

# Tupamaros and The Failure of Urban Guerrilla Warfare

Urban Guerrilla Warfare as a Failed Experiment and  
The Inevitable Failure of the Tupamaros Revolutionary Model

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Two Latin American works exist that attempt to lay out a guide to successfully lead a revolution through guerrilla warfare. The first is Che Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare* (1961), published after the successful Cuban Revolution which Che was a key part of. The second being the *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla* (1969) by Carlos Marighella, leader of the ALN - a Brazilian urban guerrilla movement. Che Guevara rarely mentions the word 'terrorist' in his work, saving it to describe urban engagements that could work in junction with his rural focused revolution.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Marighella embraced the term 'terrorist' and viewed terrorism as a necessary tool in which to achieve his revolutionary goals.<sup>2</sup> That goal, in essence, was to create destruction and terror in urban centres. This will lead the government to enact repressive measures as an only option, thus showing their true corrupt nature to the public. This will allow the guerrillas to gain a popular base of support and overthrow the now 'outed' repressive regime.<sup>3</sup> Yet, in Latin America, this method of revolution was never successful. The regimes of Cuba and Nicaragua fell to guerrilla actions, and Columbia has been in constant struggles with the guerrilla organization FARC since 1964.<sup>4</sup> The one thing that all these successful, or at least long-lasting, organizations had was that they were all rural based uprisings. The tactics and strategy of the 'urban guerrilla' as outlined by Carlos Marighella never amounted to a permanent revolution and always worked against the goals of the guerrillas. The Tupamaros, who operated in Uruguay during the late-60s and early-70s, present an ideal representation of how urban guerrilla warfare was a failed experiment. Their preliminary success, achieved through competent organization

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<sup>1</sup> Randall D. Law, *Terrorism: A History*, Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2009, 255.

<sup>2</sup> Carlos Marighella, *Mini-Manual of The Urban Guerrilla*, Montreal: Abraham Guillen Press & Arm The Spirit, 2002, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony James Joes, *Urban Guerrilla Warfare*, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2007, 76.

<sup>4</sup> James F. Rochlin, *Vanguard Revolutionaries In Latin America*, London: Lynne Rienner, 2003, 97.

and discipline, succumbed to attrition by the Uruguayan military. Urban warfare was only the first phase of Marighella's revolutionary plan, to be followed by a rural insurgency. However, the fact that the Tupamaros, let alone any other urban insurgency could not make it to such a stage, shows the failures in the strategy of urban guerrilla warfare as described by Marighella.

Many historians tend to agree with the statement that urban guerrilla warfare in Latin America was an experiment that failed. Timothy Wickham-Crowley, in his comparative study *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America*, observes that a shift occurred towards using urban guerrilla tactics as a more defensible and hopefully successful strategy after the failure and death of Che Guevara in Bolivia. The multiple failures of the new urban guerrilla movements then led to a 'rediscovery' of rural guerrilla warfare. A rediscovery that allowed Nicaragua to successfully use primarily rural guerrilla tactics to overthrow the Somoza family dynasty.<sup>5</sup> Through Wickham-Crowley's presented timeline of the evolution of guerrilla tactics, we can see that urban guerrilla warfare was a failed experiment. Nicaragua's successful revival of the rural guerrilla movement by the FSLN is pointed out by Wickham-Crowley for supporting the argument that urban guerrilla warfare failed in Latin America.<sup>6</sup>

Anthony James Joes, a historian of urban guerrilla warfare, provides a chapter in his appropriately titled book *Urban Guerrilla Warfare*, to the guerrilla campaigns in Uruguay and Brazil. Joes, like Wickham-Crowley, cites the death and failure of Che Guevara in Bolivia as the reason for the strategic switch to urban guerrilla tactics in Latin America.<sup>7</sup> Unlike Wickham-Crowley, Joes does not juxtapose rural guerrilla success (like in Nicaragua) to that of

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<sup>5</sup> Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992, 209-210.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>7</sup> Joes, *Urban Guerrilla Warfare*, 69.

urban guerrilla failure. Rather, he believes that the exportation of the Cuban revolution was grossly misunderstood by Marighella and the Tupamaros in Brazil and Uruguay respectively.<sup>8</sup> He does not make the conclusion that urban guerrilla tactics alone failed, but that both rural - as he uses the failed rural guerrilla insurgency in Peru by the Sendero Luminoso group<sup>9</sup> - and urban guerrilla warfare failed to replicate the success of Castro's revolution due to a multitude of factors.

A journal article by John Williams focuses on the failure of Carlos Marighella's *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla* to be applied to real revolutionary situations. The difference in which Williams approaches the subject is his parallel look at urban guerrilla movements outside of Latin America, specifically Algeria. Making the conclusion that in "Urban guerrilla warfare, terrorism or insurrections appear to have failed generally, as well as specifically in Latin America."<sup>10</sup>

To achieve a social revolution, the guerrilla force in question must attain popular support. Carlos Marighella saw popular support arising as a result of, rather than a precondition to, urban guerrilla actions. If conditions were bad enough, as a result of continual urban terrorist actions, the regime would enact repressive measures and alienate the population - therefore gaining support from the repressed masses.<sup>11</sup> John Williams points out that this was the initial step in Marighella's plan, which would later evolve into a rural insurgency while government forces were bogged down by urban terrorist actions in the cities.<sup>12</sup> Yet, Marighella's first phase, the

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<sup>8</sup> Joes, *Urban Guerrilla Warfare*, 69.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>10</sup> John W. Williams, "Carlos Marighella: The father of urban guerrilla warfare," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 12 (1989): 1-20, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Joes, *Urban Guerrilla Warfare*, 76.

<sup>12</sup> Williams, "Carlos Marighella: The father of urban guerrilla warfare," 8.

obtaining of popular support through terrorist action proved to not be viable or possible - as we will see in the case of Uruguay. The second part of this argument is the high impossibility of obtaining popular support in a country with either a quasi-democratic or publicly supported regime.<sup>13</sup> Guevara warned against any actions against a democratically elected government, saying “people must see clearly the futility of maintaining the fight for social goals within the framework of civil debate.” Guevara knew that “all possibilities of peaceful struggle had to be exhausted” before a popular uprising could ensue.<sup>14</sup> The political situation in Uruguay had an established democracy, only recently shattered by economic downturns. Furthermore, the Tupamaros failed to take steps and mobilize the masses - even if they were susceptible to an armed uprising.

Uruguay after the First World War was a prosperous and hopeful country. It had one of the highest literacy rates in Latin America. It featured a stable and non-repressive form of democracy.<sup>15</sup> In 1968, eighty percent of the population lived in urban areas<sup>16</sup> while the rest were primarily cattle ranchers dispersed in between the cities.<sup>17</sup> The military was very small (only numbering nine thousand<sup>18</sup>), was largely subordinate to civilians, and functioned apolitically (at least until the 1970s).<sup>19</sup> The conditions presented did not represent revolutionary conditions. However, two factors led to the formation of such guerrilla groups like the Tupamaros, also known as the MLN. Firstly, the political atmosphere that Anthony Joes mentions: a two-party

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<sup>13</sup> Joes, *Urban Guerrilla Warfare*, 153.

<sup>14</sup> Che Guevara, ed. Brian Loveman and Thomas M. Davies, Jr. *Guerrilla Warfare*, Nebraska: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1997, 51.

<sup>15</sup> James Khol and John Litt, *Urban Guerrilla Warfare in Latin America*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1974, 174.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>17</sup> Pablo Brum, “Revisiting Urban Guerrillas: Armed Propaganda and the Insurgency of Uruguay’s MLN-Tupamaros, 1969-70,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. Vol. 37 (2014): 387-404, 390.

<sup>18</sup> Joes, *Urban Guerrilla Warfare*, 80.

<sup>19</sup> Brum, “Revisiting Urban Guerrillas,” 390.

domination, “Blancos and the Colorados” where “loyalty to them was cultural and interclass”<sup>20</sup> meaning they had a wide-ranging and deeply held acceptance throughout Uruguay. Peter Waldmann further explained the political situation as immobile and united into power-blocks. Anyone outside the parties’ structure would find it difficult to start a political career which, according to Waldmann, led many “to go underground to fight for their ideas.”<sup>21</sup> The radical left in Uruguay, which the Tupamaros were formed from, failed to attain much political success. The communist and socialist party together made up only about six percent of all the votes in the 1966 election.<sup>22</sup> As a result, many of the extreme left were unable to effect the concrete change they wanted, leading to a search for other means of political expression - urban guerrilla action. A second factor to the rise of unrest and a potential factor in the rise of the Tupamaros was the economic downturn in the 1960s. An increase in inflation and population resulted in large increases in unemployment, estimated at around twenty percent at the most. Labour union unrest ensued, strikes, riots, shooting all rose dramatically between 1965 and 1969. The government responded by suspending constitutional rights and arresting over 500 unionists. The economic and social tension ultimately culminated into a general strike in Uruguay on October 16, 1966. Uruguay was starting to be ruled by force as repressive measures were put into place.<sup>23</sup> However, democracy still functioned and a presidential election was held in 1971, even while under constitutional restrictions and a technical ‘state of siege.’<sup>24</sup> In that election, the Tupamaros backed communist coalition only received 18.3 percent of the vote.<sup>25</sup> Although the Tupamaros

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<sup>20</sup> Joes, *Urban Guerrilla Warfare*, 80.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Waldmann, “How Terrorism Ceases: the Tupamaros in Uruguay,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 34 (2011): 717-731, 719.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 721.

<sup>23</sup> Kohl and Litt, *Urban Guerilla Warfare in Latin America*, 176-178.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>25</sup> Joes, *Urban Guerrilla Warfare*, 88.

exposed the high level of corruption in the expenditure in all levels of government with their Financiera Monty raid in 1969,<sup>26</sup> through elections the government maintained their appearance of legitimization and adhering to popular grievances.<sup>27</sup>

These new conditions in Uruguay presented a stark difference to the pre-60s scene of economic and democratic prosperity. The mass protests and economic stability presented a potentially supportive populace to a revolutionary movement. However, it should not be forgotten that the society had a deep cultural tie to the democratic system, and although many supported the preliminary ‘Robin Hood-esque’ nature of the Tupamaros,<sup>28</sup> their organization failed to include or build upon that initial appeal to the poorer working-class strata of Uruguayan society. Many of the members of the Tupamaros were students and middle-class workers. It is with this we can draw many conclusions. Waldmann writes that the innate sense of academic superiority in the Tupamaros milieu not only drove away a larger following but had them develop an over-reliance on a symbolic and propagandistic message that included theatrical displays of their ideology. This ultimately led to an underestimation of the government’s eventual capabilities that developed into a powerful force bent on stopping the Tupamaros.<sup>29</sup> We can also draw on Wickham-Crowley’s analysis on the role of universities in Latin American Guerrilla movements. He suggests that many of these students and academic elite viewed themselves belonging to a social class rather than an economic one.<sup>30</sup> This created boundaries between the revolutionaries and the desperately needed, to sustain a popular revolution, working-class. Anthony Joes sums them up as “between twenty-five and twenty-eight,”

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<sup>26</sup> Kohl and Litt, *Urban Guerilla Warfare in Latin America*, 176.

<sup>27</sup> Joes, *Urban Guerrilla Warfare*, 89.

<sup>28</sup> Brum, “Revisiting Urban Guerrillas,” 392.

<sup>29</sup> Waldmann, “How Terrorism Ceases: the Tupamaros in Uruguay,” 725.

<sup>30</sup> Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America*, 34.

“immature” and “narcissistic,” as well as isolated from modern society.<sup>31</sup> By becoming an exclusive group of isolated academic youths, they neglected the future of their movement - a popular uprising of the disenfranchised working-class.

The Tupamaros exposed the illegal foreign dealings of prominent Uruguayans, raided casinos (but left money to pay the employees, tip included), and interrupted broadcasts of football matches with their propaganda. The group even daringly infiltrated a naval academy, marched all the soldiers out, and took their weapons all without firing a shot.<sup>32</sup> These non-violent actions, in the beginning, gained them popular support and helped present the government as incompetent, but failed to mobilize the population towards their cause. The formation of the urban guerrilla was into small firing groups or cells of about five men. Secrecy was of the utmost importance so many of the guerrillas only knew the identities and whereabouts of their immediate firing group.<sup>33</sup> Massive actions, like those of the rural guerrillas of Cuba, were simply not possible. By being cut off from their fellow members, as well as those whom they are trying to lead to action, it made it difficult to “vivify the revolutionary movement.”<sup>34</sup> This form of guerrilla action made it hard to recruit new members. Village to village recruiting was not an option, you would have to know someone to join. As a result, the group became effectively introverted. Members who were killed or captured were continually replaced with young, inexperienced, and hotheaded individuals - far from the original experienced and methodical members, the Tupamaros had an ever-dwindling pool of people to draw from, the disaffected middle-class educated elite. While this small and dispersed organization could still complete the

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<sup>31</sup> Joes, *Urban Guerrilla Warfare*, 83, 154.

<sup>32</sup> Brum, “Revisiting Urban Guerrillas,” 391-393.

<sup>33</sup> Marighella, *Mini-Manuel of The urban Guerrilla*, 11.

<sup>34</sup> Joes, *Urban Guerrilla Warfare*, 87.

first phase of Marighella's plan, the Tupamaros failed to maintain that popular support long enough to initiate a full-fledged rural insurgency.

Starting in July 1970, a drastic change in tactics came to the Tupamaros when they escalated their aggression against the police and foreign officials. A Cuban newspaper reported on 19 July 1970 that the Tupamaros had attacked the homes of four police officers. They knew the locations of many low-ranking police officers and went as far as to threaten their families in order to stop police intervention. Police intervention did not stop, it only escalated and started to involve the military more wholeheartedly in urban counterinsurgency.<sup>35</sup> On the last day of July 1970, the Tupamaros kidnapped three prominent officials, two foreign diplomats (American and Brazilian) and more importantly Dan Mitrione, the USAID (Agency for International Development) police advisor. While Mitrione was in Tupamaros custody, one of their safe houses was raided by police and four of their leaders captured. Almost comically the replacement Tupamaros leadership was immediately captured a few days later. What was left in charge were a few young radicals who decided, now leaderless, to kill Mitrione.<sup>36</sup> The popularity of the Tupamaros started to plummet after the publicity of Mitrione's death. Uruguayans did not accept such a violent act as a legitimate form of revolution. Essentially a new incarnation of the Tupamaros appeared, and under "Operation Cacao" waves of bombings took place against multiple civilian targets. Popular places like bowling alleys, dance halls, golfing clubs, movie theatres, and even textile factories were targeted.<sup>37</sup> The military had an increasingly bigger part of the national budget, from one percent in 1963 to twenty-six percent in 1973.<sup>38</sup> The

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<sup>35</sup> Kohl and Litt, *Urban Guerilla Warfare in Latin America*, 263-265.

<sup>36</sup> Brum, "Revisiting Urban Guerrillas," 394.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Joes, *Urban Guerrilla Warfare*, 86.

government of Uruguay had to continually rely on the military not only for the Tupamaros but also the strikes for economic reform. It was this continual expenditure and acquiescence of political power that allowed the military to successfully stage a coup in 1973.<sup>39</sup> This rise of military prominence had made it harder and harder for the Tupamaros to survive in an urban atmosphere which the military could easily patrol and control with the total dominance of a dictatorship.

The Tupamaros had slowly become, in the eyes of the public, a terrorist group. No longer did they maintain their Robin Hood romanticism or urban guerrilla definition (conjuring images of the successful Cuban revolution).<sup>40</sup> The last gasp of Tupamaros energy was expelled when in April 1972 multiple hit squads killed five members of the police and military. A ‘state of siege’ was declared in Montevideo and waves of tortures began to find the whereabouts of prominent Tupamaros leaders.<sup>41</sup>

The military escalation in capturing Tupamaros leaders resulted in a deficit in the kind of people who performed the careful, non-violent, and masterly organized operations such as the raid on the Navy Training Centre in Montevideo.<sup>42</sup> Their replacements were even more secluded in their academically defined social classes, eager to escalate the process of revolutionary movement through violent means. Once the successive and violent escalation of terrorist actions started after Mitrión’s death, the populace became more accepting of the measures that the military’s counterinsurgency had put into place. As long as it kept the status quo of a democratically elected government, people accepted the constitutional restrictions and torture of

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<sup>39</sup> Kohl and Litt, *Urban Guerilla Warfare in Latin America*, 182.

<sup>40</sup> Waldmann, “How Terrorism Ceases: the Tupamaros in Uruguay,” 727.

<sup>41</sup> Brum, “Revisiting Urban Guerrillas,” 395.

<sup>42</sup> Kohl and Litt, *Urban Guerilla Warfare in Latin America*, 260.

Tupamaros.<sup>43</sup> As Marighella would suggest the use of terrorist actions to get the regime to implement repressive measures, the Tupamaros simply pushed the people to the wrong side, who chose continued elections over the killers and destabilizes which the Tupamaros were continually labeled as.

In the end, the Tupamaros failed to achieve the vilification of the regime in the eyes of the populace of Uruguay - the main purpose of the urban guerrilla according to Marighella. Is this a failure of the urban guerrilla philosophy or simply of the Tupamaros? Certainly, the choice to begin the uprising in Montevideo, Uruguay's capital, was forced upon them. Uruguay being an urban-dominated population, they did not have a legitimate rural option to choose from. The failure came in the fact that the majority of government resources were centred in the cities, the same was true all around Latin America which saw a rise in urban development. Rural countrysides were left unprotected in many countries, allowing for the survival of rural insurgents like in Columbia, Cuba, and Nicaragua. Whereas the failure of certain rural groups such as Bolivia and Peru can be explained by specific local conditions, some rural insurgencies have continued to exist, or have totally achieved their objective of social revolution. Urban guerrilla warfare did not allow for borderlines to be drawn between the government targets and the public. As their attacks became more aggressive, the Tupamaros not only became socially isolated from the populace, but they even became discredited as a legitimate option before being militarily defeated - mostly after the killing of Mitrione.<sup>44</sup>

In essence, urban guerrillas had little breathing room and were continually attempting to escape capture and death while simultaneously launching clandestine attacks against the

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<sup>43</sup> Brum, "Revisiting Urban Guerrillas," 399.

<sup>44</sup> Waldmann, "How Terrorism Ceases: the Tupamaros in Uruguay," 728.

government. The resources which the government had focused in urban centres in Latin America gave them the upper hand in crushing an urban guerrilla movement before they could establish popular support for their cause.

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