

THE REVOLUTIONS OF 1944

A. "The Thirst for Civic Dignity" and Popular Revolt

1. The Fall of Ubico

The revolution which brought the Liberal Party to power in Guatemala in 1870 did not bring any degree of democracy to the people of Guatemala. Under the regime of President Rufino Barrios, in the 1870's, separation between the Church and State was effected. This advent, however, marked the end of the dominant influence of the old conservative party, largely run by clerical and aristocratic elements, and marked the beginning of the efficient military dictatorships. The traditional ruling class of large landowners and the powerful new coffee finqueros wanted a strong man in the presidency who could preserve peace and assure them of a large and steady supply of cheap labor.

The period between 1870 and 1944 was marked by strong-fisted dictatorships interspersed with relatively short periods of governmental chaos resulting from the struggle for power among groups of military men and politicians. Politics was the source of income for almost all educated Guatemalans who left the fincas; there was little place for professionals or intellectuals in the national life. When revolutions occurred, their effects were felt chiefly by this relatively small group; they did not mean real social or economic improvements for the mass of the people. The lack of articulate public opinion and the weakness of the middle class gave full reign to the politicians. Manuel Estrada Cabrera ruled Guatemala with dictatorial efficiency for the long period from 1898 to 1920. General Jorge Ubico became president in 1931 and improved the techniques of an efficient military dictatorship.

In 1936 and again in 1942, General Ubico arranged that he be prevailed upon to accept another term of office. Ubico was responsible for the killing and imprisonment of unnumbered students, workers, and other citizens whom he accused of plotting rebellion against his regime. Thousands of Guatemalans lived in exile. At one time he proudly announced: "I am like Hitler; I execute first and hold trial afterwards".¹ Few Guatemalans felt free from observation by Ubico's efficient secret service. Two months before the sudden end to his regime Ubico issued Decree #2795 which exempted landowners and their representatives from responsibility for criminal acts committed against trespassers caught gathering game, fruit or firewood. In practice this gave a landowner the right to kill a hungry Indian picking berries or gathering firewood on his lands.

Ubico had succeeded in establishing peace and order in Guatemala. Foreign capital interests were granted liberal and virtually unrestricted concessions and foreigners in the country enjoyed rights and privileges unheard of for the average Guatemalan citizen.

1 Time, June 26, 1944.

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By 1944 the popular feeling against Ubico had been steadily mounting. The Allies' wartime propaganda and especially the Atlantic Charter had a significant effect upon the thinking of the literate citizens of the country. The women had long suffered under extremely low wages and by 1944 were beginning to feel the pinch of higher prices. In April, 1944, a disciplined general strike in San Salvador resulted in the overthrow of dictator Hernandez Martinez of El Salvador and set the pattern for Guatemala. By June, 1944, all that was needed was an initial stimulus to revolt. The students of San Carlos University in Guatemala City provided this initial spark.

The faculty and student body had asked the government for changes in the organization of the University and for its autonomy from direct government control. On June 22nd, after the government had rejected these suggestions, the students' association met and declared it would order a strike of the entire student body unless its demands were met. Ubico decreed a state of emergency and suspended constitutional guarantees. Contingents of the police were sent to blockade the University buildings. The student leaders and certain teachers were obliged to take refuge in the Mexican Embassy. On June 23rd other students met to plan an organized anti-Ubico manifestation and were joined by some teachers. The demonstrations on the next day took the form of students casually and quietly strolling en masse up and down the main thoroughfare of Guatemala City. Some students stood on the street reading the Atlantic Charter to small groups of the populace. In the evening they illegally distributed mimeographed sheets explaining their position to the general public.

On the next day, Sunday, June 25th, the demonstrations continued on an augmented scale. The students were joined by many other people in the capital and anti-Ubico sentiment ran high. In the afternoon, when a group of the demonstrators started to move towards the National Palace, they were fired upon by the nervous police. Maria Chinchilla, a young schoolteacher, was killed and became a symbol to the angry resistance to Ubico. On Monday the capital city was paralyzed by a general strike of students, teachers, shopkeepers, railroad workers, and many professional people. There was little violence. The general strike continued throughout the week. The government was powerless to restore normal activities. Demands for Ubico's immediate resignation steadily mounted. On July 1st, 1944, only ten days after the initial manifestations by the students, it was announced that Ubico had resigned the presidency and that a military triumvirate would take his place.

2. The Triunvirato Militar and the October Revolution

On Saturday, July 2nd, 1944, the Triunvirato Militar, consisting of General Federico Ponce Vaides and two other officers of Ubico's army, began operations as the new executive body of Guatemala. On July 3rd, the Legislative Assembly attempted to meet to designate a new government but it was forced to wait until the following day while the Triunvirato Militar applied pressure on the deputies. On July 4th Ponce Vaides was elected Provisional President by Ubico's hand-picked legislature. Five young lawyers who protested were imprisoned. The new government immediately made token gestures to the popular demands by reestablishing

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constitutional guarantees, making concessions to the University students, announcing that national elections would be held in November, and allowing the formation of political parties and labor unions. It soon became apparent, however, that Ponce had no intention of relinquishing his political power. Many of Ubico's former collaborators reappeared as members of the Provisional Government and Ubico himself remained in Guatemala.

As the summer of 1944 wore on the Provisional Government came more and more to resemble the Ubico regime. The people were rapidly forming into political parties in anticipation of the election of their next president. They were not disposed to accept another dictatorial regime. But the prisons again began to be filled with political dissidents and it became evident that Ponce intended to allow only one man to be elected president in the November elections - himself.

Ponce went to great lengths to attempt to convince important elements of public opinion of the need for maintaining a strong military government in power in Guatemala. Fear of a general Indian uprising had been frequently played up by dictatorial governments in the past as attempts to make their power more secure. Ponce now decided to use this strategy to his ends. He spent almost three months stirring up the Indian communities in the area between Chimaltenango and Lake Atitlan - a region of dense Indian population. He apparently thought that the traditional respect for authority shown by the Indians would lead them to rise up and kill the finqueros when told to and thus give him an excuse to establish a permanent military government. However, of the many Indian communities he had instigated, the inhabitants of only one rose up to kill the ladino landowners.¹

In September, 1944, faced with the mounting opposition to his government Ponce tried a new strategy. He sent trucks into the countryside and brought back hundreds of Indians whom he marched through the streets of the capital armed with machetes and carrying large pictures of himself on their chests. Apparently he hoped to frighten the people of the capital with "proof" that the Indians were on his side. The Indians were then housed at La Aurora on the outskirts of the capital, provided with sufficient liquor to keep them drunk, and kept there as a constant threat to the people of the capital. These Indians were obviously being treated to do the bidding of Ponce. The people were reminded of the time over a hundred years ago when Carrera led an "army" of Indians into the capital to raise havoc with the urban population.

On October 1st, 1944, the climax of totalitarian tactics came with the assassination, on orders from Ponce, of Alejandro Cordova, founder and director of the newspaper El Imparcial and a leading member of the opposition in the Legislative Assembly. This brutal act was followed by a period of violence and terror. The supporters of Juan Jose Arevalo, presidential candidate of the opposition parties, had to go into hiding or take refuge in foreign legations.

¹ The entire story of these attempts by Ponce to instigate the Indians to revolt is not known.

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The Mexican Embassy was so crowded with refugees that it had to rent part of the Palace Hotel. There was no longer any doubt that this was a dictatorship as arbitrary and determined to remain in power as Ubico's. In the Manifiesto del Frente Unido de Partidos Politicos y Asociaciones Civicas, reproduced on mimeographed sheets and distributed on October 16th, the newly formed opposition parties and the associations of University students and teachers declared their "paro politico" (political strike). They could no longer continue their political campaign in an environment which would make the outcome of the election a foregone conclusion. The Manifiesto of Paro Politico, written by Juan Jose Arevalo, Jorge Garcia Granados, and Roberto Arzu, ended with: "United we will build the new Guatemala!" Two days later, on October 18th, the faculty and students of the University declared a strike.

On October 20th, a little before 2:00 a.m., the capital city was awakened by concentrated artillery fire. A few hours previously, approximately seventy students and workers had been smuggled into the fort Guardia del Honor, where they killed the commander and took over. The fort, under its new commander, Major Francisco Javier Arana, took up arms against the Provisional Government of General Ponce. A rapid and daring military strategy, conceived by Captain Jacobo Arbenz, broke the resistance of the city's two loyal forts within a few hours. University students and workers ran to the aid of the insurgents and were given arms at the Guardia del Honor. By 6:00 a.m. the entire city, with the exception of the heavily defended National Palace, was in the hands of the revolutionaries. An ultimatum was sent to the National Palace with the threat that it would be bombarded if the government of Ponce did not immediately capitulate. The diplomatic Corps intervened and a new government was constituted and took possession at five in the afternoon of the same day - October 20th, 1944. Over a hundred persons had been killed and many more wounded but the revolution was a success and, in the minds of many, October 20th, 1944, came to mark the beginning of the "new Guatemala" - a country under the leadership of men who were attempting to lay the foundations for permanent social and economic reform for the benefit of the majority of the people.

3. The Junta Revolucionaria and the Election of Juan Jose Arevalo.

The new interim government, the Junta Revolucionaria, consisted of three men: Major Francisco J. Arana, Captain Jacobo Arbenz, and Jorge Toriello. Major Arana, commander of the Guardia del Honor on October 20th, was representative of the young army officers who had come up through the ranks. Captain Arbenz, the strategist of the revolution, represented the alumni of the Escuela Politecnica, Guatemala's military academy. Arbenz, the son of a Swiss pharmacist and a Guatemalan mother, was only 28 years of age in 1944. Jorge Toriello, a civilian, is the son of one of Guatemala's first families. The Junta Revolucionaria remained in power until the constitutionally elected government of Dr. Juan Jose Arevalo replaced it in March, 1945.

The Junta Revolucionaria immediately announced that free elections would be held for deputies to a new National Congress, and for president. The congressional elections, held on November 3rd, 4th, and 5th, resulted in the victory by a large majority of the revolutionary parties supporting Juan Jose

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Arevalo for president. The old constitution of 1879 was abolished on November 28th, 1944, and a Constituent Assembly met to draft a new constitution. In December, 1944, the presidential elections resulted in the victory by a large margin of Dr. Arevalo. The new Constitution was promulgated on March 11th, 1945. Four days later, on March 15th, the new president took office and the Junta Revolucionaria stepped aside.

It is accepted by almost all Guatemalans that Juan Jose Arevalo was elected in the freest election ever held in Guatemala. He was a new man on the political scene, had not been involved in domestic politics in the past, and represented in the minds of the majority of the people their hopes and ideals for a new and democratic Guatemala.

Arevalo was born in the village of Taxisco, Department of Santa Rosa, in 1904. His father owned a relatively small cattle ranch. His mother was a schoolteacher. After graduating from the Central Normal School in 1925, Arevalo taught in various public schools in Guatemala. In 1927 he won a government scholarship to study abroad and went to Argentina. After six years at the University of La Plata he earned a doctorate in philosophy and education.

In 1934 he returned to Guatemala and became Inspector General of Schools. Under Ubico, however, he was unable to carry out his functions to his satisfaction and after a short time returned to Argentina, after some time spent studying in Europe. In Argentina Arevalo's reputation as an educator grew. He held professorships at several of the leading Argentine universities and was invited by the government of Argentina to form the new normal school in San Luis. His outspoken denunciation of the Ramirez coup d'etat in Argentina and his political writings threatened on several occasions to get him into trouble with the authorities. He was a member of the faculty at the University of Tucuman when he received a telegram informing him of his nomination for the presidency of Guatemala by the two revolutionary political parties, Renovacion Nacional and Frente Popular Libertador. He borrowed funds from a local Argentine bookseller as an advance on the publication of some of his writings and arrived in Guatemala on September 3rd, 1944, one week before his fortieth birthday.

His arrival in Guatemala came at the height of the tension between the Ponce government and the opposition revolutionary elements. He was accused by Ponce of being "paid by Hitler to transform Guatemala into another Nazi stronghold." He was contemptuously referred to as "the Argentine".¹ Arevalo was forced into hiding during much of the time before October 20th. He is a tall, handsome man and a very effective speaker. On his campaign tours of the country he was greeted everywhere with fervid enthusiasm. Arevalismo became a genuinely popular movement which grew in strength and won a resounding victory in the election in December, 1944.

1 Juan Jose Arevalo "El Pueblo Sano de Guatemala", a speech delivered on September 23rd, 1944, Escritos Politicos, (Tipografia Nacional, Guatemala, 1948), pp. 100-102; [REDACTED]

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All told, fully twenty-two major and minor conspiracies against the government of President Arevalo had been discovered in the four years between 1945 and 1949. The twenty-third, and by far the most serious of these, occurred on the 18th and 19th of July, 1949, when Guatemala City suddenly became the field of battle in a desperate struggle between several hundred well-armed rebels and the forces defending the Constitutional Government.

2. Labor's Part in the Defense of the Government During the Military Revolt of July, 1949.

About noon on July 18, 1949, Colonel Francisco J. Arana, Chief of the Armed Forces and one of the main leaders of the October 1944 Revolution, was shot and killed. His car was ambushed and riddled with bullets as he was returning from Amatitlan where he had inspected a deposit of government munitions. With him in the automobile was Enrique Blanco, Subdirector General of the Guardia Civil, who was also killed.

The identity of the assassins and the reasons for their act are in dispute. It seems clear, however, that the assassination was related to Arana's ambition to become President of the Republic in 1951. It has been reported that Arana, essentially an upright man but with a fatal weakness for flattery, had been consistently urged by conservative and reactionary elements to depose Dr. Arevalo and establish a regime more favorable to conservative interests. It has been claimed by some that Arana had been swayed by these interested parties and, convinced that he could not afford to wait for elections, was preparing to take the Presidency by force. Persistent rumors in Guatemala City at the time seemed to give credence to the belief that his uprising was planned for July 23rd, only five days after his unexpected death. Most, if not all, of the Army would probably have followed his orders. The Constitutional Government would have had little chance. A final disagreement with his backers may have resulted in his assassination, or government sympathizers may have discovered the plot and attempted to forestall it by killing its leader.

When the news of Arana's death reached the capital, within an hour of its occurrence, events came in rapid succession. The President immediately decreed a state of national emergency which was quickly ratified by the unanimous vote of all the members of Congress who could be brought together. Lt. Colonel Arbenz, the Minister of National Defense, assumed the duties of Chief of the Armed Forces. By three in the afternoon, as the news spread through the streets, a general consternation was evident among the people. The iron shutters of the stores were pulled down and business people in the center of the city were hastily leaving for the suburbs. All non-official telephone and telegraph service was suspended.

Meanwhile, in the fort Guardia del Honor, the Army officers who had been closest to Colonel Arana determined to take up arms and overthrow the government of President Arevalo. They named a provisional junta to take over the government. Either they were convinced that government leaders were responsible for Arana's death and were determined to avenge him, or they were parties to a conspiracy which had been touched off prematurely by his death.

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At about 4:30 in the afternoon, tanks rolled out of the Guardia del Honor and advanced on the National Palace. The rebels demanded President Arevalo's immediate surrender. He replied defiantly: "My term is six years, I will not serve one minute less and not one minute more." After sporadic firing between the tanks and the hastily organized defenders of the National Palace, the tanks temporarily retired to the fort and an ominous quiet settled over the city.

A quick inventory showed that the government was in an extremely precarious position. The rebel fort contained more than half the military personnel immediately available in the city. The two loyal forts were extremely low in equipment; and the previous week, under one pretext or another, a large quantity of army and munitions had been transferred from these forts to the Guardia del Honor. The rebels had possession of the only tanks and most of the high caliber artillery as well as large stocks of rifles and hand grenades. Guatemala's small Air Force, pledged its support to the government, but a frantic search failed to disclose any bombs. The Guardia Civil, after some hours of apparent indecision, also threw its lot with the government. It was apparent, however, that the rebels had the immediate advantage and that, unless the government could secure the immediate active aid of sizeable sectors of the civilian population, it could hold little hope of lasting through the next twenty-four hours.

Shortly after five in the afternoon, the government sent out word that civilian volunteers would be given arms at the Military Base on Aurora Airfield, about two miles from the center of the city. The headquarters of the two labor federations became the scenes of feverish activity as organized workers gathered to volunteer their services. They arrived on the fields of Aurora in tracts, cars, on bicycles and on foot. As each new group of volunteers arrived at Aurora, it was greeted with resounding cheers. Between two and three thousand rifles were reportedly handed out to organized workers at this time. Besides labor union members, some students, teachers, and exiles from other Central American countries took part in the fighting.

During the evening, the civilian volunteers were organized into platoons of 37 men each. Each was in charge of a man with some military training, frequently a young cadet from the Military Academy. The volunteer platoons took such names as "El Leon", "El Oso Negro", "Vanguardia", "Alianza", etc. Spirit and determination was high among these groups. The workers knew what they were preparing to fight for and were determined to defend their government.

At shortly after eleven in the evening, as new groups of volunteers were still arriving and being organized at Aurora, the rebels emerged from the Guardia del Honor and launched strong and repeated attacks upon the National Palace, the Guardia Civil Headquarters, the Military Base, Aurora Airfield, and other strategic points in the city. The attacks continued with undiminished fury throughout the rest of the night and well into the next day with weapons as heavy as 105 millimeter artillery. Street fighters kept up a running battle with the tanks and planes on the government side dropped hastily improvised bombs and cans of gasoline in an attempt to knock out the tanks. When rebel tanks approached the National Palace, they were met with a shower of "Molotov Cocktails" from the office windows. About noon on the 19th, the loyal defenders of the Guardia Civil headquarters who had been under almost constant attack for over ten hours, ex-

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hausted their ammunition and were forced to run up a white flag. Before the rebels could enter, however, the defenders were supplied with more ammunition through a back entrance and were able to continue the fight. Some of the most serious fighting occurred in the area between the loyal base at Aurora and the Guardia del Honor. It was here that the volunteer forces of organized labor were instrumental in keeping the airport and important installations of the Military Base from falling into rebel possession.

The volunteer forces at Aurora had begun to take the offensive in the early hours of the 19th and by mid-morning had reached the Avenida de la Reforma and were moving closer to the Guardia del Honor. Although they were needed here, urgent calls from other parts of the city made it necessary to send some of them to defend points where the need was more desperate. Over 300 men, almost all of them members of SAMF and the Union of Workers in Public Works were dispatched to help defend the airport when it was threatened by rebels moving in from the north. Some of the heaviest fighting took place here for about two hours on the morning of the 19th. Another company of workers was sent to reinforce the defenses of the National Palace. Late in the morning a large group of workers arrived from Escuintla to volunteer in defense of the government, but there were insufficient rifles to supply all of them. Other organized workers arrived from Villanueva.

At about noon on the 19th the tide began to turn against the rebels. Government reinforcements had arrived from Chimaltenango, Escuintla and other cities and a shipment of bombs enabled the government to bomb the rebel fort. The rebel tanks ran out of gasoline near the National Palace and were captured. At 2 P.M. the rebel junta asked for terms, and at 3 P.M. firing ceased. Three hours later government troops and volunteers entered the Guardia del Honor. The rebel leaders took refuge in the Salvadorean Embassy. It was reported that approximately 150 persons had been killed and over 300 were wounded. Among the wounded was Jose Luis Caceres, who had retired as Secretary General of SAMF two weeks previously. Many schools and private homes had been destroyed by inaccurate bombing and artillery fire.

Had the rebel forces been sufficiently well organized to capture strategic points within the city before government reinforcements arrived, they would undoubtedly have succeeded in their purpose. Had it not been for the volunteer forces, chiefly made up of organized workers, it is quite probably that the rebels would have been able to capture the airport and the nearby main government base. This would have prevented the decisive bombing by the airforce and probably lost the day for the government.

The spontaneous aid offered by the workers was highly indicative of their loyalty to the government which had granted them the right to organize and innumerable other advantages they had never before enjoyed. Except for a few from Escuintla, workers from outside the capital were not able to participate in the fighting. Many, however, on hearing of the revolt, prepared to come to the city to volunteer. It has been reported that the members of SMT-CAG in Tiquisate went so far as to commandeering a railway train to carry them to the city. Before they could leave, however, they were informed that the rebels had surrendered. The members of some campesino unions are reported to have set out on foot for the capital.