

"The horror! The horror!"

Bolivia at the Heart of Darkness

BY "ANTON"

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For there to be a day like July 17, 1980, a nation's citizens have to fail completely in their duty to their country. It was, in fact, the only possible end for Bolivia after fourteen years of military dictatorship and three years of childish civilians' games that were so grandly called "the road back to democracy." It may look as if the military, who returned to power in a two-day battle that claimed three thousand lives, should bear all the blame. But I believe that civilian politicians hold greatest responsibility for the tragedy.

Bolivia had its National Revolution in 1952. It turned into the Frustrated Revolution in 1964, after the country's leaders lost their revolutionary vision. And it was completely destroyed by General René Barrientos between 1964 and 1969. In fact, I consider Barrientos the first modern military dictator, for he succeeded in abolishing almost completely the political, social, and economic rights for which Bolivians had been fighting and dying since 1952. Then came three years in which the Left—the "childish Left" we used to call it—demonstrated that it was unable to find the road back to hope. General Banzer Suárez finished Barrientos's work between 1971 and 1977, when huge areas of our territory were sold to Brazil and Bolivians were helpless in the face of unprecedented levels of corruption and further abrogations of human rights. Finally, it took a true gerontocracy, our 1980 presidential candidates, and the dogs of war General Luis García Meza unleashed against an unarmed and desperate people to ensure that the political nightmare would be one from which Bolivians will seemingly never escape.

It is not necessary to say much about the military. They are a curse from God, a symbol of tyranny and corruption, of ignorance and brutality (the same can be said of most of Latin America's military), but they are as spoiled children: in part a product of our past, in part a product of the international game now played out in Latin America; in part a consequence of our own negligence as Bolivians.

As for the Bolivians themselves, selfishness is the word that best characterizes their attitude for the last ten years. The upper and middle classes, having long

ago given up hope for their country, dream of fulfilling their own pleasures. Corruption is the game they play best. Even a professional degree earned today is not worth the paper it is printed on, for it is usually obtained through many and shameful tricks. The military has almost succeeded over two decades in destroying the truly educated and creative class in Bolivia. Distinguished writers, painters, philosophers, cultural figures—these can be counted on the fingers of your hand. It is simple enough to do: just create a climate pervaded by insecurity, aimless torture, and killing.

There are those who work hard and earn their living honestly, people who can look you in the face. But among this minority there is the certain knowledge that they will die poor, frustrated, robbed of the fruits of their labors. It is the children of these families that are the only hope for Bolivia's tomorrow.

Among the very poor—the campesinos, the miners, the Indians—life is such a struggle that one rarely dares plan for tomorrow. No national feelings have replaced tribal ones, and they are unable to perceive a common Bolivian destiny. From time to time they manage—usually at the expense of another group—to make a small gain, but this merely delays their own day of reckoning.

Political participation in Bolivia is such that even civilian regimes willing to prepare general elections had to issue decrees in 1979 and 1980 to ensure a turnout at the polls, threatening loss of the right to cash pay checks, to collect monies, to operate a business, to be employed if one failed to get a voting certificate.

THE "SERIOUS" CANDIDATES

What of the 1980 candidates themselves—the men who, one assumes, were among the few in Bolivia who were well-informed and who recognized the dangers that were lurking? There were five "serious" candidates: the winner, Hernán Siles Zuazo, and losers Victor Paz Estenssoro, General Hugo Banzer Suárez, Marcelo Quiroga Santa Cruz, and Juan Lechin.

Siles Zuazo, nearly eighty and quite ill with arteriosclerosis, among other ailments, believed—as he did twenty-five years ago—that one has first to conquer power and only then to ask what to do with it. A brave man then, a brave man now...but courage is not the virtue Bolivians lack. Fairly well-educated and a lawyer, he served as Bolivia's president in the '50s. He was the "European candidate" in 1980, chosen by several

Left politicians in Europe to advance their ideas.

Siles and *Victor Paz Estenssoro* were the founders in the '30s of the *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario*, the last truly popular political party in Bolivia, and both men helped to make the National Revolution. Paz, now well into his eighties, was the country's first president after the Revolution.

Hugo Banzer Suárez, then colonel, came to power in 1971, later pledging to return the nation to civilian rule. In November, 1977, he reversed himself in the matter of civilian rule for a second time but announced a national election the following July. Quite a number of people, though mainly his friends, profited under Banzer, for unprecedentedly high prices were then being offered for raw materials in the international market. It was during his tenure that Bolivian lands were sold to Brazil and an attempt was made to exchange a portion of two southern provinces with Chile in a deal that was supposed to return to Bolivia an outlet to the Pacific. At the time of the July, 1978, elections—with Siles and Paz together polling a majority—Bolivia's foreign debt was more than \$3 billion, \$690 million of which will have to be repaid by December, 1980. (In the 1980 campaign Banzer made no secret of the fact that his hoped-for election would give the veneer of constitutionality to what would become another dictatorship.)

Siles and Paz were unable to arrange a compromise in '78 that would have allowed Bolivia its first constitutional government in almost two decades, though there were few political or ideological differences between the two old men. Only weeks after the election General *Juan Pereda Asbún*, the third runner and Banzer's hand-picked candidate, was installed as head of state. Several months later Pereda himself was ousted. His successor promised to return the country to civilian rule following an election in July, 1979.

In 1979's election Siles obtained a bare plurality over Paz. Called upon to decide the outcome because of the lack of a majority, the National Congress was unable to choose between the leading candidates and in August designated the senate president to serve as interim executive pending a new presidential election. *Walter Guevara Arze* was ousted on November 1 in a military coup led by Colonel *Alberto Natusch Busch*—who was forced to resign only fifteen days later amidst massive civil disorder, including a paralyzing general strike in the capital. On November 16 the Congress elected the president of the Chamber of Deputies, *Lydia Gueiler Tejada*, to serve for an interim term. President Gueiler announced a new general election for June 29.

There were two other serious candidates in the 1980 election. *Marcelo Quiroga Santa Cruz*—brilliant, young, articulate—knew what he wanted: a socialist Bolivian state. He was a perennial critic of the military during his service in Congress, presenting evidence of their crimes; a man so dangerous he had to be killed as soon as the post-election coup was under way. *Juan Lechin*, general secretary of the *Central Obrera Boliviana* (COB), the most important labor organization and the only organized political alternative to the army in Bolivia, is politically dead in Bolivia today. Another of the old men who made the Revolution, it was Lechin

who called a halt to the national strike that forced *Natusch Busch* to step down, but before complete victory was obtained. Now a rich industrialist in Venezuela, he is respected in Bolivia mainly by the miners and was unable to obtain more than 2 per cent of the vote.

So it was that three old men, their egotism undimmed, helped to precipitate the political polarization that led to the election debacle. Each could have anticipated the later tragedy, for *García Meza*—author of Bolivia's bloody Tuesday—had announced his actions as early as December, 1979, when he staged a "white coup" that forced interim President *Gueiler* to accept all the generals in the same jobs they had held under *Natusch Busch*. He told anyone who cared to listen that he would never accept Siles as president.

During the campaign Siles himself avoided crowds and questions about his platform, though occasionally he managed a few general words on general topics, enlisting on his side those who wanted to stop Banzer from returning to power. Paz was merely absent; journalists who had come to discuss his programs on a TV broadcast were seen interviewing an empty chair. Those who gave their vote to Paz were attempting to stop *Quiroga* and his *Partido Socialista Uno*.

Paz did finally learn that he was no longer an important political leader; he was able to make or destroy Siles or Banzer, but never again would he be president. Tired and disappointed, he announced he was going to "make Siles the president." That was all *García Meza* needed.

THE SILENT CANDIDATES

García Meza was not alone. He was backed by Colonel *Luis Arce Gomez*, an intelligence officer trained by the U.S. military to fight "subversion," today the final authority on who is an "extremist" and who can live in Bolivia without being tortured, forced to act as a spy for Arce or to "disappear."

But what is at stake in Bolivia today? Why should the military be so unwilling to surrender power to constitutionally elected leaders? Power itself is one answer, but there is another: cocaine. It is a \$1 billion a year business, worth \$5 billion to dealers in the United States. Among military drug smugglers *Arce Gomez* is the most important, with his own "company" and airfields in the jungle from which weekly deliveries are made to the U.S. Even such men as *Erwin Gasser*, the Bolivian sugar king, are today only members of *Arce's* gang. *García Meza* and *Arce Gomez* were the silent candidates in the last election, but none of the candidates spoke of the importance of cocaine as a "political" factor. No one warned the Bolivian people that the military would be willing to torture and kill as never before, that there was no old rifle that would offer sufficient resistance once the military launched its new war.

This is my third exile: No wonder it was easy to put all my earthly belongings in a very small bag. So much for forty years of idealism, for an attempt at responsible journalism, for hope of a better fate for Bolivia. But then, as we say in Spanish, *la vida comienza mañana...* [WV]