



Uruguay - February 1973. Elected President Bordaberry leaving Boisso Lanza Base after having signed an agreement with the armed forces.

URUGUAY

Collaborative Agreement with the Uruguayan Presidential Peace Commission

In August 2000, EAAF met with the Uruguayan Presidential Peace Commission, and agreed to a plan for mutual aid investigating disappearances in both countries. Uruguay, like Argentina, suffered a period of state-sponsored terror in the 1970's; significant numbers of Uruguayan citizens escaped repression at home only to suffer further persecution and disappearance while in exile in neighboring Argentina. EAAF will help find information on the fates of these persons. In exchange, the Uruguayan Commission will help locate the remains of "disappeared" Argentine citizens, whose bodies, after having been thrown into the sea from airplanes, washed up on the Uruguayan coast between 1976 and 1980.¹

The Peace Commission was set up earlier in 2000 by newly-elected President Jorge Batlle in response to growing public desire for a historical clarification regarding their "Dirty War." Uruguay's repression began much earlier than Argentina's, in the mid-1960's, when fears of radicalism due to economic distress encouraged greater use of police violence. This work was taken over by the military in the 1970's. Uruguay's process became interlocked with that of its neighbors, in part via Operation Condor, a covert agreement among military governments in the southern cone whereby information and political prisoners were exchanged. Of approximately 180 permanent disappearances of Uruguayans, 142 are currently believed to have occurred in Argentina.²

BACKGROUND

Until the 1960's, Uruguay was one of the most prosperous countries in Latin America, whose parliamentary democracy and civic freedoms earned it the title "the Switzerland of the Southern Cone." In the 1960's, however, the crisis of Import-Substituting Industry and growing class inequalities led to popular and political unrest. Over the course of a decade, (1963-1973) conflicts among the political parties, between the armed Tupamaro Movement and the government, and between the executive branch and the judiciary and legislative branches of the government led to a gradual breakdown of the parliamentary system and a concentration of power in the hands of the President.



San José, Uruguay - 1970s. View of the cell block at Libertad Prison. photo in "Uruguay - Nunca Más: Human Rights Violations, 1972-1985"



Uruguay - 1977. An International delegation met with the ministers of National Defense and Public Health to express concern over the state of health of various political prisoners: Dr. Aeberhard and Dr. Kouchner of Medicine Without Frontiers, Dr. Guerin of the Association for Cardiological information, and Dr. Tomkiewicz of the French Psychiatrists Association.

By the end of the 1960's, the level of violence had risen from the region's lowest to the region's highest. The Tupamaros, who had initially chosen actions intended to embarrass the regime while avoiding casualties, resorted to greater use of force. The police and military detained increasing numbers of people, usually for long periods of time, attempting to dismantle opposition by "plucking them apart one member at a time."³

In comparison with the repressions in neighboring countries, the Uruguayan regime killed a relatively low number of its prisoners. The use of torture, on the other hand, was unprecedented. In 1970, a parliamentary commission denounced as brutal the use of torture by the Montevideo police. Soon after, amidst a general strike, the president transferred responsibility for internal war against the Tupamaros from the police to the military, which quickly arrested thousands of suspected members of that organization.

Parliament itself was dissolved by a military coup in 1973. That year, elected civilian President Bordaberry, who was kept in office by the militaries even after the coup, began to conform to what is now referred to as the Doctrine of National Security, an anticommunist program promoted in part by the United States. With the Tupamaros defeated, this now meant a state of internal war against anyone suspected of being a "subversive," including members of the mainstream political parties, trade unionists, etc. Severe restrictions on freedoms of the press, of speech, and of association converted an ever-larger section of the population into suspects. According to Uruguay-Nunca Mas, an early compilation of testimonies edited by the organization

Servicio Paz y Justicia (SERPAJ), one in five Uruguayans were detained during the repression.

In the early 1970's, many Uruguayan dissidents opted for exile in Chile, just as many Brazilians had taken refuge in Uruguay after Brazil's 1964 coup. Particularly after the 1973 coup in Chile, these Uruguayans and many Chileans fled to relatively liberal Argentina. With the March 1976 coup, Argentina's military regime began its infamous Dirty War; using the language of the often-denied National Security doctrine. The repressive regimes of the Southern Cone countries were linked not only by this shared political vocabulary, but concretely by Operation Condor, a covert agreement that allowed for the arrest and detention of exiled dissidents wherever they might be located.

"Swords International' was the name by which the military operations came to be known, so efficient and audacious did they become...Uruguayan military and police forces reciprocated with those in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and Paraguay, creating a vast territory without frontiers, a veritable game reserve for hunting down anyone these regimes thought objectionable" (Uruguay Nunca Mas, English edition, 1992:262).

Operation Condor is widely believed to have functioned from the early 1970's until 1983, though its precise genealogy is still being uncovered.⁴ It



Zelmar Michelini, Frente Amplio leader assassinated in Buenos Aires on May 22, 1976.

was largely because of this agreement that so many Uruguayans disappeared in Argentina. As Lawrence Weschler writes, "many of the deaths and disappearances ascribed to the Uruguayan military in fact took place in Buenos Aires...If those victims had stayed in Montevideo, they would doubtless have been captured, tortured, and imprisoned, but they might still be alive" (1990:129).

In 1980 the military proposed a new constitution which would have legalized many of the repressive processes already well established in the 70's. Partly because of pressure from the Carter administration in the US, it was actually offered it to voters in a plebiscite. The military was shocked to have 57% of the voting public reject it. In spite of the rejection, however, the military carried much as it had before, thanks in part to an aid package approved by

incoming US President Ronald Reagan.

At around the same time, Servicio Paz y Justicia, an organization founded by Jesuits and linked to similar organizations in the region, began to denounce the regime's abuses. Though SERPAJ was outlawed in the early 80's, it gained the sympathy of a broad section of Uruguayan society. A combination of worldwide recession, corruption within the military, and popular mobilization led to coordination among the old political parties, and national elections in 1984. Gradually the country returned to a civilian rule of law, much as its neighbors did. During the transition, and throughout the 1990's, SERPAJ and other social movements built popular support for official investigation and trials.

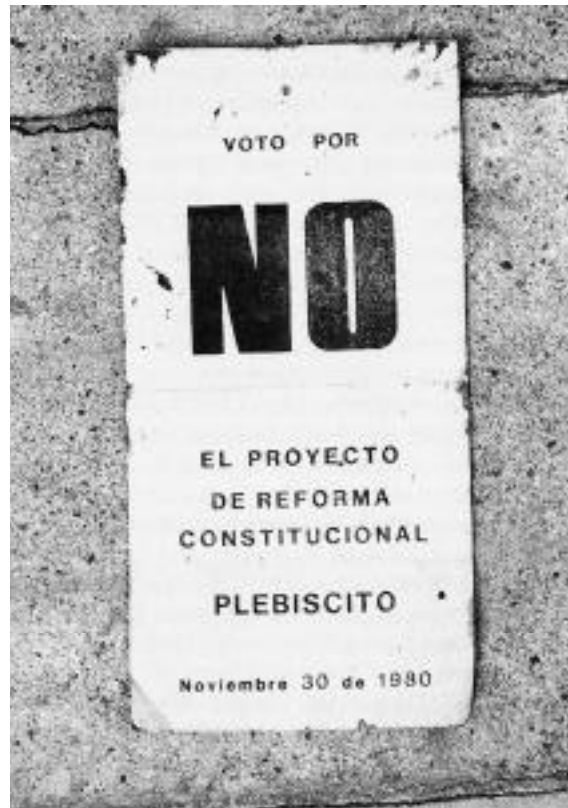
THE PEACE COMMISSION

To the dismay of the families of the disappeared, another plebiscite in 1989 ratified the Ley de Caducidad de la Pretensión Punitiva del Estado, a sort of statute of limitations on the liability of those who ordered or carried out human rights abuses.⁵ Despite the fact that this law directly conflicts with the OAS's American Convention on Human Rights, the Uruguayan Parliament does recognize the fourth article of that Convention, which obligates it to investigate disappearances.

It was not until 2000, with the election of current president, that full executive support was granted for an official investigation. When Dr. Jorge Batlle entered office in March of that year, he finally established the Comisión para la Paz, and appointed Carlos Ramela, a lawyer and activist, as its secretary. Relatives of disappeared persons immediately began to open cases with the Commission.

At Ramela's request, EAAF met with this Commission three times in 2000. On August 9th, we agreed to collaborate with the Commission, and requested information about the Uruguayans thought to have been disappeared in Argentina, and documentation of the bodies found on Uruguayan beaches during Argentina's Dirty War.

At the second meeting, which took place at the Uruguayan embassy in Buenos Aires in September, envoy Jose Ignacio Villar supplied us with part of the requested information: fingerprints of all the Uruguayans believed to have disappeared in Argentina, as well as files on twenty-two bodies discovered on the coasts of Colonia, Montevideo, and Maldonado departments. The latter information was entered into EAAF's database and is currently



Uruguay, 1980. "No" flier from the constitutional plebiscite.

being compared with information on unsolved cases.

The files for eight more cases, from the department of Rocha, were delivered on October 24, when we had our third and final meeting. In three of these cases, there were partial fingerprints. We consider the prospects for reaching identifications in these last cases to be quite good.

At the time of this writing -fall 2001- EAAF has already exhumed the remains of two Uruguayans disappeared in March 1977. Further information on these and other cases will be included in EAAF's 2001 Annual Report. We are also planning a joint meeting with the Uruguayan Commission and several members of the Federal Court of Buenos Aires, which has processed most of the identifications made in Argentina since 1997. The purpose of the meeting will be to lay out streamlined procedures for exchanging more official information in the future.

FOOTNOTES

1. See *The Flight Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior*, by Horacio Verbitsky, or EAAF's 1994-95 Biannual Report.
2. *Uruguay Nunca Mas*, SERPAJ, English version, 1992.
3. See Weschler, Lawrence, *A Miracle, A Universe: Settling Accounts with Torturers* Pantheon Books, 1990.
4. See for example "Into the Murky Depths of 'Operation Condor'" Lucy Komisar, *LA Times* No. 1, 1998.
5. For details and updates, see www.desaparecidos.org/uru/campana.