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Many Pasts in Recent Argentine History**

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THE SABINO NAVARRO ORGANIZATION. ARMED STRUGGLE AND THE MANY PASTS IN RECENT ARGENTINE HISTORY

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We have been exploring for some time different aspects of revolutionary militancy in Argentina's recent history. For this purpose, we have approached from the perspective of oral history some of the armed organizations that sprang up in the early 1970s.¹ We have come to know better diverse practices, and more important, we have been able to trace the trajectory of single militants through concrete experiences. We have focused on following a group of members of the Sabina Navarro Organization who were active in the greater Rosario area.

The organization was an early splinter from Montoneros that grew strong mainly in the Córdoba and Rosario area, and had a lesser presence in Buenos Aires and Tucumán. It had a short life (1972-1975). It had two outstanding characteristics: adhering to what was known as the "independent alternative" and unceasingly criticizing the actions of the parent organization, Montoneros. The Sabino Navarro (SN) thus intended to become an alternative political experience, different from other *Peronista* armed organizations. This ambitious goal

was rooted in the belief that it was possible to resist the evident tendency toward militarism in armed organizations without abandoning the tactic of armed struggle. In other words: their political wager was on the side of reversing the subordination of politics to guns.

The SN was active during the political conjuncture marked by Peron's return to power, followed by the inevitable pacification of the main armed force in the camp of revolutionary *Peronismo*: Montoneros. The Sabinos, far from acquiescing, reoriented assigned a new and particular political importance to the use of arms. Besides, it is noteworthy that according to the organization's theory and practice not all members carried weapons. The SN was different from other political military groups of the period, in that military operations were carried by a small number of members. As we will see, this aspect constitutes a crucial point in relation to the possibility of evoking and resignifying the function of weapons in the theory and practice of the SN.

In some of the interviews with members of the student front or the neighborhood front, their references to the armed apparatus of the SN were almost elliptical and often showed a high degree of separation. Interviews with members of the combat units, on the other hand, inevitably recalled that aspect of their experience in the seventies. They never denied or hid from us the theme of armed struggle, even if at times they

¹ This article comes out of a new reading of my undergraduate thesis, "Bajo la sombra del ombu. La experiencia de Montoneros José Sabino Navarro. Historia oral y memoria", Universidad Nacional de Rosario, 2006. A first version was read at the VIII Encuentro Nacional y II Congreso Internacional de Historia Oral, "Las fuentes orales: su aplicación en educación, investigación y gestión", Buenos Aires, October 3-5 2007.

remained silent about it.

Recalled memories

The method may or may not be revolutionary and armed struggle does not define us politically.²

After doing a number of interviews, we were able to draw the organizational structure of the SN in the area of Rosario. There were three internal structures that acted in different spaces: the trade union front, the neighborhood front, and the university front. There was also a core of members, all of whom had been expelled from Montoneros and had been founders of the SN in Rosario. This core group remained active together and in fact functioned as the regional political leadership; at the same time, it was in charge of planning several armed actions in coordination with a cell in charge of logistics.

Raúl, Pedro and Gabriela were part of the core group, and given the concentration of activities and their leading roles, they have a privileged standing in recalling the armed experience of the SN. Let us briefly take a look at their life as militants before going on to analyze the interviews.

Gabriela started her university studies at the Catholic Law School of Rosario, and that was the background to her first interventions in the city's neighborhoods and slums, as well as her initial activism in a Christian organization (*Movimiento de Orientación Social y Cristiana*, MOSyC), that alongside social work pushed for opposition to the school authorities, strongly identified with the goals of the Onganía regime.

Pedro discovered the world of radical politics in 1966, in his native town, led by a third world priest. He came to Rosario in 1968. He got a room in a boarding house that was home to many representatives of the various revolutionary organizations coming to life then. Gabriela and Pedro got married as the new decade began. They decided to share their lives and also their militancy through different armed organizations (first the FAP, then Montoneros), and finally started together in the SN.

Raúl, born in the capital city of Santa Fe, began his activism in Christian groups such as *Movimiento de Estudiantes de la Universidad Católica* (MEUC, Student Movement of the Catholic University), and in 1969 joined underground groups that had decided armed struggle was the best strategy to fight the military dictatorship in power since 1966. He entered the Organización Montoneros shortly after, and participated in an important military operation that ended with his detention on February 17, 1971. First imprisoned in Coronada, he was later moved to Resistencia. There, Raúl joined a group already engaged in a discussion that eventually produced a position paper, first made public in July of 1972. The ideas and criticisms developed in it were addressed to the national leadership of Montoneros. The paper, however, was read by members in different areas and hence acquired an important life of its own, becoming the starting kick for important debates and confrontations that went beyond the original intention. The "prisoners' document" was a very important element in the series of events that led to the founding of the SN.

Raúl, freed on May 25, 1973, went to the city of Rosario and joined the first SN grouping. When he tells about his first meeting with the group, he recalls first that "the comrades in Rosario, from Rosario and Córdoba, had already done... I don't mean to say... but yes, had carried out the first economic seizure which in turn facilitated the political development of what was happening in Córdoba."³

The following armed actions, which enabled the SN to strengthen its infrastructure (cars, documents and so on), were carried out by the Rosario cell, since they had already done the first kidnapping. The particular distribution of tasks within the national structure of the organization, as we shall see, had important consequences and marked many of the experiences depicted here.

All actions were in fact carried out in the area of influence of the Rosario group, although fre-

² Foundational statement of the Sabino Navarro Organization.

³ Interview with Raúl, by Luciana Seminara, Santa Fe, 3 March 2006.

quently they could count on the important presence of “Monina” or “la Petisa María” (Little Mary). This woman, who played a key role in the birth of the SN and particularly in the creation of its armed apparatus, was perhaps the militant most often mentioned in our interviews. “Monina” became responsible for the armed branch of the SN, having acquired her experience in the first combat units of the Santa Fe group; she and Raúl were there together. Her real name was María de los Milagros Doldán, and she was a member of the first Montoneros combat groups. Raúl remembers that “the only woman active militarily was la Petisa, and I think she was not regarded as a woman but as a male, because given the machismo at the time, which was very strong, they would not have consented to having a woman in the armed units, there was then a whole series of what later became the UBC [*Unidad Básica de Combate*, basic combat unit] and the UBR [*Unidad Básica Revolucionaria*, basic revolutionary unit]”.⁴

Gabriela adds that Monina “was a woman who had [temperament]... the women they had, they had personality... they were as authoritarian as the men, in the way they handled themselves I mean, there was no difference. But there were only a few that reached leadership positions... but I’d say they were not equal”.⁵

Pedro states that “we acknowledged only one leader in military actions, and that was la Petisa, who was the most capable, she was a real military cadre... to me she was the guide, my reference, our leader”.⁶

It is impossible for Gabriela to remember her experience as a militant in the 1970s without referring to armed struggle as the best way “to take power”.

From the start of the interview, Gabriela weaved into her story continuous references to the armed aspect of her militancy in the seventies. Indeed her experience was closely linked to armed struggle, except for her brief membership on MOSyC, and her commitment to social change took her into organizations that carried out armed actions, thus transforming decisively her personal and political life.

She was close to the trade unions in greater Rosario, due to her professional practice as a labor lawyer. Her militancy, however, separated her from the public sphere to the point where “our activism was exclusively armed... we were just starting as a group, so we learned to make bombs, political statements, and we put several [bombs] in the city. At the time, they were [laughter]... the kind of bomb that you set off and hardly makes a dent in a bank’s door, all targets were economic, say, companies that everybody identified as imperialist companies”.⁷

Against all expectations, such a thorough transformation of her political activism is not recalled today as a traumatic moment or as something out of the ordinary given her commitment to revolutionary struggle. If in the eyes of the present this change in the form of struggle may be seen as strong subjective and political rupture, it seems that for Gabriela it was not then, nor is it now, a controversial issue.⁸ In her own words: “The thing is that at that time that’s how it was, at that time you did a sort of social militancy by going to a slum. And then, when you became a member in an organization then you no longer did that social militancy in neighborhoods. [...] My student activism was colored by

4 Interview with Raúl.

5 Interview with Gabriela, by Luciana Seminara, Rosario, 26 October 2005.

6 Interview with Pedro, by Luciana Seminara, Rosario, 6 April 2006. María de los Milagros Doldán or Monina, as she is remembered by her comrades, belonged to the MEUC, alongside Raúl, and then joined Montoneros. She was kidnapped in Córdoba in 1976 and to this day remains disappeared.

7 Interview with Gabriela.

8 We have further developed this problem in Cristina Viano and Luciana Seminara, “Las dos Verónicas y los multiples senderos de la militancia: de las organizaciones revolucionarias de los años 70’s al feminism” (Centro Latinoamericano de Investigaciones en Historia Oral y Social, Universidad Nacional de Rosario), paper delivered at the Colloquium on History, Gender and Politics in the 1970s, Instituto Interdisciplinario de Estudios de Género – Museo Roca, Buenos Aires, 10-12 August 2006.

a Christian point of view and all that [...] And later it became a thing that, seen from today's perspective, grew out of the conviction that you had to be in an organization and take up armed struggle in order to take power. It was that simple".

Against present expectations, Gabriela's words do not indicate that choosing armed struggle was the outcome of deep ideological or personal reflection: "it was that simple". If we take a closer look at other parts of her story, we find statements that strongly indicate the easiness with which she lived her experience in armed struggle. It is interesting to note how her reminiscences move in a manner unusually detailed for a woman, from the best way to put together a bomb, describing it with the exactitude of clockwork, to training in the use of arms to reading military manuals.

The SN combat unit coordinated actions with a logistics cell made up of three members. They were in charge of gathering necessary data, follow-ups, diagrams and "cleaning" papers for expropriated cars. They relied on a service agency that was in fact open to the general public in the south side of Rosario, to carry on these meticulous tasks. Another important part of the SN infrastructure consisted of an auto mechanic shop where expropriated cars were overhauled. The car repair shop was also open to the public, providing a good cover for clandestine planning of actions whose purpose was to obtain money for the organization.

The SN carried out some kidnappings and the ransom money amounted to an important sum.⁹ To help out in the success of these operations, some of the members of the combat unit built what they called "*carceleta*", a small jail. Their purpose in building it was to have a place to hide the kidnapped person while ransom negotiations were carried out, which could take a long while. Raúl remembers that "we had the *carceleta*, which was a sort of basement made of thick stone, at the bottom of closet, and you entered the basement through the closet".

Construction of the basement was the work of

9 The number of kidnappings may have been 2 or 3, according to the interviews. This number has not been corroborated in our newspaper research.

SN members, a fact recalled today through an anecdote:

...all the dirt was brought out to what was going to be a garden, and every time Flaco saw our neighbor he was a little taller, because the ground was rising (laughter) and each time was higher in relation to the wall built to hide one house from the other. Gitano, another neighbor, showed up one day while Flaco was laying the foundations. I never knew exactly where Gitano lived, somewhere near the producers' market, on 27 de Febrero Street, three or four blocks in. Gitano saw him laying foundations that were about 60 centimeters wide, because the underground wall was going to be real thick so no noise could be heard. So Gitano says 'what is that for?' and Flaco, lying good and fast, answered 'Well, see, this ground here is all filling, and this is to make it firm because it's all filling'. Time went by, about a year, and one day Flaco sees Gitano building a house and had dug foundations 60 centimeters wide (laughter) and had to use twice as many bricks. Poor guy! But Flaco was a real smooth talker...¹⁰

Raúl's story seems like a fable with a certain humorous rhythm, evident in the laughter that serves to lighten the difficulty of the subject. But more importantly, it allows us to approach a wider plane of analysis, a plane that lets us rethink how some of the mechanisms for remembering function.

Let us start by pointing out that history is concerned with knowledge while memory is concerned with transmission of what has happened, and we may add that there are different ways of communicating the past. In the case of Raúl, he prefers to tell anecdotes or fables which much enhance the story in so far as the voice of the narrator acts out the roles of those who participated in the drama recalled; and by rendering their words, he strengthens the sense of authenticity and increases the vivid nature of the story.¹¹ The anecdote about "Gitano and the founda-

10 Interview with Raúl.

11 Daniel James, *Doña María. Historia de vida, memoria e identidad política*, Buenos Aires, Manantial, 2004, originally published in English by Duke University Press, 2000.

tions” not only tells us details and dangers involved in the construction of the basement. The anecdote unfolds an unusual and extraordinary story, in which the smooth swift talking of Flaco, an SN member, convincingly answers Gitano’s question, thus representing the ground gained by SN militants, who have taken a political stand that enables them to face and overcome challenges.

The SN in Rosario occupied a distinct place within the organizations of the new *Peronista* left. It had mounted an infrastructure that enabled it to carry out kidnappings and could rely on an unknown number of stolen automobiles with false papers that were good enough to be undetected by security forces, and could thus provide money to the national organization. It had a unique military operation due to its internal organization and the goals pursued, and more importantly, it operated within a special national conjuncture. Perón, acknowledged as leader by the majority of the population, came back to Argentina advocating national unity and democracy, clearly antagonizing the politics of armed struggle. Given this context, the SN carried out a policy of strengthening rank-and-file organizations while developing a military strategy that, in the words of those who carried it out, “was aimed at securing economic objectives”. During the interviews, in fact, the “arms question” was always linked to the obvious need for financing the organization and never as an expression of political propaganda.

This problem of course deserves further thought, in so far as any action of a political organization cannot be understood outside the political and social framework in which it exists and pretends to transform. We do believe the purpose of armed operations was to obtain funds for the organization, while most of its political activity was in mass organizations. And yet, it is not possible to isolate and not consider the political consequences of such actions.

When members of the SN began criticizing militarism within Montoneros, they had in mind among other things the nature of the 1966-73 period. Armed action, based on the theory of the guerrilla *foco*, to them represented the only possible answer to a repressive system that closed off any oth-

er avenue of political participation. Although Lanusse’s dictatorship and the Great National Agreement intended a way out of the crisis created by working class and popular protests in the late sixties, they did not bring about the sort of change that would impel them to review tactical questions.¹² The coming of the Campora government undoubtedly posed a profound change in the nature of the situation.

Pedro remembers clearly:

The character of the Onganía coup and the debate over the character of *Peronismo*, it seems to me those were the two axes... Perón was not the strategic guide, and there it is, in that definition: Perón was not the strategic leader of revolutionary war, and therein lies the idea of why create an independent alternative. And there was also the greatest, or perhaps not the greatest, difference with Montoneros, the question of the critique of *foquismo*, characterizing the guerrilla *foco* as a phase during Onganía and Lanusse, and that phase was over after that. To us it ended on May 25, 1973, because we recognized we had entered a new stage, and we did not go back in that sense.¹³

Most of the organizations that came to life in the sixties and early seventies and defined their politics as the fight for socialism—beyond whatever differences they had in defining term—chose armed struggle to pursue that goal. They justified this option in part because they considered that particular point in time to be a closed political scenario, since the Onganía dictatorship imposed limits on the development of other means to carry out social struggles.

We agree with Marcelo Raimundo when he says that toward the end of the 1960s a series of general agreements existed for all *Peronista* armed organizations.¹⁴ The agreements were: recognition of *Peronismo* as a movement of na-

12 “Cartilla para militantes”, *Revista Militancia* # 35, Montoneros José Sabino Navarro, c. end of 1973.

13 Interview with Pedro.

14 Marcelo Raimundo, “Izquierda peronista y clase obrera, an alternative experience: the FAP-PB”, mimeo, n.d.

tional liberation, choosing armed struggle, and pursuing the goal of Peron's return and having a free and sovereign fatherland. These general agreements accepted by the wide gamut of *Peronista* new left organizations, however, started to break down after the coming of the Campora government in the early 1970s, as differences arose and brought to the discussion table elements that invited reconsideration of the adopted tactical definitions, and consequently, a critical review of methods and notions of guerrilla *foco*.

Let us add, as a side note, that *Revolution within the revolution?* by Regis Debray, appeared in 1967. This was a sort of manual of guerrilla *foco* theory meant to circulate in Latin America. Possibly, at that point, the concept and theory of guerrilla *foco* had been simplified into a system, and for that reason was positively received by political organizations that embarked upon the road of armed struggle. Beyond the specific discussion on the meaning of *foquismo*, our interest focuses on visualizing those aspects that lay behind the term. In fact, there exists a wide variety of meanings ascribed to this concept, which in turn were responsible for multiple readings of the actions of *Peronista* new left organizations.¹⁵ We do understand, however, that in the armed organizations of the 1960s and 1970s, many elements present indicated that interpretations around the categories of guerrilla, armed struggle and *foco* were far from univocal.

For the Sabinos, concretely speaking, the relationship between analysis of the stage or period and

the abandonment of *foco* theory, whether urban or rural, was clearly manifested in their attempt to place military actions at the service of their policy of joining mass organizations. Even though pulling away from the principles of *foquismo* immediately brought changes in both tactical and strategic notions, the organization did not give up armed struggle. On the other hand, even though military objectives were substantially modified and military actions acquired a utilitarian function, we have to admit that in this idea there is a validation of armed struggle as a means to intervene and thus a reaffirmation of violence as a constitutive aspect of politics.

Beyond the social and political stage inaugurated when Campora came to power, followed shortly after by Peron's presidency, the point is that the SN understood the use of armed struggle as an indispensable means to engage in their practice. Pedro's words illustrate this point rather well: "We were a point of transit between the splintering of Montoneros and nothingness ...making links with different sectors but such links were political and never military. *We had our own military apparatus for the purpose of carrying out our political life*".¹⁶

We have to take note of this particular understanding of the link between politics and violence, or politics and armed struggle, to use an expression of the times. It is thus possible to think, considering the theory and praxis of the SN, that the issue of politics and armed struggle was a negation of violence.

Indeed, throughout its existence, the SN tried to keep politics and armed struggle moving on separate tracks. We believe the explanation for this particular aspect lies in part on the outstanding distribution of tasks on a national level, where the national SN delegated all armed actions to the Rosario group. Gabriela remembers, along the lines of this idea, that "there was not in Rosario, as there was in Córdoba, say, creation, development of theory and political line, that was the task of the *cordobeses* ...*there was a very clear cut division between the cordobeses,*

15 We could say that historians have tended to over generalize by giving similar meanings to the categories of guerrilla, armed struggle and *foco*. Arguing in a different direction, Pablo Pozzi insists that "the development of guerrillas in Argentina during the 1970s was quite complex and escapes easy classification. There were throughout the period approximately seventeen different organizations, five of which became important in the national political scene.... None of these organizations could be clearly classified as *foquista*. They all did mass work, and had legal fronts, trade unions, newspapers, and youth and student organizations". "Los setentistas: hacia una historia oral de la guerrilla en la Argentina", *Anuario* #16, segunda época, 1993 – 1994, Escuela de Historia, Facultad de Humanidades y Artes, Universidad Nacional de Rosario.

16 Interview with Pedro, my underlining.

who thought, and us, who got the money so they could think”.¹⁷

Let us again underline that an undeniable characteristic of the Rosario group was its intense armed activity, as opposed to the Córdoba group. It is also important to point out that the national leadership worked out of the province of Córdoba, from where the organization’s political line was issued, to then be discussed by the membership in different areas. The separation between arms and politics that Gabriela remembers in her experience appeared as natural in this scenario. We have to point out that such a particular arrangement was accepted without questioning.

Pedro, Gabriela and Raúl, in bringing the experience of their past commitment to the *Sabinos* to the present, did more than merely engage in long sessions of questions and answers. Above all, they thought through their militant paths and what became of them over time. Our main purpose in this paper was to fix our attention in the armed experience, because our interviewees repeatedly emphasized the original effort the SN made to overcome the experience of Montoneros. Beyond what was expected and what was achieved, it is appropriate to ask whether the bet was feasible. In other words: is it possible to think the link between politics and violence outside the canon imposed by our own time and space?

The coming of the SN in Rosario brought together a number of dissident militants from the Montoneros Organization, who aimed at developing a political practice adhering to the general principles of the independent alternative and acting in concert with the most advanced sector of the labor movement, operating outside the traditionally bureaucratic structures of *Peronismo*. To that purpose, they consolidated numerous factory committees and supported elections in trade unions, while at the same time doing neighborhood organizing and strengthening student groups.

Meanwhile, their appropriation of the theoretical tenets of the “independent alternative” meant rethinking the pertinence of guerrilla *foco* theory as

the means to power. This had important consequences in the practice of the SN. Above all, it meant a new and distinct interpretation of armed struggle. They meant to reduce it to a mere tool without any political meaning, and consequently created a sophisticated logistical branch that would provide infrastructure and money for the whole organization. This particular characteristic may not be understood without the accompanying politics, because these actions were carried out due to the expectations borne out of everyday militancy and the possibility of revolution. It is for this reason that the armed actions of the SN must also be understood in a more general framework that evinces an affirmation of armed struggle as a way of political intervention. Does this mean that such an affirmation corresponds with what is commonly known as 1970s political militancy? Or to phrase it differently, was armed struggle a characteristic that identified militant practice in the 1970s?

Furthermore, how far may we go in explaining—and understanding—the reach and limits, the effectiveness, the legitimacy or the usefulness of armed actions as concrete forms of expression of politics, regardless of when and where they were thought? Many of the present debates on the political practice of the 1970s take for granted the opposition between violence and politics, often limiting their capacity to understand how these issues change and develop over time.¹⁸ On the contrary, we believe such issues must be understood from a critical perspective that considers the multiple meanings assigned to militancy and to liberation politics.

In the stories told by Pedro, Gabriela and Raúl it is evident that armed struggle was an indissoluble complement to militancy and liberation

18 This and other problems are discussed in Alejandra Oberti and Roberto Pittaluga, *Memorias en montaje. Escrituras de la militancia y pensamientos sobre la historia*, Buenos Aires, El Cielo por Asalto, 2006. The authors argue for the need to elaborate a critical memory of the recent past in Argentina, and approach the ways of linking politics to armed struggle, and in this sense ask if the practice of armed organizations is not in fact “an expression of the absence of politics” (p. 47).

17 Interview with Gabriela, my underlining.

politics, and for that reason their effort to make the SN a political alternative to the militarist logic of Montoneros did not mean the abandonment of arms. On the contrary, this effort led to a new conception of armed struggle, placing it on a different plane that limited it to the merely utilitarian func-

tion of financial support.

