its remarkable size and power as an armed force, the movement was strictly speaking beaten by the army, and will address the long-term consequences of this defeat.



1. THE CONTEXT

The Tupamaros belonged to what has been called the first generation of guerilla groups in Latin America. These groups sprang up in the sixties, inspired by the example of a successful revolution set by Castro and his bearded followers in Cuba in the late fifties. They spread over large parts of Latin America (from Guatemala to Bolivia) and propagated a socialist revolution in their respective countries, with the ultimate goal of freeing them from the double grip of transnational imperialism and the local oligarchy. Starting from a misinterpretation of the revolutionary succors in Cuba – disseminated by the writing of Regis Debray and Che Guevara: the so-called focus theory – they maintained that a little group of highly motivated, courageous, and eloquent activists by their sheer example could change the general mood of the population and mobilize it to a revolutionary upheaval.ⁱⁱ

The Tupamaros' strategy was strongly influenced by the size and the topographic conditions of the country in which they operated. Uruguay is a small country with no more than about three million inhabitants, about half of whom are living in the greater area of the capital, Montevideo.ⁱⁱⁱ The countryside consists mainly of plains and lower hills, a landscape that can be controlled by security forces quite easily. For this reason the focus theory, as it was developed from the example of Castro's campaign in Cuba, which stressed the necessity of gaining a stronghold on the countryside before attacking the cities, did not make much sense in the case of Uruguay. Any attempt to change the existing order by violent means had to start in the power centers of the cities themselves. That is the reason why the Tupamaros became the "inventors" of urban guerilla^{iv} whose example was imitated not only in Latin America (for instance by the Montoneros in Argentina) but also in several European countries.

That Marxist rebels in Europe considered the Tupamaros' way of attacking the established order as a model to be followed was also due to the fact that Uruguay at that time was no longer a typical underdeveloped country. At the end of the 1950s, when our story begins, it had a highly developed and differentiated society with weak social extremes but a very strong middle class



(about 40% of the population) whose outlook, preferences and expectations marked the general way of life. It was a literate and secularized society in which traditional forces such as the church and the military had not much of a say. Its political culture can be described as moderate social-democratic; it was the product of an early welfare system whose institutions promised security and a relatively high standard of life. On the whole we can characterize Uruguay at that period as a society without great cleavages as far as the distribution of wealth and income are concerned, with a rather highly developed sense of civil liberties and civil responsibility on the part of the average citizen: a kind of peaceful and harmonious island in the midst of much more conflict-ridden states like Argentina and Brazil. It is not by accident that the country at this time was often called “The Switzerland of Latin America.”^v

The advanced state of development and civil standards also found its expression in the low level of force and violence which characterized the Uruguayan public sphere. In the sixties it would become evident that the state had not yet reached an effective monopoly on the exercise of legitimate violence, but there is no doubt that it had come much closer to this goal than most other Latin American states. It was a relatively strong state that had a strong position within the national economy, was responsible for a vast network of social services, and on the whole was able to provide public security and to control violence and crime. The last civil war with heavy losses on both sides had occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century. As an exception from the typical Latin American pattern the armed forces in Uruguay did not develop political ambitions. From the early twentieth century political life was dominated by two parties: the urban-progressive Red Party (“Cocorados”) and the more rural, conservative White Party (“Blancos”).^{vi}

Yet the firmly entrenched two-party regime had ambivalent consequences. On the one hand it guaranteed the continuity of civil government and was an important obstacle for military officials who wanted to seize power. On the other hand, over time, it resulted in a certain immobility of political life and was responsible for stagnation tendencies. This was the case the more the original profiles and programs of the rivaling parties diluted over the years. They



became not only similar in their orientation, their style, and their selection processes for candidates, but also formed concrete alliances on different levels, from the local to the national. As a consequence they became a widely unified power-block that was difficult to break up. New ideas and impulses stemmed in great part not from official leaders but rather from outsiders within the dominant parties who used the parties' structure and hegemonic position to launch a political career. As to those who acted in opposition to the block formed by the parties, they often had enormous difficulties to be respected and heard, so the temptation was great to go underground to fight for their ideas.

2. EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT

There is a striking contrast between the situation in the 1950s that has just been described, and the country's profile 20 years later. As Philip Taylor says, no other Latin American country has experienced a similar rise in a few decades followed by such a sharp decline. In the fifties the saying ran "Como Uruguay no hay" (Uruguay is unique). In the mid-seventies the scene had changed completely. The armed forces had taken power, the parliament had been dissolved, the constitution repealed, 500 persons were in jail for political reasons. Twenty-two of those put in prison had died from torture, hundreds of thousands of citizens had fled the country, many more planned to go abroad. What had happened?^{vii}

Following the experts' view, economy was of primary importance. Uruguay's economy depended and still depends on the exportation of agricultural and cattle raw products.^{viii} The high demand for them on the world market had facilitated the country's quick rise and modernization in the first half of the twentieth century, but from the 1950s onward competitors appeared on the international scene who produced the same goods at a cheaper price. The shrinking export economy could not be compensated for by the national industry, which was too weak to offer many jobs. Production broke down, and for several years the country had negative economic growth rates. Capital was taken out of Uruguay; at the same time inflation and speculation were on the rise. The state had to cut its expenditures for the highly developed social



security system. As a consequence social unrest broke out, and especially in Montevideo there was a social climate of dissatisfaction and unrest.

The general discontent grew the more because the political elites, represented by the two dominating parties, seemed to lack ideas or plans to meet the crisis. The voters for the first time in decades gave the “Blancos” instead of the “Colorados” the chance to exercise power, but the situation did not become better. There was some experimentation with liberal policy and the introduction of more market elements but they remained almost without effect. As has been observed by some authors, patronage and clientelism had penetrated the political system to the extent that it was widely paralyzed and could not offer fresh ideas and impulses. The only remedy, in which the establishment set its hope, was the reform of the country’s constitution: Resuming an old debate they substituted the collective form of government by a presidential system conferring much responsibility to a single person.^{ix}

It could also be argued that the crisis was not only of an economic and a political nature but reached deeper to question the entire model of growth and modernization on which Uruguay’s exceptional situation in Latin America was based. Whether this assumption is true or not, in any event it seems clear that the challenge exercised by the visible decline of the country was so great that it shook traditional patterns of identity-building and group loyalty. As the establishment was unable to resolve the pressing problems, new initiatives and proposals came from those groups which traditionally were not a part of the power centers but were placed on its margins: first from groups of the radical left, afterwards from extreme right-wing groups, especially within the army.^x

The radical left in Uruguay was traditionally divided in sub-camps that competed for a dominant position: the orthodox communists loyal to Moscow, the more open minded socialists (mainly intellectuals), the Maoists, the Anarchists and still others. Their common trait was an orientation toward external, mostly European models and visions which were applied without modification to the situation of Uruguay. In this respect a gradual change took place in the late



fifties that continued in the sixties. Rey Tristán has subsumed it under the four headings of renovation, fragmentation, unification and mobilization.

It was a highly complex process of change which in every subgroup was following a slightly different course. In general the step of renovation consisted in the transformation of abstract models by applying Marxist categories and thought to the special situation of Uruguay. For one group this meant to establish closer contact with the labor unions, others began to mobilize rural workers, a third group began to take an interest in previous cases of popular rebellion in the country's history. In most cases the shifting in perspectives and orientations was not a harmonious enterprise but turned out to be highly controversial. Regularly, a minority bent on concrete revolutionary action was confronted by a majority that preferred a moderate strategy. Gradually the radicals of the different groups focused on certain common goals and principles. A central impetus in this context came from the Cuban revolution since it offered an example to all those who wanted concrete action. The more the Cuban experience was discussed and admired, the more it exercised a mobilizing effect on certain left-wing circles.^{xi}

When we look at these developments, we can already see that it was by no means clear from the beginning that radicalization would result in the foundation of an underground organization. The entire process was marked by a high degree of ambivalence. For a considerable period, legal actions went hand in hand with illegal ones. Some protagonists, such as the legendary Raúl Sendic who organized the sugarcane workers' protest march from a remote northern province to Montevideo, were convinced from the beginning that the capitalist order which existed could not be reformed but had to be destroyed by force.^{xii} Others insisted on using legal methods as long as possible before resorting to violence. A third group which believed that one option should not exclude the other supported both ideas at the same time. All these debates took place within the *Coordinador*, a provisional association of the revolutionary left operating from 1963 to 1966 that was responsible for most radical operations in this time and mirrored the experimental state of the movement as a whole.



When after a number of preliminary steps the group of the Tupamaros was founded in 1966 (its official name was MLN-T, “Movement for National Liberation – Tupamaros”), its members shared two basic convictions: that only a socialist revolution in the Marxist sense of the term would resolve the country’s structural problems; and that the ruling class, the “Oligarchy,” would not peacefully give in and abandon power but had to be compelled to do so by force.^{xiii}

In fact there were two further arguments and motivations behind the group’s decision to proceed by violence that rarely appeared in the organization’s official statements. One was that several leaders of the extreme left had become tired of the endless theoretical discussions about the most promising strategy to bring about a radical change in the country. They hoped that by concrete attacks against the system they would create an effect of solidarity and oblige vacillating comrades to join them. The other reason were the bad results that the parties of the radical left had regularly reached in national elections. Despite putting aside their traditional disputes and forming an alliance, the communist and the socialist party together got no more than about 6% of all votes in the elections of 1966. Seeing no way of gaining power legally, the leaders of the radical left came to regard a revolution as the only way of realizing their socialist project.^{xiv}

Nevertheless it would be wrong to conclude from the meager results obtained by the left-wing parties in elections that the Tupamaros were isolated and operated in a kind of sociopolitical vacuum. As Rey Tristán has shown, Uruguay and specially Montevideo was a hotbed of all kind of militant groups in the sixties and early seventies, groups that expressed their displeasure and rage in demonstrations, spontaneous rebellions and often in violent acts. While the working class on the whole had remained loyal to the traditional parties, sectors of the urban middle class were displeased with their deteriorating life quality and salaries and frequently protested against state measures. Particularly, bank employees, teachers, high school students, and university students sympathized with the Tupamaros’ attacks against state officials and institution and often openly applauded them.^{xv} From these very groups stemmed the bulk



of the new members who after 1968 were filling the ranks of the organization and transformed it into an important power factor.

The urban public was fascinated as well as amused by the way the Tupamaros proceeded, their particular “style”. Their actions were at least in the beginning a kind of ridiculing, playful competition with the security forces (especially the police), aimed less at hurting them or inflicting serious damage than at neutralizing them. This was supposed to demonstrate the obsolescence and inefficiency of the entire system. The urban guerilla’s actions covered a wide range of objectives and methods, beginning with Robin-Hood style attacks on food trucks – the food was then distributed among the poor –, later proceeding to bank robberies, arm raids, and more sophisticated attacks on banking accounts in order to disclose corruption affairs, and culminating in highly complicated kidnappings or occupations of an entire provincial town for several hours. The way in which the Tupamaros proceeded was highly imaginative. In no few cases some of their members disguised themselves as policemen, thus obtaining easy access to official buildings and at the same time keeping the whole situation under control. These kind of maneuvers were the reason why they became famous worldwide and were imitated by many other underground groups, especially in Europe.^{xvi}

The overall development of the violent movement and organization was not continuous but occurred in steps or waves. Periods of enhanced activity and expansion were followed by organizational setbacks and heavy manpower losses.^{xvii} Repeatedly, important leaders were arrested and cells or safe houses discovered and destroyed by the police. In spite of these setbacks the organization was not seriously weakened but grew stronger and stronger. The explanation lies in the fact that whenever the group was in danger and its members prosecuted, spontaneous solidarity initiatives emerged. These initiatives helped the Tupamaros to survive and, since many of their members joined the organization, contributed to its consolidation. The government, too, had its part in this paradoxical reinforcing process. Particularly, the tough, repressive measures taken by President Pacheco Areco after 1966 and his



complete strangulation of the press polarized society and pushed the liberal and left-wing sectors towards the rebel's side.^{xviii}

For several years it was not clear how the drama would end. A spectacular outbreak of almost one hundred Tupamaros from a state prison, long-lasting kidnappings and other successes seemed to prove that the rebel organization resembled a hydra that when one head was cut off replaced it by several others. The Tupamaros consciously nourished their reputation for being invincible by claiming that they were firmly established in the underground, forming a kind of parallel power to the officially ruling government.^{xix} Since in the beginning of the seventies (1971) the political representation of the far left, the "Wide Front" (*Frente Amplio*) for the first time in its history was quite successful in the national elections – they obtained 18% of all votes, even 31% in Montevideo –, several indicators seemed to demonstrate that the country had come to a point where it was "ripe" for a radical turn to the left.

It was the army's intervention into the struggle against subversion that changed the whole situation within a few months. The intervention was ordered by Pacheco Areco, who concluded after the successful Tupamaro outbreak that the rebels were too strong for the police and were in fact playing a cat-and-mouse game with them. The Uruguayan military had for a long time been an apolitical, exclusively professionally oriented force. Only when the political situation was becoming tense did it develop political interests and ambitions. These ambitions were by no means specifically right-wing from the beginning. Impressed by what the Tupamaros had revealed about corruption and nepotism within the political class, a group of officers was flirting with the left and even started a dialogue with some of the guerilla leaders.^{xx} Yet it was not this wing but another, closely linked with the government, which finally decided the whole institution's course, namely fighting the rebels and destroying their organization.

This was achieved more quickly and thoroughly than most Uruguayans would have believed. After six months the organization had practically ceased to exist, all leaders of any importance were in jail or had fled abroad. The military took its rapid victory not only as a proof of its professional qualities but also of its moral



and political superiority over the rest of society and especially the political class. Successively it dissolved the parliament, outlawed party activities, and finally seized power, governing the country for twelve years (from 1973 to 1985).^{xxi} The military regime in Uruguay coincided with a general turn to the right in the region. In the neighboring countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile), too, military institutions were in charge in the second half of the seventies and the beginning of the eighties, pretending that they had the mission of fighting communism and of accelerating their countries' development.

Yet the Uruguayan military did not write the last chapter in the Tupamaros' history. In prison as well as in diaspora-like communities in other Latin American countries to which they had fled, the urban guerillas maintained their internal cohesion and their solidarity as an ideological group. When the army retired from politics and the Tupamaros were released from the prisons in which they had been locked up for more than a decade, they quickly reestablished themselves as a political group and took up their project of a socialist revolution.^{xxii} But they soon realized that for most Uruguayans an elected government and constitutional rights were of crucial importance. Their traditional leader, Raúl Sendic, was the first to make his peace with democracy, and others followed his example. Today some Tupamaros figure among the most prominent political personalities of the small country.

3. SOME STRUCTURAL TRAITS

Ideology

As far as their ideological orientation is concerned, the Tupamaros were no particularly original thinkers. The ideas and principles defended by them reflected widely the general ideological development of the radical left in Latin America in this period. It can be summarized in two principal goals:

- the struggle for national liberation from imperialist exploitation;
- a socialist revolution within the country.



Both aims, as the Tupamaros saw it, could only be realized by force. The objective of liberation from imperialistic pressures was inspired by the renaissance of a branch of Marxism that had originally been founded by Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg. This renaissance coincided in Latin America with the emergence of the “dependency theory” which claimed that in spite of being formally independent since the beginning of the 19th century, from an informal economic point of view the Latin American nations still depended heavily on the world’s industrial centers. While in the 19th century they had been a part of the informal British empire, in the 20th century the United States had taken over the role of a hegemonic power that controlled Latin America and exploited its natural resources. For this reason any effort to transform a country’s socioeconomic structures had to be preceded by an effort to cut the bonds of external dependency.^{xxiii}

The innovative trait of this kind of Marxist thinking was the strong accent on the nation as frame of reference for action. According to the radical left, the first and decisive step was to free the country from external imperialist domination. Without this liberation, the socialist revolution that was planned as a second step had small chances of success. The Tupamaros’ slogans, such as “the country belongs to all or nobody,”^{xxiv} reflected this nationalist turn, as did the guerilla’s search for heroes in the national past who had preceded them in their struggle for national independence.

In defining the socialist revolution as a process that had to take place within the country, the Tupamaros were forced to adapt the revolution’s context to the specific conditions of Uruguay. They did not speak of “class conflicts” but replaced this rather abstract terminology by the opposition of “the people” and “the oligarchy”. By “people” they understood much more than just the working classes; the term included also large sectors of the middle classes and in the last resort was equivalent with “patria” and “nación” – that part of society which the Tupamaros appreciated and with which they identified. On the other side stood the “oligarchy,” the great enemy who in the eyes of the Tupamaros was responsible for everything that had gone wrong in the country: its external dependence, because it was the upper class that had sold the country’s natural



resources to foreign companies and cooperated with them, and for the social differences, since that same class (the “600 families”) concentrated all national wealth in its hands, exploiting the “people” and preventing them from getting their due share. It was a corrupt and decadent class which used its power not for common national goals but exclusively for particularistic and clientelistic purposes.^{xxv}

In reproaching the traditional elites for being morally corrupt, the revolutionaries demonstrated their aspiration to create “the new man”: going back to the nation’s roots, they hoped to retrieve the original identity of the people, to produce a new set of values and a new humanistic lifestyle that could replace the crude materialism predominant at the time. This aspiration was once more inspired by the Cuban example, which furnished not only the model of a successful revolution and a strategy for seizing power, but also the conception of the new type of individual to emerge from the revolutionary process. Oddly enough, the same idea of defending society against exclusive materialism had its promoters among the counterpart of the Tupamaros, the military forces, where a group of officers disgusted by the political establishment’s corruption was for some time engaged in a dialogue with the rebels about how to give the country a new orientation and value system.^{xxvi}

Strategy and Tactics

The Tupamaros became famous less for their theories and ideological constructs than for their ingenious way of putting theory into practice: for their strategy and their tactical skills. They have, as one author remarks, “invented” urban guerilla action, which up to this point had been neglected in guerilla theory.^{xxvii} A typical trait of the Uruguayan insurgents was their pragmatism: their focus on concrete actions, their preconditions, and their political and socio-psychological consequences. But that does not mean that they did not reflect the general possibilities and limits of urban guerilla war.



In this respect, too, the starting point was provided by the Cuban revolution and by the “focus theory” some authors, such as Regis Debray and Che Guevara, had derived from this successful experiment. The focus concept deviated from classical Marxist theory since it affirmed that in order to launch a revolution it was not necessary that the “masses” were already highly mobilized and ready to rise, but that a limited group of highly motivated fighters could also create the conditions for a general upheaval through their exemplary actions and propaganda.^{xxviii} Castro and his successors in other Latin American countries worked from the premise that a guerilla group could only operate and expand in the countryside. Given the flat topography of Uruguay, it was evident that it would be difficult if not impossible in this country to start a rural guerilla campaign, so from the beginning the leaders of the Tupamaros reflected on how to apply the focus theory to an urban setting. One of their conclusions was that militaristic elements of guerilla strategy largely had to be replaced by symbolic ones. What mattered in their eyes was to mobilize people mentally, to create in their minds a revolutionary situation, to make them conscious of the unbearable state of public affairs, but not to defeat the government and its security apparatus in military action.^{xxix}

The latter would have been impossible because the urban guerillas – in this respect they are quite distinct from the rural ones – operate in zones whose characteristic trait is a high concentration of security forces, mainly of the police. For this reason they have to go underground and dedicate much energy and logistical effort to security matters. The leadership of the Tupamaros was conscious of this problem from the beginning and developed a series of measures and principles to protect its men (and the whole organization) from being detected and killed or put in jail. A special security filter was set up to prevent “spies” from infiltrating the organization. The founders of the Tupamaros subdivided the organization into departments and the departments into cells, each unit operating largely independently from the others, to avoid that the whole movement was in danger when one cell or department was detected. Also, the principle of collective leadership as a combination of centralized decision-making and decentralized execution was due to security reasons.^{xxx}



As far as violence and the use of force is concerned, the Tupamaros used them quite economically and cautiously in most of their activities. Interested primarily in the symbolic effect of their projects and acts, they regularly tried to combine them with a specific message, calculating how this message would be received by its target group and the wider public and how it would influence the organization's image.^{xxx1} They were particularly careful when their actions could cause material damage to people whom they wanted to win for their cause, or when "executing" one of their enemies. On the other hand, they also tried to entertain and amuse the public or to gain sympathy by operations that had a funny or a humanitarian touch. Violent attacks were usually accompanied by long explanations and, if necessary, by justifications to avoid misunderstandings. Conscious of the great advantage they had in operating in an environment where the mass media were omnipresent, the rebels seized any chance to gain attention.

F. R. Allemann in his seminal work on Latin American guerilla groups praises the Tupamaros as quite exceptional. He highlights their efficiency, their discipline and abnegation, their rationality, their ability to learn, and the fact that they were not suffering from major internal splitting. In conclusion, he states that this was the only organization of the first guerilla wave that was able to establish itself as a serious competitor of the government, exercising some form of parallel power from and in the underground. If this is true it raises the question of why the rebels, despite all their successes, were quite rapidly beaten and destroyed by the military.^{xxxii} One answer probably lies in the specific conflict dynamics that the struggle developed from a certain point on. But before we turn to this dynamics in more detail, we will take a brief look at the members and sympathizing groups that backed the Tupamaros.

Membership and Support Milieu

When the MNL-T was founded, it consisted of about 50 members. Their number grew slowly but steadily, reaching finally the mark of 400.^{xxxiii} Around these core members there was a wide circle of sympathizers and supporters, so that the real size of the whole movement amounted to about 4,000 persons at the



beginning of the seventies (estimations vary considerably). To distinguish between members in the strict sense of the term who lived in clandestine conditions and assistant cadres who remained within the bounds of the law is a well-established practice of underground organizations (the Basque ETA makes the same distinction). Keeping the clandestine organization small makes sense because it reduces maintenance costs and because there is less danger of infiltration by secret agents of the security forces.

The first members of the MLN-T stemmed mainly from three “camps”: the Socialist Party, the anarchists, and the sugarcane worker’s union. Some of the founding members came from neighboring countries in which the military had established a dictatorship (Argentina, Brazil). Later on the spectrum of the groups from which the organization recruited its members grew wider. Most members were university or high school students, office workers, teachers, or civil servants. In consequence, there was a strong bias towards the middle classes and academically educated intellectuals. Occasionally, some upper-class members joined the organization, but its attraction on the poorer strata of the Uruguayan society remained limited.^{xxxiv}

That the Tupamaros’ propaganda had the strongest appeal on the middle class becomes clear if we look more closely at their attacks. In a number of cases they could only realize their project because some higher-rank member of the target institution gave them access to arms, the treasury, or secret data. Evidently the prestige of the state and many institutions had so deteriorated that even young people, among them a great number of women, from traditionally well-off families did not feel moral scruples when helping the Tupamaros to raid these institutions or disclose their corrupt practices. After having contributed to the success of the Tupamaros’ action, the persons in question regularly joined the underground organization.

It has rightly been affirmed that the strong representation of the academic middle classes in the organization made itself felt in several socio-psychological traits as well as in its general outlook: The ambitious goals of the Tupamaros’ leaders, their impatience, their trust in symbolic means, in propaganda, in



communication in general, all this, it has been said, as well as their tendency to overestimate their own and their organization's force and to underestimate their adversaries' shrewdness and perseverance, reflected a somewhat naive middle-class horizon and origins. On the other hand, traits such as the Tupamaros' flexibility, the rich imagination underlying their actions, their capacity to plan and develop sophisticated projects, but also their theatrical talents certainly had to do with these origins.^{xxxv}

Nevertheless the insurgents' embeddedness in a wide range of similar-minded milieus and social groups of the middle classes should not be exaggerated. Skeptical or openly critical statements about the role assumed by the Tupamaros in national politics did not only come from the conservative upper class or the lower classes but also from middle-class groups, even from those who shared the armed rebels' left-wing creed. The reason for this critical attitude could be envy or jealousy: by the sheer number and effect of their actions the Tupamaros had left all rival groups far behind. But another widespread reason was the conviction that a violent campaign might in the long run cause more damage to the left than would a campaign within the bounds of traditional legal frames. This latter position was particularly popular among the leaders of the newly founded *Frente Amplio*, which did well in the elections of 1971 and whose cadres the Tupamaros would join about 15 years later, after the purgatory they had suffered in jail.^{xxxvi}

Interaction Dynamics

It would not be correct to pretend that the escalation of the violent conflict between the revolutionary left and the security forces was only beginning in the late sixties whereas the precedent years had been relatively calm. There were periods of severe confrontations between protesting groups and the police before, for example around 1962/63, where weapons were fired and one person died.^{xxxvii} But from 1968/69 onward the conflict without doubt reached a new dimension, with much more violent acts from both sides and the number of shootings and homicides reaching new records.



It is difficult to judge in retrospect who was mainly responsible for this escalation. Some scholars affirm that it was president Pacheco Areco's "fault": his hard repressive measures and the censuring of the press, they say, fostered the polarization of society.^{xxxviii} Others blame the Tupamaros for negatively influencing sociopolitical atmosphere through the raised scope and intensity of their attacks against representatives of the existing order. Bank robberies and arm raids, acts typical of their early years, were substituted by more sophisticated and brutal acts like kidnapping or bombings. While the rebels had treated the kidnapped persons in a gentleman-like manner in the beginning, avoiding at any price to kill them, now they often threatened to kill them and in one case effectively executed a hostage. In the clashes with the police, whose number mounted steadily, deaths on both sides were not an exception anymore but became routine incidents. Committing at least one violent attack every month, the MLN-T underlined his claim to rise to the status of a parallel government in the underground. That meant at the same time that the symbolism of violence that had predominated in the beginning gave way to the use of violence as an instrument to impose the organization's plans on the country and to gain power.^{xxxix}

In the last resort it is secondary who promoted the escalating dynamics of violence to a larger degree, the government or the rebels. Probably both worked in the same direction, pushing the conflict forward in a kind of "antagonistic cooperation". As far as the Tupamaros were concerned, the fact that the organization was bolstered up in 1970 by a wave of young, poorly trained students who were eager to fight may have encouraged them to be less cautious.^{xl(49)} But this was not decisive. The main "errors" of the Tupamaros lay elsewhere:

- Firstly, they underestimated the dynamics inherent in any process of escalating violence which makes it very difficult to control. Parallel to their own expansion and increasing power, not only did army groups prepare to intervene in politics on the extreme right side of the political spectrum, but death squads emerged who arbitrarily killed alleged sympathizers of the guerilla forces. The principle of "tit for tat" which they used to justify their acts shows that there was a general spirit of thinking



in terms of vengeance, which is one of the main forces in the dynamics of violence.

- Secondly, by consciously raising the level of violence the Tupamaros changed their image in the population, transforming themselves in the public perception from an urban guerilla into a terrorist group. The message conveyed by their attack was not supposed to mobilize people and win them over anymore but to intimidate and to spread fear. This message was primarily meant to reach and impress the political establishment and the security forces. But it was also felt and perceived by large sectors of the middle class that had originally looked at the rebels with sympathy and had partly supported them. Now they were frightened and distanced themselves from the MLN-T. They began to look at its leaders as people who would not hesitate to plunge the country into a civil war in order to realize their revolutionary plans.^{xli}

4. THE END AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

As mentioned before, in the end the Tupamaros were defeated by the military. It was a quick and neat victory by the armed forces. This raises several questions: First, was fighting to the end really the only solution of the conflict – couldn't it have been resolved by peaceful means such as negotiation and compromise? Second, why were the Tupamaros defeated and why did this happen so quickly? Finally, what were the consequences of this outcome: how did the Tupamaros manage to survive as a group in spite of their defeat and to return to the political scene twenty years later?

Was the solution of the conflict by force the only possible option or might it also have ended by negotiations and some kind of agreement? One could argue that escalation had so far advanced that both sides were fixated on an “all or nothing” solution and unwilling to resume dialogue. But this argument is not convincing. The sort of stalemate situation Uruguay experienced after 1969 is not necessarily an obstacle to the parties' disposition to begin peace talks; in many cases it is even a precondition. For as long as one side believes that it is



stronger than its adversary and could win the fight it sees no necessity to negotiate.^{xlii} Did not in midst the hardening confrontation dialogue take place between a group of officers and leaders of the Tupamaros? Evidently the radicalization of the conflict as such did not prevent representatives of both sides from exploring options for a bilateral solution.

The causes why this effort failed were less conjectural than structural. One structural reason was that the states in the Cono Sur region were at that point already too strong to accept the emergence and competition of rivaling power factors. In this respect the situation differed clearly from that in other Latin American sub-regions, as for example the Andean countries or those of Central America, where the state was still far weaker and occasionally had to make substantial concessions to rebel groups. In several countries of the Southern Cone, on the other hand, the military exercised power in a dictatorial way, leaving no doubt that it would crush ruthlessly any attempt to put in question its sovereignty. Surrounded by these “hard-core” neighbors it would have been difficult for the government of small Uruguay to opt in favor of a “soft” solution.

Even had the government (or the army) been willing to look for a peaceful solution of the conflict, the question remains if there was enough common ground between both sides to come to such an agreement. Sendic himself was convinced from the beginning that the socialist revolution he was dreaming of could only be realized by force, and most other leaders of the guerilla group shared this view.^{xliii} On the government’s and the military’s side there was a similar perspective: the insurgents’ goals were precisely the opposite of the existing order; it was a struggle of Capitalism versus Socialism, and since both concepts were perceived as antagonistic little space was left for intermediate solutions or compromise.

Arguably, the extremely excited atmosphere in Montevideo at the time would have made it extremely difficult to deescalate the conflict and to resolve it peacefully. Animosity was stirred, emotions went high on both sides and pushed towards a neat and clear solution of the ongoing drama, not an outcome without losers and winners.^{xliv}



The second question: if armed confrontation was inevitable, why did it end with the rebels' defeat and why were the rebels unable to offer stronger and longer resistance? The second part of the question seems easier to answer since it touches on tactical points. There were several reasons why the Tupamaros as a military group were no serious challenge for the armed forces. One reason has already been mentioned: the too-rapid growth of the underground organization from 1969 to 1971. It was swelled by a wave of young recruits from the high schools and the universities who formed a new column that operated on the countryside. Poorly trained, it was an easy prey for the army, which succeeded to break up the whole clandestine organization from this weak point. The army at that point was a fairly well trained corps that had been prepared by North American specialists to fight subversion. It seems that it employed torture systematically and successfully in order to obtain information. What it did not find out from captives was communicated by treacherous ex-Tupamaros who had changed sides.^{xlv}

Independently from the army's tactical advantages, the chances of the insurgents to win and to realize their goal of a socialist revolution were very restricted from the beginning. There were three obstacles that were almost impossible to overcome. The first was that the rebels were fighting not against an external power but against their own government. History shows that this is highly problematic because the insurgent group cannot appeal to nationalism as one of the driving forces that push people towards revolt. Secondly, it was a democratically elected government that the Tupamaros tried to overthrow. While a mass rebellion may under certain circumstances break out against an authoritarian regime or dictatorship, political leaders in democracies enjoy for the most part a credit of legitimacy that protects them against violent uprisings. People are unwilling to attack openly a government which they have elected themselves. In Uruguay, which enjoyed a relatively longstanding democratic tradition, the bulk of the population felt particularly uneasy about the idea of a little self-appointed elite substituting by force its legal representatives.^{xlvi}



The third obstacle lay in the strategy of urban guerilla warfare itself. As can be demonstrated by many examples, this is not a very promising strategy if one wants to start a revolution. In spite of all their tactical skills and their imaginative maneuvers, the Tupamaros' leaders and brains had not analyzed this question very well. The crucial point is that urban guerilla warfare does not permit to draw a neat borderline between those the guerilla want to attack and those they want to win over and protect. When the fight escalates and the number of violent attacks against the established order and its representatives increases, their negative effect inevitably affects those social sectors which the rebels hope to mobilize for their cause. As a consequence, the very groups on whose support and approval the urban guerilla fighters depend begin to distance themselves from the would-be revolutionaries. In this sense, Lessa is right when he affirms that in being socially isolated, the Tupamaros were already discredited before they were militarily beaten.^{xlvii}

What were the consequences of their defeat? The most direct and visible consequence was the army's intervention into politics. After the revolutionaries' attempt to impose on the nation a radical left-wing program it was now the military's turn with a counter-project from the extreme right. Both sides had some things in common, for example their contempt for parliamentary procedures and the political class in general. But they differed in their view of the role of the state and of the security forces. If the Tupamaros had not constantly ridiculed the police and undermined the authority of the state, the armed forces might not have seized power to reestablish the prestige of these institutions. As in the neighboring country of Argentina, there was a close connection between the radical challenge of the existing order by the left and the vehement reaction and effort to defend this order from the extreme right.

The Uruguayan military regime that was in power from 1973 to 1985 was as hard and intransigent as other such regimes in the region. It suspended the constitution, dissolved parliament, outlawed the political parties, censored the press, systematically neglected civil and political rights and put thousands of real or alleged political opponents in jail. Yet while it tortured political prisoners it did not systematically eliminate them. This "humanizing" trait, which was



probably due to Uruguay heritage of respect for the constitution, stood in sharp contrast to the military's procedures in other countries like Chile and Argentina.^{xlviii}

Its consequence was that the Tupamaros, most of whose leaders spent the twelve years of military dictatorship in jail, survived as individuals and as a political group.^{xlix} When they were released after the military's retreat from political power, they soon reorganized and reappeared on the political stage as an ideological and political formation. It first seemed that their long imprisonment had had no major impact on their political visions and plans. They still favored socialism as a key to solving the country's structural problems and believed that a revolution was impossible without the application of force. Nevertheless they gradually changed their minds. When their former leader Raúl Sendic declared in an open letter that he would no more pursue his socialist goals by violent means but would work within the legal framework of democracy, this initiative was strongly contested by his comrades at first. But eventually they followed him one by one and also made their peace with democracy.ⁱ

That they could be reintegrated into Uruguay's democratic political system was due to two circumstances. One was the learning process that took place on the rebels' side. They realized that Uruguay's political culture was so thoroughly penetrated by legalistic and democratic principles that any initiative to change the country's structure by force would be useless and doomed to failure. On the other hand, the rebels' decision to revoke the use of force and to pursue their political project legally instead was favored by the fact that there was already a left-wing party that the ex-Tupamaros could join, the Wide Front (*Frente Amplio*). It had come into existence when the extreme left had split up into two branches, the legal and the illegal (violent) one.ⁱⁱ

As a summary, we can say that the political system of Uruguay has returned to a civil form of government after some radical experiments. The experiments have not weakened but rather strengthened democracy and have contributed to its maturing. This was only possible because the extreme forces which



occupied the political stage from the mid-1960s till to the mid-1980s maintained some minimal standards of human rights: the Tupamaros by treating their adversaries and hostages with respect for a long time, the military by keeping its enemies as prisoners and not killing them arbitrarily. As a result of this leniency, some Tupamaros who survived now are among the most prominent members of the reestablished democratic scene.

NOTES

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- ⁱ Peter Waldmann, *Terrorismus. Provokation der Macht*, 2nd ed. (Hamburg: Murmann 2005). Pp. 12-22.
- ⁱⁱ Eduardo Rey Tristán, *A la vuelta de la esquina. La izquierda revolucionaria Uruguaya 1955-1973* (Montevideo: Fin de siglo 2006). P.46-62.
- ⁱⁱⁱ For the following the article of Philip B. Taylor provides a useful first overview. It appeared in the classic handbook on Latin American edited by Howard J. Wiarda and Harvey F. Kline: *Latin America. Politics and Development* (Boston: Hughton Mifflin 1979).
- ^{iv} Thomas Fischer. *Die Tupamaros in Uruguay. Das Modell der Stadtguerilla*, in: Wolfgang Kraushaar (ed.), *Die RAF und der linke Terrorismus* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition 2006). P.736-750, P.739.
- ^v Hans-Jürgen Puhle, *Uruguay*, in: Walther L. Bernecker and others (Ed.), *Handbuch der Geschichte Lateinamerikas. Vol. 3.* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 1996). P.973-1015.
- ^{vi} Article "Uruguay" in: Peter Waldmann, Heinrich Krumwiede (Eds.), *Politisches Lexikon Lateinamerika*, 3rd ed. (Munich: Beck 1992). Pp. 188-202, 301-314.
- ^{vii} Philip B. Taylor, *Uruguay: the costs of inept political corporatism*, in: Howard J. Wiarda & Harvey F. Kline (Ed.), *Latin America. Politics & Development* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1979). Pp.263.280.
- ^{viii} Puhle, *Uruguay*. P.973, 992. Fischer, *Die Tupamaros in Uruguay*. P.738.
- ^{ix} Martin Weinstein, *Uruguay: The Politics of Failure* (Westport: Greenwood Press 1975). Pp.113-123.
- ^x Rey Tristán, *A la vuelta de la Esquina*. Pp.21-62.
- ^{xi} Rey Tristán, *A la vuelta de la Esquina*. Pp.63-120. The dissertation of Rey Tristan is the most exhaustive and best documented study on the radical Left in Uruguay.
- ^{xii} On Sendic see the very detailed biography of Samuel Blixen, *Sendic* (Montevideo: Ediciones Trilce 2000).
- ^{xiii} Alfonso Lessa, *La revolucion imposible. Los Tupamaros y el fracaso de la via armada en el Uruguay*. Pp.65-82. Thomas Fischer, *Die Tupamaros in Uruguay*. P.741.
- ^{xiv} Rey Tristán, *A la vuelta de la Esquina*. Pp.86-90, 151-170; Alfonso Lessa, *La revolucion imposible*. Pp.56-58.
- ^{xv} Rey Tristán, *A la vuelta de la Esquina*. Pp.361-404.
- ^{xvi} Fritz Rene Allemann. *Macht und Ohnmacht der Guerilla* (München: Piper 1974). Pp.311-354.
- ^{xvii} *Ibid.* Pp.317-337.
- ^{xviii} Puhle, *Uruguay*. P.995; Fischer, *Die Tupamaros in Uruguay*. P.743.
- ^{xix} Allemann. *Macht und Ohnmacht der Guerilla*. P.348, 349.



- ^{xx} Alfonso Lessa, Estado de Guerra (Montevideo: Fin de siglo 207). Pp.38-64.
- ^{xxi} Wolfgang Heinz, Determinants of Gross Human Rights Violations by State and State-sponsored Actors in Uruguay (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers 1999). Pp.351-360. 377-387; Lessa, Estado de Guerra. Pp.69-77.
- ^{xxii} Adolfo Garce, Donde hubo Fuego. El proceso de adaptación del MLN-Tupamaros a la legalidad y a la competencia electoral (1985-2004) (Montevideo: Fin de siglo 2006).
- ^{xxiii} Rey Tristán, A la vuelta de la Esquina. Pp.86-90, 151-173; Garce, Donde hubo Fuego. Pp.29-33.
- ^{xxiv} Lessa, La revolución imposible. P.24.
- ^{xxv} Rey Tristán, A la vuelta de la Esquina. P.158.
- ^{xxvi} Lessa, Estado de Guerra. P.54, Pp.74-77.
- ^{xxvii} Fischer, Die Tupamaros in Uruguay. P.739.
- ^{xxviii} Regis Debray and others, Guerilla in Lateinamerika. 11 Aufsätze zur Focustheorie (Berlin: Verlag Klaus Wagenbach 1970).
- ^{xxix} Rey Tristán, A la vuelta de la Esquina. Pp.59-62; Allemann, Macht und Ohnmacht der Guerilla. Pp.311.
- ^{xxx} Allemann, Macht und Ohnmacht der Guerilla. P.319, 351, 352.
- ^{xxxi} Rey Tristán, A la vuelta de la Esquina. Pp.169-183.
- ^{xxxii} Allemann, Macht und Ohnmacht der Guerilla. P.342-345, 348-354.
- ^{xxxiii} Lessa, La revolución imposible. Pp.25, 26.
- ^{xxxiv} Rey Tristán, A la vuelta de la Esquina. Pp.123-131; Allemann, Macht und Ohnmacht der Guerilla. P.353; Fischer, Die Tupamaros in Uruguay. Pp.746, 747.
- ^{xxxv} Garce, Donde hubo Fuego. P.29; Allemann, Macht und Ohnmacht der Guerilla. P.315; Federico Leicht, Cero a la Izquierda. Una biografía de Jorge Zabalza (Montevideo: Letraeña Ed. 2008). Pp.35-38, P.92.
- ^{xxxvi} Lessa, La revolución imposible. P.52, 54.
- ^{xxxvii} Samuel Blixen, Sendic (Montevideo: Ed. Trilce 2000). Pp.85-105. Leicht, Cero a la Izquierda. Pp.31-38.
- ^{xxxviii} Rey Tristán, A la vuelta de la Esquina. P.18.
- ^{xxxix} Allemann, Macht und Ohnmacht der Guerilla. Pp.329-337; Leicht, Cero a la Izquierda. Pp.92-95.
- ^{xl} Leicht, Cero a la Izquierda. Pp.57. Rey Tristán, A la vuelta de la Esquina. Pp.130-132.
- ^{xli} Allemann, Macht und Ohnmacht der Guerilla. Pp.331, 336.
- ^{xlii} William Zartman. Ripe for Resolution: Conflict and Intervention in Africa, 2. Ed. (New York 2009); Heinrich-W. Krumwiede, Regulierungsmöglichkeiten von Bürgerkriegen – Fragen und Hypothesen, in: Idem / Peter Waldmann (Ed.), Bürgerkriege: Folgen u. Regulierungsmöglichkeiten (Baden-Baden: Nomos 1998). Pp.37-60.
- ^{xliiii} Blixen, Sendic. Pp.75-81.
- ^{xliiii} Heinz, Determinants of Gross Human Rights Violations by State and State-Sponsored Actors in Uruguay 1960-1990. P.380.
- ^{xliv} Ibid. Pp.355-357; Allemann. Macht und Ohnmacht der Guerilla. Pp.343-347.
- ^{xlvi} Lessa, La revolución imposible. Pp.32-35. Taylor, Uruguay: The costs of inept political corporatism. P.269.
- ^{xlvii} Ibid. P.45.
- ^{xlviii} Heinz, Determinants of Gross Human Rights Violations. Pp.359-362, 378-387.
- ^{xlix} Leicht, Cero a la izquierda. Pp.95-134.
- ^l Ibid. Pp.157-182; Garce, Donde hubo Fuego. Pp.17-22.
- ^{li} Taylor: Uruguay: The costs of inept political corporatism. P.277; Garce, Donde hubo fuego, Pp.51-95.