

The Argentine Revolution

Shadow of the Man on Horseback

By EDWARD O. GUERRANT

ON June 4 there was a revolution in Argentina. A military committee headed by General Rawson and General Pedro Ramirez overthrew the isolationist government of President Ramon Castillo in Buenos Aires in a lightning coup d'etat. The rebels encountered slight resistance; there was little bloodshed. Ramon Castillo took refuge on the minesweeper *Drummond* and radioed that he had transferred his government to that vessel in the River Plate. Shortly afterwards, realizing that further resistance was futile, he capitulated. Meanwhile General Rawson had set up a new government which lasted only two days to be immediately followed by one under the leadership of General Ramirez, the former Argentine War Minister.

UNDERLYING CAUSES OF COUP D'ETAT

The rapidity and success of the revolutions surprised the world. Observers scanned the news from Argentina for clues as to the underlying causes of the coup d'etat. On the first day of the revolt crowds surged through the streets of Buenos Aires shouting "Death to fascists, long live democracy," and stoning pro-Axis newspapers and German business houses. An official proclamation of the Ramirez government stated: "We will fight to maintain the real and integral sovereignty of the nation, to fulfill its historic traditions, to make effective and absolute the true, loyal union of American collaboration, and to comply with international pacts and promises." Another proclamation exposed the venality and corruption in the Castillo government.

The popular demonstration in Buenos Aires and the proclamations of the revolutionary leaders, especially with regard to compliance with international pacts, were such that many observers in the United States attributed the revolution solely to a rising tide of antagonism against the pro-Axis tendencies of the Castillo regime. On June 4, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox said: "It looks as if the pro-Axis Administration there has been unhorsed." The revolution attracted special attention in the United States for two reasons. First, representatives of this government urged at the Rio de Janeiro Conference of January, 1942, that the 21 American nations sever relations with the Axis powers. Argentina alone had not complied with the recommendation. Accordingly, it was thought that the revolution might foreshadow such compliance. Second, the established interest of the United States Government in Latin American affairs since 1933 suggested that a revolution in a nation as important as Argentina would warrant close attention. Judging from the unfolding of events since June 4, it now seems that the causes of the revolution can be found both in the field of foreign policy and domestic relations.

ARGENTINA'S FOREIGN POLICY

Turning first to Argentina's external affairs one must consider the Rio de Janeiro Conference. This meeting stemmed from a convention adopted at Lima in 1938 which permitted any American nation to call a confer-

ence of the foreign ministers of the Pan-American Union in any emergency. After Pearl Harbor the United States called a meeting at Rio de Janeiro to consider the measures to be taken arising from the Axis onslaught in December, 1941. Quite naturally this country desired unanimous Pan-American action against the Axis. Such unanimity at the Conference on the severance of relations was finally reached toward the close of proceedings after Argentina had persistently opposed the recommendation. Argentina had been at odds with the other American nations and particularly with the United States in the five Inter-American conferences held since 1933, and the Rio de Janeiro gathering was no exception. After Argentina had agreed reluctantly to sign the recommendation, she refused to implement the declaration by severance of relations. This brought strained relations between Argentina and the other states in the Western world. The reaction of the United States, for instance, has been to refuse lend-lease aid to Argentina while granting it to others in Latin America. The reason is obvious. The President of the United States could hardly decide that Argentina was resisting the aggressor nations and was vital to the defense of this country while she retained her contacts with the Axis. It was the hope of the United States that the recent revolution would bring an alteration in Argentina's foreign policy. This result may be forthcoming, but it has not occurred yet.

The isolationist policy of Ramon Castillo possibly contributed to the revolutionary movement. While the texts of the lend-lease agreements between the United States and various Latin-American nations have not been published, it is known that this country is supplying some of Argentina's neighbors with military equipment. For instance, the United States has spent a substantial amount of money in Brazil in constructing permanent airfields and other military installations. As the major belligerent nations are obviously not in a position to sell arms to Argentina, and as the United States will not extend lend-lease aid, she cannot procure adequate military supplies either in Europe or America. Vis-a-vis the other Latin-American countries, Argentina is becoming increasingly weaker.

It was probably wishful thinking on the part of many in this country to attribute the revolution solely to the international situation. Even as reputable a newspaper as the *New York Times* missed the mark in an editorial which stated: "There is little doubt that the revolution was brought about by a split within the conservative camp and that this split was not on domestic issues but on foreign policy." It was most certainly only a cleavage in the conservative camp, but if the break occurred chiefly over foreign affairs there has been little indication of this.

A "PALACE REVOLT"

Before examining the purely internal aspects of the Ramirez revolution, it is expedient to understand the nature of this revolt which is characteristic of many

Latin-American revolutions. Obviously it was not an organic, social or economic change such as the French or Russian Revolutions. It was merely a palace revolt—in this case the substitution of one conservative regime for another. That Generals Rawson and Ramirez succeeded so easily, and that revolutions occur so often in Latin-American countries and so infrequently in Anglo-Saxon nations, has amazed some Americans. This phenomenon can be accounted for largely by the difference in Latin and Anglo-Saxon legal traditions. In England and in the United States the law is considered superior to any individual. The power of the government is limited, and the people have guarantees against governmental excesses in such documents as the Bill of Rights, the Habeas Corpus Act, the United States Constitution, and similar legal landmarks. Because of this theory of the superiority of the law over individuals, revolutions have been relatively rare in Anglo-Saxon nations. They have usually occurred only when the peoples have felt they were suffering intolerable abuses.

TRADITION OF INDIVIDUAL LEADERSHIP

On the other hand, there is no similar tradition in the Roman law—the legal background of the Latin-American countries. The precedent has been the superiority of individuals to the basic law. In Latin America, particularly, there has been the tradition of leadership of various strong men—witness such individuals as Simon Bolivar, Jose de San Martin, Bernardo O'Higgins, and Agustin de Iturbide in early revolutionary times, and the modern authoritarian rulers in the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Brazil, and elsewhere. During the early days of Latin-American independence these leaders were called *caudillos*, and the term still remains today. They were military men—almost literally on horseback. There is no exact counterpart in United States history. This country has had its political bosses and Huey Longs, but in most cases these leaders have not been military men and have not had quite the same qualities of personal leadership as the *caudillos*. While *caudillo* leadership was more widespread a century ago than it is now, it certainly has not disappeared. As one Latin-American authority has put it: "Over all the countries of Hispanic America, there is still the shadow of the man on horseback."

Generals Rawson and Ramirez did not ride into Buenos Aires on horseback probably because the horse is outmoded. Nevertheless, the acts of the new regime indicate how closely these men resemble earlier *caudillos*; they also indicate the difference between the legal traditions of the United States and Latin America. One of the first moves of the revolutionary government was to dissolve the Argentine Congress. This would hardly have happened in the United States. While the Constitution of the United States allows the President to dismiss Congress in case of a disagreement between the two Houses as to the time of adjournment, this has never been done. Then, after dissolving the Argentine Congress, the new regime issued the following proclamation:

Provisional President Ramirez, in view of the diffusion of false news tending to sow confusion and disorder, announces that the situation is absolutely normal and that he firmly maintains the power which he has just assumed.

He also announces that he will take the severest measures to suppress with the greatest energy attempts of such nature which will be considered from now on as treason.

The above statement concerning treason, while a logical one to make, is somewhat amusing when one consid-

ers the action General Ramirez had just taken against President Ramon Castillo.

Stern measures in suppressing freedom of speech were taken as indicated in this proclamation:

In order to avoid circulation of rumors tending to create confusion among the public, all civil and military authorities will immediately detain those who spread alarming or tendentious news. When detained those who are proved guilty will remain at the disposal of the government for corresponding measures according to martial law. (Signed) Ramirez.

FEW LIMITATIONS

There is little in this decree to suggest that there are many limitations on the government in Argentina. A Ramirez decree of June 18 was added evidence that the days of the *caudillos* are not ended. This decree announced the cancellation of the presidential election scheduled for September 5. Such procedure differs radically from the practice in the United States where the election date is set and cannot be arbitrarily altered and certainly not abolished. On the day of the decree concerning the cancellation of the election President Ramirez said "the army would re-establish the national constitution and impose respect for it."

While the new regime announced that its policy would be one of acts and not words, its acts have chiefly concerned domestic affairs. The one notable exception has been the order cancelling cable facilities that have permitted Axis nations to transmit code messages. This was in compliance with a resolution adopted at the Rio de Janeiro Conference.

As far as can be determined at present, on the basis of partial evidence, one of the major factors precipitating the revolt was the corruption of the Castillo regime. There were various scandals which undermined confidence in the government. One of the most notorious was the weekly lottery conducted by the Government of Argentina. The prizes run sometimes as large as \$1,500,000 a week. It was discovered that the numbers to be drawn were known to a small group of people close to the government. This disclosure followed reports of maladministration and corruption in the judicial and executive branches of the government. One observer who released his story from Montevideo to avoid the censorship in Buenos Aires said that "Electoral fraud had been raised to the level of a fine art and extensively used in all elections." These irregularities, coupled with the fact that Castillo had reportedly picked the next president, Robustiano Costas, virtually assuring him of election, aroused public indignation. That Senor Costas' fortune is based on sugar, and that a government decree during the Castillo regime raised the price of sugar, did not add to the tranquillity in Argentina.

SUMMARY

It would seem that the present leaders of Argentina, being military leaders, would realize that, while neutrality and isolationism might have been a conservative and realistic policy from 1940 to late in 1942, at present, with the tide of war turning strongly against the Axis, it is the part of wisdom to get on the Allied bandwagon for reasons of purely national interest if nothing else. If the Ramirez government does eventually sever relations with the Axis, which will be inevitable in the event of total Allied victory, there are competent observers in this country who think it will not redound greatly to Argentina's credit in the Western world, coming so late in the course of the war.