

The Final Battle of Latin American Revolution. Southern Cone Militants in Peronist Argentina (1973-1976)

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L'auteur

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Abstract

My paper delves into the establishment and development of the Junta de Coordinación Revolucionaria, a coordinating body formed by members of Uruguay's MLNT (Tupamaros National Liberation Movement, or MLN-T), Chile's MIR (Revolutionary Left Movement, or MIR), Bolivia's ELN (Bolivian National Liberation Army, or ELN), and Argentina's ERP (People's Revolutionary Army), whose actions were carried out from 1973 to 1976 in the still-democratic Argentina. It was during this period that these organizations relied more heavily on military action due to the impossibility of political activities caused by the brutal repression of Chilean, Uruguayan, and Bolivian activists in their respective countries. This process occurred under a framework of complete transnationalization of Southern Cone politics, where various actors, ranging from the military to guerrillas, viewed the region as a whole and devised joint actions that transcended national boundaries.

Key words : Junta de Coordinación Revolucionaria ; Chile ; Uruguay ; Bolivia ; Southern Cone Politics.

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The 1971 Banzer coup in Bolivia, the authoritarian reaction of President Bordaberry in 1972 in Uruguay and the subsequent dissolution of parliament in 1973, as well as the military coup in Chile in September 1973 had thwarted the expectations of social change that had emerged in the late sixties and early seventies. The year 1973 came to a close with a situation that was far from the expectations of radical social change promoted through different methods (electoral triumphs in Chile, emerging urban guerrilla groups in several countries, social mobilization, and progressive sectors within the armies in Peru and Bolivia) that had been raised at the beginning of the decade by the left in South America.

For the activists of the armed left, however, the Southern Cone was still a “key zone” where the fate of Latin America’s revolution would finally be decided. In 1975, writing in *Correo de la Resistencia* under the pseudonym “Luis Cerda,” Brazilian sociologist Ruy Mauro Marini (who was at the time head of the Chilean MIR’s foreign committee) argued that while there were countries in Latin America with nationalist reformist projects (Peru, Panama, Venezuela, Mexico) that were a source of concern for the United States, the “key zone” where the future of revolution in Latin America would be disputed was the Southern Cone:

What is clearly plain to see now is that there has been a shift in Latin America’s revolutionary focal point, both in terms of geography and in terms of class and program content. The main factors that are furthering Latin America’s revolutionary process today are therefore not to be found in countries ruled by bourgeois reformism, but precisely in those countries where counter-revolution has succeeded in seizing power (a typical example is Chile) or where it is fighting to take power (Argentina). Counter-revolutionary violence in those countries, as well as in Bolivia and Uruguay, is precisely the bourgeois and imperialist response to revolutionary movements whose development jeopardizes the very survival of their domination. Which is why we can say that it is in those countries where the decisive round in Latin America is being played out (...) Where the revolutionary movement succeeds in stopping [authoritarianism] (as may be the case today with Argentina) and, more so, where the proper means are found to bring down those regimes (as is the case mainly with Chile, but also with Uruguay and Bolivia), there we will have taken a decisive step, a highly meaningful step to pave the way for the downfall of bourgeois and imperialist domination in our continent.¹

In Marini’s view -- which expressed the feeling of the recently created Junta de Coordinación Revolucionaria (J.C.R), a coordinating body formed by members of Uruguay’s MLNT (Tupamaros National Liberation Movement), Chile’s MIR (Revolutionary Left Movement), Bolivia’s ELN (Bolivian National Liberation Army), and Argentina’s ERP (People’s Revolutionary Army) – after 1973 Argentina had become a critical place for the final outcome of the confrontation between revolution and counter-revolution. Argentina was the place where counter-revolutionary forces had not yet firmly established themselves, and the place where, given its geographical location, a strategic site in which revolutionary activists from neighboring countries (Uruguay, Chile, Bolivia, Brazil) could regroup and form a rearguard.

This article examines the experiences of JCR activists from Chile, Bolivia, and Uruguay held in Argentina from 1973 to 1976. This period marked a new moment in the history of these armed organizations. The geopolitical situation turned Argentina

¹ Luis Cerda “Aspectos internacionales de la revolución latinoamericana,” *Correo de la Resistencia*, no. 9, July-August 1975, 60–61.

into a safe place that offered these organizations both a refuge and a rearguard base. During this period, the JCR gained certain institutional autonomy regarding its founding organizations and developed a significant propaganda, logistics, and weapons infrastructure. It was also at this time that it implemented an international policy through which it expanded its contacts towards different regions of the world. Besides, it was during this period that a more articulated coordinated reaction developed by the armies in the region, destroyed these groups as well as other leftist organizations through illegal and inhuman methods.

Argentina as the Rearguard Base of the Continental Revolution

The PRT-ERP—the only non-Peronist armed left-wing organization—had a complicated relationship with the new Peronist democratic government that took office in April 1973.² From May through August 1973, the PRT conducted legal activities and called a truce with the new government. As of September, following its military strike against the Army Health Command, the ERP went back underground and stepped up its armed actions. In a communiqué untitled “The ERP Will Continue Fighting,” published in its newspaper *Estrella Roja*, it justified its return to armed struggle arguing that: “The existing democracy is highly relative and a harsh repression is being prepared to finish it off.”³ Its documents and actions expressed a profound disillusionment with the democratic process that had been opened with the Peronist government.

This military strategy against Perón’s government was launched in January 1974 with an attack on the C-10 Armored Cavalry Regiment in the locality of Azul, Buenos Aires. Three months after Perón had become president with 62% of the votes, the PRT-ERP staged an action involving 80 to 100 guerrillas. Targeting one of the country’s most important military regiments entailed a clear defiance of the president’s authority.⁴ The action failed and 14 guerrillas were captured, three were killed in the crossfire, and two were captured and disappeared. The following day, Perón gave a press conference, dressed for the first time in many years in his military uniform, and expressed his intention to “wipe out terrorism.”⁵

Along with the chorus of conservative voices supporting the measures proposed by Perón to “wipe out” this organization, several sectors of the Peronist and communist left questioned the PRT-ERP’s action, as it gave the executive branch an excuse to speed up its plans to implement a stricter criminal code and involve the armed forces in the political conflict.

The leaders of the PRT-ERP were relatively aware of how isolated this action had left their organization.⁶ In that context, the PRT-ERP turned to its regional allies. It is not by chance that, while contacts had begun in 1972, the first public appearance of the Junta Coordinadora Revolucionaria occurred in 1974 with a press conference held by

² Ver Liliana de Riz, *La política en suspenso, 1966–1976*, Buenos Aires, Paidós, 2000, Chap. III.

³ “El ERP seguirá combatiendo,” *Estrella Roja*, no. 25, November 21, 1973, 6.

⁴ Daniel De Santis, *La historia del PRT-ERP por sus protagonistas*, Buenos Aires, Estación Finlandia, 2010, p. 100 ; María Seoane, *Todo o nada, la historia secreta y pública de Mario Roberto Santucho, el jefe guerrillero de los años setenta*, Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 2003, p. 80.

⁵ Liliana de Riz, *La política en suspenso, 1966–1976*, Buenos Aires, Paidós, 2000, p. 148-149.

⁶ Luis Mattini, *Hombres y mujeres del PRT-ERP: La pasión militante*, La Plata, Ed. de la Campana, 2003, p. 256.

the ERP after the events in Azul, where the joint declaration *A los pueblos de América Latina* was read.⁷

The declaration was a call to implement one of the “leading strategic ideas of Commander Che Guevara” and renew the tradition of “our peoples” who joined together against the “Spanish colonialists.” In this organization’s view the question was how to lead that “awakening of the people”⁸. There were two lines of thinking that “conspired” against revolutionary efforts. “These are an enemy—bourgeois nationalism—and a mistaken notion among those on the side of the people—reformism.”⁹ Against these, the declaration optimistically saw “the armed pole, the revolutionary pole [...] growing stronger and stronger among the masses.”¹⁰

The fact that it was the ERP that first presented this declaration indicates the new stage that the coordination efforts among armed left-wing groups had entered in 1972. The ERP harbored activists of JCR organizations from neighboring countries and provided the necessary material and human resources for them to plan rearguard operations from Argentina into bordering countries. The PRT-ERP was also instrumental in the network’s maintenance, as it was the only organization that was able to increase its capacity for armed actions from 1973 to 1975, through successful kidnappings that brought in significant funds, while in the same period other organizations suffered major defeats.

Tucuman as the “new Vietnam”

The military campaign in Tucumán was perhaps the most ambitious military project undertaken by the Southern Cone guerrilla groups. The campaign was a PRT-ERP initiative that involved the creation of a specialized military group known as the “Compañía de Monte Ramón Rosa Jiménez,” whose goal would be to establish a free zone in the province of Tucumán, extending some 350 km into Bolivian soil. It was actually only able to cover some 30 to 40 km, with about 50 to 100 guerrillas who, dressed in soldiers’ uniforms but with *alparagatas*¹¹ on their feet, sought to turn that stretch of land into a liberated zone.¹² According to the hypothesis underlying the ERP’s strategy, a liberated zone in Tucumán would spark a counterinsurgent reaction that would internationalize the conflict. A public document issued in January 1976 stated that if a guerrilla army were actually to be formed, the area would be invaded by a regional force backed by the United States. The Tucumán campaign did not reach such dimensions and the internationalization was processed elsewhere.¹³

Throughout the campaign there were attempts by both the ERP and the national army to turn the scenario of the conflict into a dramatization of a formal war. While the army sought to exaggerate the characteristics of the guerrilla group to justify its

⁷ Archivo Dirección de Inteligencia de la Provincia de Buenos Aires (DIPBA), La Plata, Argentina. MDS, Legajo 1453, “Hechos de Azul. Recortes periodísticos. Tomo III, 19/1/1974.”

⁸ Junta de Coordinación Revolucionaria, “A los pueblos de América Latina. Declaración Conjunta,” *Estrella Roja*, no. 31, March 4, 1974, 10–14.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Traditional shoes made with jute.

¹² See D. de Santis, *La historia del PRT-ERP...*, p. 473–503, and L. Mattini, *Hombres y Mujeres...*, p. 285–299.

¹³ Archivo de la Lucha Armada David Campora (ADLADC) in Archivo CEIU, FHUCE, Udelar, Montevideo, Uruguay; Carpeta JCR, “Pacto militar contra los pueblos de America Latina,” January 1976, Paris.

growing involvement in political affairs and increase its military presence in the area, the guerrilla tried to give the idea that it was turning into a regular army, in the manner of the Vietnamese or Chinese experience.¹⁴ The ERP implemented a persuasive communicational strategy through its newspaper, focusing particularly on all aspects connected with the supposed formalization of the revolutionary army. The relationship between the Compañía de Monte guerrillas was meant to reproduce the ranks, aesthetics, and rituals of a regular army. This was conveyed and amplified by *Estrella Roja*, which reported on the awarding of medals, promotions in rank, and daily rituals. For instance the ERP's anthem was sung and the guerrillas marched dressed in their military gear bearing ERP badges. All of this information played up the features of the ERP, giving an exaggerated idea of the military dimensions that this guerrilla group was achieving.¹⁵

It was in this context that the other member organizations of the JCR began to think of how they could use to their advantage the situation of the Argentine guerrilla group. They saw in the supposed military development of the ERP a significant support they could draw on to plan actions aimed at their respective countries from Argentina.

In its internal bulletins, the PRT-ERP featured accounts of Latin American activists who were participating in Argentine experiences. A piece featured in *Internal Bulletin* No. 42, for example, under the heading "Letter from a Latin America Revolutionary," a member of a "sister organization" described his experience in the PRT's school of leaders and in ERP actions, and expressed his admiration for the organization's development. He admitted that in the beginning of the decade "the vanguard of the war was with the MLN-Tupamaros, but we believed that couldn't last for long. Because the MLN was not a Marxist-Leninist party and it was formed by all sorts of ideologies, both revolutionary and pseudo-revolutionary."¹⁶ Even at that stage there were already indications that the PRT-ERP "would one day occupy the position that the MLN-T had then, if that fellow movement did not embrace Marxism-Leninism." The author of the letter then went on to convey his experience in the "school of leaders," showing his admiration for the "high level of political and ideological development and how concerned everyone was with furthering their Marxism-Leninism education."¹⁷ In his activity in the ERP he had been able to "confirm that much progress had been achieved in terms of political and ideological development since 1971." He also perceived "the great spirit of sacrifice" and "high fighting morale" of ERP combatants.¹⁸

Chileans and Uruguayans Preparing the Revolutionary Return

¹⁴ See Santiago Garaño, "El monte tucumano como 'teatro de operaciones': las puestas en escena del poder durante el Operativo Independencia (Tucumán, 1975–1977)," *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos*, Cuestiones del tiempo presente, 2011 [online], published online on September 29, 2011, <http://nuevomundo.revues.org/62119>.

¹⁵ See, for example, "Condecoraciones," *Estrella Roja* no. 40, 20, "Grados y reglamentos en el ERP," *Estrella Roja*, no. 42, 20, and "Numero especial: La verdad sobre Tucumán," *Estrella Roja*, no. 63, November 2, 1975.

¹⁶ "Carta de un revolucionario latinoamericano," Boletín interno, no. 42, April 27, 1973.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Chilean and Uruguayan activists are known to have participated in the Tucumán “Compañía de Monte.” The participation of activists from other countries occurred in the framework of the strategic projects of each of the groups that were part of the JCR.

The MIR had promoted the creation of the JCR to ensure a strategic rearguard in the event of a coup d'État in Chile.¹⁹ However, after the coup these plans were limited when the leadership decided to stay in Chile and propose the “No Asylum!” policy in an attempt to give a different image (from that of most) of the left, whose activists started going into exile. While some MIR activists made it to Buenos Aires, fleeing from repression, they were not reincorporated into the organization as they were considered to have questioned the *No Asylum!* decision.

The first MIR leader to leave Chile was Edgardo Enríquez, brother of the movement's general secretary Miguel Enríquez. The reasons for his departure were both political and personal.²⁰ In March 1974 he traveled to Buenos Aires from where he left for Paris to establish a number of contacts with European and Latin American left-wing organizations.²¹ Besides Enríquez' movements and the statements of support to the JCR, the MIR had not defined how the rearguard would operate in Argentina. Throughout 1974, even as Chile's National Intelligence Agency (DINA) captured most of its members, the MIR maintained its decision not to send activists abroad because they continued to regard exile as a renouncement of the struggle against the dictatorship.

The MIR's failure to appeal to the JCR for support led PRT-ERP leader Domingo Menna, head of foreign affairs, to travel to Chile in July 1974 to meet with the MIR's political committee. Menna met with the committee for several days. The discussion between the MIR and the ERP revolved around the lack of a clear coordination with the JCR in the activities the MIR delegates conducted outside Chile, a biased view on the part of the PRT-ERP regarding the low levels of proletarianization in the MIR, and the delay in the initiation of armed propaganda actions in Chile.²² This last issue later prompted an epistolary discussion between Miguel Enríquez and Mario R. Santucho. While the PRT-ERP questioned the MIR's delay in launching armed propaganda actions, the MIR activists were not sure of the military development claimed by the PRT-ERP.²³ The PRT-ERP's response is not fully known, although in *Internal Bulletin* No. 65 of August 1974 it reaffirms its political position.²⁴ In later visits by MIR activists to Argentina the differences were gradually overcome as it became clear that the MIR had the firm intention of carrying out armed propaganda actions, and the two organizations began to conduct joint efforts in Europe.²⁵

¹⁹ For a historical overview of the MIR's actions during the Chilean dictatorship, see: Julio Pinto Vallejo “¿Y la historia les dio la razón? El MIR en dictadura, 1973–1981,” in Verónica Valdivia, Rolando Álvarez; Julio Pinto, *Su revolución contra nuestra revolución. Izquierdas y derechas en el Chile de Pinochet (1973–1981)*, Santiago, LOM, 2006; and Carlos Sandoval Ambiado, *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria. Coyunturas y vivencias (1973–1980)*, Concepción, Chile, Escaparate Ediciones, 2011.

²⁰ See account by Carmen Castillo, *Un día de octubre en Santiago*, Mexico, ERA, 1982, p. 117.

²¹ *Correo de la Resistencia*, no. 3–4, September–October 1974, p. 31–32.

²² Luis Mattini, *Los perros. Memorias de un combatiente revolucionario*, Buenos Aires, Continente-Pax, 2006, p. 116–125.

²³ Comisión Política (MIR), “La táctica del MIR en el actual período” (December 1973), in Miguel Enríquez, *Con vista a la esperanza*, Concepción, Chile, Escaparate Ediciones, 1998, p. 314.

²⁴ *Boletín interno*, no. 65, August 1974. Mattini reconstructs some aspects of this discussion in *Hombres y mujeres...*, p. 300–307.

²⁵ To review some aspects of these later talks between the two organizations, see Mattini, op. cit., p. 378, and John Dinges, *The Condor Years*, New York, The New Press, 2004, p. 84.

The assassination of MIR general secretary Miguel Enríquez on October 5, 1974 evidenced just how far the dictatorship's repressive actions were advancing on the organization's leadership. Many of its top leaders had either been captured or disappeared. By mid 1975, around 90 % of the original members of the central committee had fallen.²⁶ A year after Miguel Enríquez was killed, the other two top leaders of the MIR—Andrés Pascal Allende and Nelson Gutiérrez—sought refuge in the Costa Rican Embassy and the Apostolic Nunciature, respectively. These leaders' request for asylum evidenced the end of the *No Asylum!* strategy.²⁷

According to journalist Nancy Guzmán, Miguel Enríquez's death led his brother Edgardo to return to Buenos Aires and take a more proactive attitude regarding the JCR. The catastrophic situation within the MIR meant that support from Argentina was critical. Before reaching Argentina, Edgardo made a stop in Cuba where he organized a MIR training school. In May 1975, Enríquez left Cuba for Buenos Aires with the aim of preparing a return operation with a group of MIR activists.²⁸ A few activists were selected to participate in JCR activities in Argentina. Most of them had been in Cuba and traveled to Buenos Aires in early 1976 to receive specific training within the structure of the PRT-ERP.²⁹

However, the plans that were being developed in Argentina in the years 1975 and 1976 did not prosper. In addition to the difficulties they had in establishing contact with activists who were in Chile, these Chilean activists were watched in Argentina by several state and parastatal intelligence organizations, both Chilean and Argentine.

The Tupamaros had also left Chile for Buenos Aires, even before the coup. The democratic government in Argentina coupled with the worsening situation in Chile had led a significant number of Uruguayan activists to leave Chile, with some going to Cuba to prepare their return to Uruguay, and others to Buenos Aires, to plan logistic aspects of possible incursions into Uruguay.

In 1973, the MLN-T had been unable to overcome the internal crisis it had suffered after its defeat in 1972. In early 1973, several activists had organized the Viña del Mar Symposium, where, in line with the intellectual and political climate that prevailed in Chile at the time, they had explained their defeat as a result of "petit bourgeois deviations" and "ideological weakness," and they had proposed the creation of a "Marxist-Leninist party" as a solution to those problems. The adoption of a new language and a new ideological paradigm generated a superficial consensus in the context of the crisis and put them in line with their regional (the MIR and the PRT-ERP) and continental (Cuban Communist Party) allies, which had also adopted these definitions.³⁰ However, this language and ideological definition meant different things to different sectors of the MLN-T.

²⁶ "Debimos detener las acciones armadas antes," interview with Hernán Aguiló in *La Nación*, February 4, 2007, <http://www.lanacion.cl/noticias/site/artic/20070203/pags/20070203235146.html>

²⁷ These leaders' decision to abandon the call for *No Asylum!* sparked a heated internal discussion in the MIR. See C. Sandoval, *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria. Coyunturas y vivencias...*, p. 337–380.

²⁸ Nancy Guzmán, "Edgardo Enríquez fue asesinado en Buenos Aires," *La Nación*, December 20, 2009, <http://www.lanacion.cl/edgardo-enriquez-fue-asesinado-en-buenos-aires/noticias/2009-12-19/220604.html>.

²⁹ In the year 1975, Domingo Villalobos (known as "Sargento Dago") and Svaente Graende, two MIR activists who were participating in the Compañía de Monte in Tucumán, are murdered.

³⁰ Simposio de Viña del Mar (Montevideo: MLNT), Archivo ADLADC, Montevideo, Uruguay; Clara Aldrighi. *Memorias de insurgencia : historias de vida y militancia en el MLN-Tupamaros 1965-1975*, Montevideo, Uruguay, Ediciones de la Banda Oriental, 2009, 245–456.

The Tupamaros in Chile, Cuba and Argentina devised a military plan to return to Uruguay. A military committee would be in charge of training some 60 activists in Cuba, in order to obtain weapons and personal documents in Uruguay, and to prepare the infrastructure in Buenos Aires and the Argentine and Uruguayan coasts.³¹ The coup in Uruguay altered that plan. After the coup, the MLN-T could not set up a solid and a stable base of activists on Uruguayan soil. In fact, every group of activists which returned to Uruguay was immediately detected by the dictatorship.

In that context, the MLN-T leadership began to have increasing doubts such as the feasibility of organizing an armed resistance within the country. The differences that had been emerging since 1972 were aggravated in 1974, finally leading the organization to split at the end of the year. Most leaders concluded that given the defeats of 1973 and 1974, there was no choice but to suspend all plans for an armed comeback and decided, instead of focusing on a political strategy of denunciation of the dictatorship, to strengthen alliances with Uruguayan politicians who had been exiled in Buenos Aires after the coup.³²

Several activists who were in Argentina reacted to this decision by insisting on the continuation of armed actions in Uruguay. A small group of labor activists who had recently arrived from Montevideo, together with Andrés Cultelli, an old activist who was in charge of the school of leaders, formed the organization Tendencia Proletaria (Proletarian Tendency), focused on political work in factories, in line with the PRT's political agenda in Argentina's trade union movement, as a jumping board to generate a military strategy for the masses.³³ That was the line that prevailed in the central committee meeting held in October 1974 in Argentina. A new leadership was established there, whose aim would be to build a "proletarian, clandestine, and armed" Marxist-Leninist party.³⁴

This internal conflict was marked by accusations that confused personal matters and political issues and which went as far as death threats. Each side accused the other of being responsible for the disappearance of the one million dollars that the PRT-ERP had entrusted them with delivering to the MIR. Rank-and-file members also questioned the "bourgeoisified" lifestyle of the leaders, who justified it as a way of distracting repressive forces.³⁵

Proletarianization was a key concept to understand many of the transformations that the Tupamaros underwent in Argentina.³⁶ The PRT-ERP had a major influence throughout this process. While the definitions regarding proletarianization were

³¹ Archivo ADLADC, Montevideo, Uruguay, "Breve síntesis histórica de la organización" (1976); Archivo ADLADC, Montevideo, Uruguay, Astrid Arrarás, "Armed Struggle, Political Learning and Participation in Democracy: The Case of the Tupamaros" (Dissertation Thesis, Princeton, 1998).

³² See Archivo ADLADC, Montevideo, Uruguay, Carta de renuncia, "Las razones de nuestra ruptura,"; "Entrevista a Luis Alemany," in C. Aldrighi, *Memorias de insurgencia...*, p. 317–343. Jimena Alonso and Magdalena Figueredo, "El caso de los 'renunciantes'," *Cuadernos de la historia reciente*. no. 6, 2010.

³³ See Archivo ADLADC, Montevideo, Uruguay, "Desgrabación de Gabriel hoja 9," in *Descasetamiento*. For a view of the internal conflict from this fraction's perspective, see Andrés Cultelli, *La revolución necesaria*, Montevideo, Colihue, 2006.

³⁴ Archivo ADLADC, Montevideo, Uruguay, "Tupamaros. Documentos y comunicados. 1974–1975,"

³⁵ See Archivo ADLADC, Montevideo, Uruguay, "Desgrabación de Gabriel hoja 9," in *Descasetamiento*. For a view of the internal conflict from this fraction's perspective, see Andrés Cultelli, *La revolución necesaria...*

³⁶ For a discussion on the issue of proletarianization, see Archivo ADLADC, Montevideo, Uruguay, "Debate en el Comité Central," *Descasetamiento*; MLN-Tupamaros, "MLN (Tupamaros): Balance, situación actual y perspectivas," *Che Guevara, Revista de la Junta de Coordinación Revolucionaria*. no. 2, February 1975.

connected with the 1972 experience in Chile, coming into closer contact with the PRT-ERP heightened that perspective.³⁷

In addition to this intellectual influence, the PRT-ERP also intervened in the internal conflicts of the Tupamaros. The member of the PRT-ERP's political committee mentioned above, Domingo Menna, participated in the MLN-T's central committee meeting in the framework of the reciprocity that had been decided by the JCR leaders. These interventions reveal a clear influence on the decisions that the weakened Tupamaros were adopting in Argentina, setting forth the strongest arguments for the "peludos"³⁸ to take over the leadership and for the Tupamaros to return to Uruguay.³⁹ Menna's assessment of the situation of the Southern Cone was very far removed from the reality that several activists from these organizations were suffering in neighboring countries: "We are moving towards a new Vietnam and the four organizations [of the JCR] have the responsibility of turning this new hope in Latin America into a real and concrete possibility."⁴⁰

"Domingo"—one of the leaders who left the MLN-T after the central committee meeting and who disagreed with Menna's positions there—recalls that while there were differences of opinion, discussions were conducted in an atmosphere of the utmost respect and a certain admiration for the role that the PRT-ERP was playing at that moment in the context of the Southern Cone.⁴¹

Another group that was influenced by the PRT-ERP was the Bolivian ELN (ELN-B). In this case the influence was much stronger. In 1975 the organization changed its name to "Bolivian PRT." Most members of the Bolivian ELN fled to Argentina from Chile after the September 11th coup. This organization had been severely hit. Despite the prestige it had earned as the guerrilla group founded by Guevara, its strategic plans had proven ineffective and had revealed its inability to remain in Bolivia for any substantial period of time. Its two attempts at establishing an armed *foco* had failed and its incursions into urban areas after the Banzer coup had not lasted more than a year.⁴²

The members of the ELN were not the only Bolivians who were flocking to Buenos Aires. A large part of Bolivia's leftist activists were there too, attempting to coordinate actions against the Banzer dictatorship. After the first attempt at forging an alliance of left-wing groups was frustrated in Chile, former president General Torres tried again to form a left front in Argentina. He formed the Alianza de la Izquierda Nacional (National Left Alliance, or ALIN) with the aim of preparing his return to Bolivia.⁴³

Major Ruben Sánchez was one of Torres' closest allies in their Chilean and Argentine exile. This military officer—who had been captured by Guevara and would later join the revolutionary cause during Torres' popular government—formed a small armed group in Chile, made up mostly of former members of the military (FAR). After forming this group he came into contact with the armed organizations of the

³⁷ See the influential PRT-ERP document by Luis Ortolani, "Moral y proletarización," *Políticas de la memoria*, no. 4, Summer 2004–2005, p. 96.

³⁸ The sugarcane workers of Bella Union were known as peludos (or hairy ones).

³⁹ Archivo ADLADC, Montevideo, Uruguay, "Menna cassette 18," *Descasetamiento*.

⁴⁰ Archivo ADLADC, Montevideo, Uruguay, "Cassette N. 6, hoja 6," *Descasetamiento*.

⁴¹ See "Entrevista a Domingo," in Clara Aldrighi, *Memorias de insurgencia...*

⁴² Gustavo Rodríguez Ostría, *Sin tiempo para las palabras, Teoponte, La otra guerrilla guevarista en Bolivia*, Cochabamba, Grupo Editorial Kipus, 2006.

⁴³ Martín Sivak, *El asesinato de Juan José Torres: Banzer y el Mercosur de la muerte*, Buenos Aires, Ediciones Colihue, 1997, p. 81.

Southern Cone, particularly with the PRT-ERP, which led him to join the JCR, and as of 1973 with the ELNB, in particular.⁴⁴

After the coup in Chile, the ELNB moved most of its military and logistic apparatus and maintained some safe houses in Argentina. There, several of its activists participated in PRT-ERP activities. To a great extent, the ideological priorities of the PRT also permeated the ELN-B's agenda of ideological discussions, sparking some internal conflicts. Issues such as proletarianization and the construction of a Marxist-Leninist party that had already been discussed in Chile were brought up again by ELNB members who were in Argentina. Much criticism was directed towards historical leader Chato Peredo, because of his militarist deviations. His main opponent was Sánchez, who had the support of the PRT-ERP.⁴⁵

They were even viewed by Argentine intelligence as a sign of the interference of the Argentine PRT in the Bolivian organization.⁴⁶ The tasks set out were also similar to those planned by the MLN-T: "Proletarianize our organization, systematically study Marxist-Leninist theory—the party's ideological line— and improve practical activities based on the concrete practice of criticism and self-criticism."⁴⁷ As with the MLN-T and the PRT-ERP, adopting an ideological definition was seen as an almost magical solution to the political analysis problems they had experienced in the past.

While Torres was sending messages announcing his return and operating politically through the ALIN, the Bolivian PRT (PRT-B) was trying to initiate armed actions in southern Bolivia. Sánchez returned to Bolivia after the PRT-B congress set up a network that would try to re-launch actions.⁴⁸ The PRT-B's plans were linked to the plans of the ERP's Compañía de Monte in Tucumán and backed by the JCR. Two key participants in this operation were Luis Stamponi, an Argentine activist who had joined the ELN-B in the late 1960s, and the Uruguayan Enrique Lucas, a former MLN-T member who had joined the ELN-B during his stay in Argentina in the framework of JCR activities.⁴⁹ These plans did not withstand the 1976 coup in Argentina, with the ensuing assassination of Torres in Argentina, and the disappearance of Stamponi and Lucas in Bolivia during joint operations staged by the dictatorships of the Southern Cone.

The documentation found in the files of the Intelligence Bureau of the Province of Buenos Aires (DIPBA) shows that simultaneously with the activities that were being conducted by each organization in Buenos Aires, the JCR was concerned with developing joint propaganda mechanisms and logistic activities to support the organizations' armed actions in their countries. Among the activities projected were

⁴⁴ For the relationship between Torres and Sánchez, see Jorge Gallardo Lozada, *De Torres a Banzer: diez meses de emergencia en Bolivia*, Buenos Aires, Ediciones Periferia, 1972; and for Sánchez' relationship with the PRT-ERP, see Enrique Gorriarán Merlo, *Memorias de Enrique Gorriarán Merlo: de los sesenta a La Tablada*. Argentina, Planeta, 2003, p. 235–237, and Martin Sivak, *El asesinato de Juan José Torres: Banzer y el Mercosur de la muerte*, Buenos Aires, Ediciones del Pensamiento Nacional, 1998, p. 83.

⁴⁵ See Osvaldo Peredo, *Volvimos a las montañas*, Santa Cruz, Bolivia, Osvaldo Peredo Leigue Edición, 2003.

⁴⁶ "Parte información procedente de SIDE, *Asunto: Ingerencia del Partido Revolucionario de los trabajadores (PRT) de Argentina en la promoción del similar boliviano*," MDS, Legajo 3393, Archivo DIPBA, La Plata, Argentina.

⁴⁷ ELN Bolivia, "Nace el PRT de Bolivia" (April 6, 1975), Archivo ADLADC, Montevideo, Uruguay.

⁴⁸ There are different interpretations of this moment. See: G. Rodríguez Ostría, *Sin tiempo para las palabras*, p. 569–599; J. Dinges, *The Condor Years*, p. 150–155.

⁴⁹ Dinges, 150–155.

the production of films, the establishment of a news agency, and the publication of a political theory magazine, *Che Guevara*.⁵⁰

The logo of the organization, featured on the back cover of the magazine, condensed the meanings that the coordinating body sought to build.⁵¹ It shows the silhouette of a man holding a rifle high above his head, over a map of Latin America. Behind the shape of the continent there is a five points star that serves as background of the badge, and it is surrounded by a circle with the name of the JCR and its member organizations. The overlapping of these different images (the man, the continent, the star) symbolizes how the identity of these groups had been shaped. In the center was a man with his rifle, thus highlighting the core element that had brought these organizations together: armed struggle. The continent was the territory on which their actions unfolded, and the star, already used by some of the member organizations (the ERP, the MLN-T), conveyed a number of meanings associated with the international communist movement and with Latin American unity.

It is still hard to determine the degree of development that the JCR attained in terms of infrastructure in Argentina because many of the activists involved in such tasks were kidnapped and disappeared and because of the compartmentalization of information that characterized these actions, which meant that logistic information had to be kept secret. One of the few surviving leaders of the JCR, the Tupamaro Efraín Martínez Platero, recalls that the members in charge of logistics had used JCR funds to enter into agreements with land transportation companies that were critical for distributing various supplies across borders.

Many DIPBA documents from early 1975 describe several raids of JCR houses where important conspiratorial activities were conducted. A report untitled *Procedure and Detentions of Tupamaro Elements* documents 13 house raids involving sites linked to JCR activities and the arrest of foreign activists, linking the tools and materials seized in those raids to two activities that were dubbed “Plan Conejo” and “Plan 500” by the Buenos Aires police.⁵²

The aim of “Plan Conejo” was to provide forged identity documents (IDs, passports, driver’s licenses, police and military service cards, etc.) for the members of all the JCR organizations. The forged documents found were Argentine, but also from bordering countries, the U.S. and Canada, and Europe. Two houses were set up for forgery activities. Various materials used for such purposes were found in both houses, including a “very expensive modern photographic enlarger.”⁵³

“Plan 500” involved the making of 500 homemade machine guns. This project had been initiated in Chile, where the industrial units had begun experimenting with homemade weapon production, and it continued in Argentina. A month before these workshops were discovered in the raids, the ERP reported in its paper *Estrella Roja*

⁵⁰ See Archivo ADLADC, Montevideo, Uruguay, “Relaciones (1974),” The three numbers are available in Archivo ADLADC, Montevideo, Uruguay.

⁵¹ Image taken from *Che Guevara, Revista de la Junta de Coordinación Revolucionaria*, n. 2, February, 1975.

⁵² See Archivo DIPBA, La Plata, Argentina, MDS Legajo 15174, and MDS Legajo 3010,. Also, “Memorandum I-09/975, Junta de Comandantes en Jefe, Servicio de Información de Defensa, Departamento III-Planes-Operaciones-Enlace,” in *Movimiento de Liberación Nacional-Tupamaros (MLNT-T), Índice cronológico de documentos, Actualización histórica sobre detenidos desaparecidos*, Uruguay, Presidencia de la República, 2011, (pdf) p. 80–84,

<http://www.presidencia.gub.uy/wps/wcm/connect/presidencia/portalpresidencia/comunicacion/informes/investigacion-historica-sobre-detenidos-desaparecidos>.

⁵³ *Ibidem*. DIPBA, Legajo 15174, 3010.

that a machine gun that could shoot more than 500 rounds had been designed. This machine gun was the result of two previous attempts by a Bolivian ELN activist and by an ERP activist. *Estrella Roja* featured an image of the JCR 1 machine gun, as it was called, and presented it as a weapon that could be made at a non-industrial workshop. The journal further informed that there were also efforts underway to mass produce the different parts of the machine gun. The raids were most likely connected with the announcement of the weapon's development in this publication. The tasks involved in "Plan 500" were conducted in three sites. Two fully-equipped shops and a covered firing range. A fourth site was used to assemble FM devices to intercept police taps.

The raids found weapons, explosives, weapon production shops, houses used for document forgery, and people's prisons. These raids, which were conducted by Argentine police forces, reveal that in early 1975 the coordination efforts between the member organizations of the JCR were reaching a significant level of development in terms of infrastructure.⁵⁴ During the raid operations, two Uruguayans were gunned down, and 26 Uruguayan, three Argentine, and two Chilean activists were captured.

The Geographies of Repression

While the raids revealed the coordination capacity of these organizations, they also exposed the increasing difficulties that the JCR was beginning to face in Argentina as repression was stepped up and the intelligence services of the Southern Cone enhanced their own coordination. In 1974 Perón started to suggest that the armed forces should be involved in the "fight against subversion." Although some sectors of the military were initially against this involvement, the ERP attacks appear to have persuaded them.⁵⁵ According to historian Marina Franco, in the months of August, September, and November the army participated in different repressive actions in the provinces of Catamarca and Tucumán.⁵⁶ During this period the government also passed the State Security Act, which expanded the concept of subversion and provided legal mechanisms to widen the scope of political persecution. It was no longer just members of clandestine organizations who were targeted, but also members of any social, political, and cultural organizations that were critical of the status quo. Lastly, in early 1975, the army launched an attack on the ERP's military campaign in Tucumán, through what was known as "Operation Independence", which consolidated the army's involvement and leading role in the fight against subversion.

In addition to the growing repression and state control, exiles had to face the enhanced coordination among the region's armies, police forces, and intelligence services. Although most of the literature on Operation Condor points to a meeting organized in November 1975 by DINA chief Manuel Contreras as the beginning of the

⁵⁴ A Uruguayan intelligence document that describes the objects found in these raids lists 56 FAL rifles, 48 sub-machine guns, 50 rifles, 120 pistols and revolvers, 150 hand grenades, one ton of gelignite and assorted ammunition, two trucks, four cars, one motorboat, and four workshops (carpentry, construction, weaponry, documents). See "MLNT Documento 9," *Anexos, Actualización histórica sobre detenidos desaparecidos*, p. 6.

<http://www.presidencia.gub.uy/wps/wcm/connect/presidencia/portalpresidencia/comunicacion/informes/investigacion-historica-sobre-detenidos-desaparecidos>

⁵⁵ Rosendo Fraga, *Ejército: del escarnio al poder (1973-1976)*, Buenos Aires, Planeta, 1988, p. 276.

⁵⁶ Marina Franco, *Un enemigo para la nación: orden interno, violencia y "subversión", 1973-1976*, Buenos Aires, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2012.

regional coordination between the military intelligence services of the region, there is evidence of earlier cooperation efforts that are relevant for this study. Patrice McSherry cites a declassified CIA document that reveals that in February 1974 Perón had begun to promote coordinated actions between the intelligence services of the region with the aim of persecuting members of the armed left-wing organizations of the Southern Cone.⁵⁷ This context explains a number of actions perpetrated against Uruguayan and Chilean activists in Argentina in the years 1974 and 1975 before Operation Condor was fully crystallized. As the March 1975 raids were being conducted, Jorge Isaac Fuentes—a member of the Chilean MIR—and Amílcar Santucho—brother of the ERP leader, Mario Roberto Santucho— were captured in Paraguay, when they were carrying out a JCR mission dedicated to expand the organization’s political contacts in Peru and Venezuela. The trip had attracted the attention of Paraguayan intelligence and in May 1975 it informed the Argentine and Chilean intelligence services of the presence of these activists on Paraguayan soil.⁵⁸ According to John Dinges, the information seized in Paraguay catalyzed the need to enhance mechanisms for coordinated action between the military intelligence services of the region.⁵⁹ This led Lt. Col. Manuel Contreras, head of the Chilean National Intelligence Bureau (DINA), who was in close contact with the CIA, to convene a working meeting of the region’s military intelligence services. The invitation to the meeting was accompanied by a document which provides a general diagnosis of the continentalization of the political conflict, that had similar points with the assessments made by the left. Just as the left denounced the hand of the United States in the continentalization of the political repression furthered by the OAS and similar bodies, Contreras’ document described a similar, but inverted, version of continentalization.

Subversion “recognizes no Borders or Countries, and infiltration permeates all areas of National life.

Subversion has developed Intercontinental, Continental, Regional, and Subregional Commands, centralized to coordinate dissociative actions. For instance, we can mention the Tricontinental Conference in Havana, the Junta Coordinadora Revolucionaria para el Sur, etc., all of which are eased by all sorts of Solidarity committees (...)

By contrast, the countries that are being Politically and Economically and Militarily attacked (from within and from outside their borders) are combating on their own or at most with bilateral agreements or simple “gentlemen’s agreements.”

Thus, we have come to the conclusion that to face this Psycho-Political War what we need on an international level is not a domestically-centralized Command but an efficient Coordination that will enable a timely exchange of information and

⁵⁷ Patrice McSherry, *Los estados depredadores: la operación Cóndor y la guerra encubierta en América Latina* (Uruguay: Ediciones de la Banda Oriental, 2009), 121.

⁵⁸ Most of the relevant information on these kidnappings are located in the “Archivos del Terror.” Centro de Documentación y Archivo para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (CDYA), Asunción, Paraguay. <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/CDyA/index.htm>. For a compilation of these documents, see Alfredo Boccia Paz, Myriam Angélica González, and Rosa Palau Aguilar, *Es mi informe. Los archivos secretos de la policía de Stroessner*, Asunción, CDE, 1994. And for a reconstruction of the operation, see J. Dinges, *The Condor Years...*,

⁵⁹ J. Dinges, *The Condor Years*, p. 82–126.

experiences, in addition to a certain degree of personal knowledge among the Heads of Security.⁶⁰

In contrast to the “battle cry against imperialism” proposed by Guevara and taken up again by the JCR, Contreras’ war was against international subversion and it was a psycho-political war. The conflict was not limited to armed groups that challenged state power, but extended to the whole left, regardless of its forms of expression. Although some authors have stressed the role of the JCR as the trigger for the development of Operation Condor, this document would appear to disprove that assertion, as the JCR is only mentioned as one example of the various international activities conducted by left-wing groups. The range of political affiliations of the victims of Operation Condor also seems to refute that assertion. Beyond that the coordination between the region’s intelligence services had been extremely effective in its actions against the JCR. In that context, the JCR entered a period of more intense work abroad (Europe, Africa, and Latin America) and cut down its activities in Argentina.⁶¹

On March 24, 1976, the coup canceled once and for all any possibilities of action for the JCR in Argentina. The margin of action of the organizations was further limited as there were no more places where they could take refuge and the coordination of repression in the region meant that security forces could act freely. The repression against the left groups and the anti-dictatorial forces that were still in Buenos Aires was intensified, targeting leaders of a range of anti-authoritarian movements, such as the former president of Bolivia, General José Torres, the Uruguayans legislators, Senator Zelmar Michelini and Congressman Héctor Gutiérrez Ruiz, and the Tupamaros William Withelaw and Rosario Barredo, who were murdered only days after the coup. The persecution of activists of the member organizations of the JCR was also stepped up.

A SIDE document noted that the coup in Argentina had altered “the balance of geopolitical power between subversive and counter-subversive forces.” The document examined the “escalation in the concentration of efforts and the generation of right-wing reactions that led to the displacement of pseudo-leftist or leftist governments or governments that were too weak to decisively deal with the actions of armed underground groups (AUG) that were already operating in their respective countries.” The last stage in that process had been closed with the seizing of power in Argentina, but now the conflict was expanding into other regions of the world where “subversive forces” would continue their political struggle, as the margin for action within Argentine borders was very limited.⁶² Revolution and counterrevolution now would travel to other areas of the world.

⁶⁰ “Primera reunión de inteligencia nacional,” in *Operación Condor en el Archivo del Terror*, on the website of the National Security Archive, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB239b/index.htm>

⁶¹ Comité Central Ampliado, “Vietnam Liberado,” *El Combatiente*, no. 175, July 30, 1975, 4.

⁶² Archivo DIPBA, La Plata, Argentina. MDS, Legajo 22851, SIDE, “Parte de inteligencia n. 06/76. Asunto: Modificación del equilibrio de fuerzas subversivas contrasubversivas en el plano geopolítico”.