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Counter-Revolution Without Revolutionaries: Conspiracy in the Argentine Barracks, 1919-1930

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In 1921, the US military attaché to Argentina sent a report concerning the apparent influence of revolutionary propaganda in the military:

> Lt. Colonel Jose Maria Argañaraz of the Council of War for non-commissioned officers and troops of the Army recently terminated his report concerning the accusations against 42 persons in the Army for subversive and anarchist propaganda in the Army. The defense will be constituted by 12 officers in the Army. This prosecution is attracting great interest in the Argentine Army, and its particular importance is the demonstration of an abnormal condition in the Army inasmuch as discipline in the Fifth Division is concerned.[1]

A subsequent U.S. Military Attaché report mentioned the discovery of a "soviet" in a military installation near Buenos Aires. Details such as the date, location, or nature of the leftist organizing were vague.[2]

Although short on details, these reports find an echo in the clandestinely published newspaper, *El soldado rojo* [The Red Soldier]. First published in late 1919, the front page of the two extant issues shows a worker shaking hands with a soldier. The

[1] United States. Dept. of the Army. General Staff. Military Intelligence Division. 1984. *US Military Intelligence Reports: Argentina, 1918-1941* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America) Reel 3, frame 00152, "Army Items from Argentina," (November 5, 1921).

[2] *US Military Intelligence Reports: Argentina, 1918-1941*. Reel 3, frame 00318 "Discipline and Morale," (December 3, 1923). See also Reel 3, Frame 00155 (January 2, 1922). See also a report on disturbances in barracks in Buenos Aires, *La Nación* (February 16, 1922).

worker holds a flag that carries the words "Bandera Roja" [Red Flag], which happens to also be the name of an anarchist paper published during the same time period. The paper claimed to represent clandestine soldier, sailor and police soviets that sought to emulate what had developed in the armed forces of the late Russian Empire. By infiltrating military and police units, the paper suggested, revolutionaries were disrupting military discipline and creating "a propitious ambience for rebellion and abandonment of policing and defense activities that the bourgeoisie assign to the armed forces."[3] The monthly paper gives the impression that already by the early 1920s there was a sizeable network of revolutionary cells in the Argentine army. The only known copies of *El soldado rojo* are housed at the International Institute of Social History's collection of anarchist periodicals (Nettlau 2013). Several historians have identified Enrique García Thómas, a Catalan-born mechanic and anarchist, as the editor of the clandestine paper (Doeswijk 2013; Tarcus 2007, 242-43).

Both of these compelling stories of resistance against the power of the state, however, were fabrications. These false narratives developed in different ways. The Jujuy barracks "soviet" story was the result of newspapers reporting rumor as fact and of extrapolating that the presence of anarchist literature in the barracks must mean there was a plot afoot. The newspaper, however, was likely the product of a deliberate plot by the Federal Police (possibly the *Orden Social*, renamed and expanded into *Sección Especial* in the 1930s) to fabricate evidence and then to plant it on leftists. Strikingly, both events had lives that extended well beyond their initial creation. So much so that when I first encountered these documents, I found them plausible.

Argentine historian Daniel Lvovich outlines the development in Argentina of a mentality that he calls the "Gran Miedo" [The Great Fear] during the years after the Russian Revolution of 1917. Lvovich convincingly demonstrates increased labor militancy and economic uncertainty generated fear, misinformation, fantasy, and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about how Argentina was poised to become the next site of communist revolution. (Lvovich 2004). Lvovich offers a clear framework for understanding how these conditions made conspiratorial fantasies plausible but he does not consider the important case of the Armed Forces. Similarly, studies of *La Forestal* strike and labor massacre in 1921-22 point to a growing paranoia on the part of government officials and the propertied classes about the threat of revolution and of

[3] "La propaganda en el ejército," *El soldado rojo* 2:11 (August, 1922): 1.

workers' "soviets" but make no mention of anxiety about leftist infiltration of the barracks. (Jasinski 2013, 109-35; Rapalo 2012, 139-188).

After 1917, Argentine military officers and their civilian allies on the right began to pay attention more closely the loyalty of troops. Much of their growing concern (we cannot use the word "anxiety") was driven by increasing levels of strife and violence between organized labor and business and the state, which in turn led to soldiers being called upon to perform internal security work. The case of the imperial Russian army and the dissolution of discipline as its soldiers turned on their officers was a subject of great interest. (Smith 1918). Perhaps even more troubling to the military hierarchy were growing levels of actual subversive activity in the lower ranks of the Brazilian and Chilean militaries during the 1920s and 1930s. (Nunn 1970; Diacon 1998; Love 2012). In Argentina, the bourgeois press played an important role in fomenting conspiratorial delusions in large part because they were inclined to blur the distinction between run-of-the-mill indiscipline and outright subversion. The latter had not been contemplated when the 1905 Code of Military Justice was passed into law.

Ironically, sectors of both the left and the right were to varying degrees predisposed to believe that subversion, coordinated by outside forces, was a major factor within Argentina's barracks. Both conservative and working-class newspapers reported on soldiers resisting orders, especially during the period of heightened strikes and military repression that occurred from 1919-1922. In other words, the idea that Argentine soldiers might be ideologically informed enough to refuse orders or to otherwise undermine their growing internal security functions had politically-diverse adherents. The existence of a robust and vibrant anti-militarist press tradition in Socialist, anarchist, and syndicalist dailies may have inadvertently increased the perception of widespread insubordination (Ablard 2017). These publications found widespread readership, not just among the working classes and middle-class leftists, but also by military and police who monitored the publications and their authors.

Equally important to this story was the work of the police, and possibly the army, in fabricating documents to give the false impression of dangerous subversion. Such counter-propaganda would drive the development of a more doctrinaire and cohesive right-wing in Argentine politics and served to justify a greater degree of internal discipline within the military. Paradoxically, but to a lesser degree, these fabricated stories of conscripts organizing in the barracks formed part of the left's own mythology of a heroic and revolutionary conscripts and would be revived during the guerrilla struggles of the late 1960s. Few scholars have fully considered the impact of

police infiltration on the Argentine left, in part because police archives are both incomplete and often inaccessible to researchers.

Scholarship on right-wing Argentine politics has focused almost exclusively on how the perceived threat to the social and political status quo by organized labor and immigration more generally helped foment fascist-inspired counterrevolutionary movements, most notably the *Liga Patriótica Argentina* (Deutsch 1999, 78-106; Finchelstein 2014; Rock 1993; Spektorowski 2003). Strikingly absent from the major studies of the period are deeper examinations of policies and practices within the barracks and aboard ships. Officers' interactions with conscripts, enlisted, and non-commissioned officers, most of whom came from the working classes, influenced the move of many in the hierarchy to engage with right-wing or counterrevolutionary organizations.

The history of the Argentine left also starts looking different when we consider the problem of conspiracy theories. The archival record on Argentine anarchists and syndicalists is remarkably sparse considering the extensive historiography on these movements. For decades, scholars have relied heavily upon these groups' own publications to reconstruct the leadership, organization, and actions. As Luciana Anapios convincingly argues, in many cases the newspapers were central to the larger organizations that they represented. Editors and writers were often in leadership positions (Ananpios 2011; Suriano 2001). Still, the cases outlined below suggest that a missing piece in the history of the Argentine left is the state's infiltration of the movements. Studies from Europe, for example, indicate not only high levels of surveillance but also of penetration and manipulation by *agents provocateurs*. In several cases, European anarchist publications were in fact funded by the very police who were monitoring them (Jensen 2014, 37-61). These studies suggest that the history of the left in Argentina is incomplete without a deeper examination of its infiltration by state agents (Anapios 2013; Caimari 2017, 76-77).

More broadly, despite the profound imprint on Argentine politics, society, and economic, scholars have paid surprisingly little attention to the internal operations of the armed forces prior to the 1930s. The historiography on this incredibly important sector of the Argentine state is especially thin with respect to the rank and file.[4] This

[4] Robert A. Potash, *The Army and Politics in Argentina, 1928-1945: Yrigoyen to Perón* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969) is a foundational and path-breaking text, which, along with his subsequent two volumes, relies heavily upon published sources and a huge number of interviews with officers. Another important source, with no archival basis, is Loris

state of affairs is in large part a result of archival challenges. First, little documentation from the period of Radical rule (1916-1930) survived the 1930 military coup d'état.[5] Second, until quite recently, military archives such as the *Archivo General del Ejército* and the *Archivo General de la Armada de la República Argentina* were effectively sealed off from meaningful research. Even following reforms that improved access, many files remain classified as *reservado* or *secreto* or there are no indexes (Ministerio de Defensa 2015). The remarkable *Archivo Histórico de la Justicia Militar* which is housed in the *Archivo General de la Nación-Intermedio* holds almost no records from before the 1955 military coup against President Perón. Finally, the Ministry of War's annual reports are minimalist in their details of daily life of soldiers. The lack of access to documentation is often a precondition for a conspiracy theory gaining viability.

Conspiracy theories, stories or rumors about a conspiracy or plot that prove to be false, and conspiracies operate dynamically and synergistically with each other. Actual conspiracies, or the widespread belief that a conspiracy might exist, whether organized by powerful groups or by subordinate or marginalized groups, generate anxiety, and distrust. A population that has experienced, or heard of, a rumored conspiracy, will be more inclined to see other conspiracies out in the world. In other words, the experience of conspiracy will generate future conspiracy theories by the anxious, the fearful, and the paranoid. Conspiracy theories in general share a set of common factors: willful fabrication of untruths; a high level of distrust or fear, which may be directed at the state, at a political or social group, or at a vague foreign entity; and, perhaps most importantly, plausibility to diverse sectors of the public. On this last point, sometimes people holding diametrically opposing viewpoints can believe the same conspiracy theory, even if their interpretations about its significance are completely distinct. As a general rule, conspiracy theories thrive where the state operates with low levels of transparency, which may in turn generate low levels of trust about the state (Olmsted 2009).[6] But those with the means to manage popular opinion can also insert themselves into this dynamic and create politically useful conspiracy

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Zanatta, *Del estado liberal a la nación católica: Iglesia y Ejército en los orígenes del peronismo. 1930-1943* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 1996).

[5] Works that center on this time period rely heavily upon published sources. The practice of destroying records continued with the first Peronist government (1946-1955) and after the coup that overthrew him in 1955.

[6] The literature on slave societies is also instructive. See Jason T. Sharples, "Discovering Slave Conspiracies: New Fears of Rebellion and Old Paradigms of Plotting in Seventeenth-Century Barbados," *American Historical Review* (June 2015): 811-843; Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York: Knopf, 2005).

theories. Thus, not all conspiracy theories are alike; some are a creation of popular imagination and fear, while others are consciously created.

Conspiracy theories are texts historians can employ despite the sources being fallacious, wrong-headed, or fabricated. Briefly, we can gain insights into a people's anxieties, myths and fears. They also indicate what is considered believable. Finally, as in famous cases like the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* or the *Donation of Constantine*, state-sponsored fabrications reveal some of the ways that states deploy information to solidify power and claim legitimacy.[7]

Argentina has proven to be fertile ground for the development of conspiratorial fantasies with specific national characteristics.[8] High levels of armed political conflict, characterized by regional *caudillos*, hampered full national integration until the 1880s. A range of political actors, including most notably the caudillo Juan Manuel de Rosas, who ruled as de facto head of state from the 1830s until 1852, fomented an atmosphere of actual conspiracies and false conspiratorial accusations against opponents. Armed rebellion and state violence were commonplace and there was little consensus about the form that the Argentine national state should take. After national consolidation and the eventual formation of a recognizable national state, politics was increasingly controlled by the *Partido Autonomista Nacional*, which successfully managed the often conflicting economic and political agendas of the numerous provinces. A relatively restricted political order operated, paradoxically, in a society that was characterized by high levels of immigration, remarkable periods of economic growth, a flourishing and diverse press, and a highly combative and mobilized working class. Union membership rates were relatively high in urban areas and certain export zones but union politics tended to be fractious with intense ideological conflicts erupting within and between organizations (Munck 1986). The gap between the traditional elite, the growing middle class, and the foreign-born spawned at times high levels of mistrust and animosity. A relatively weak sense of national identity further intensified both the appeal and viability of conspiracy theories (Bohoslavsky 2009, 15-27). After the passage of male obligatory suffrage and the accompanying modernization of military enrollment and conscription in 1911-1912, the barracks was transformed into the site of a project to nationalize young men. Military service spawned both

[7] The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, created by the czarist secret police before World War One, is the most famous example. A Renaissance philologist exposed the *Donation of Constantine* in 1440 and threw into doubt the Church's historical claims.

[8] Little historical work exists on conspiracies in Argentina. Writers, including Jorge Luis Borges, Ricardo Piglia, and Roberto Arlt, have produced insightful works on the topic.

optimism about the role that the Armed Forces would play in developing an Argentine national identity, but the arrival of so many young men, many with backgrounds in the country's radical labor movement also produced concern (Ablard 2017). Thanks to the above-mentioned electoral reform, the Unión Cívica Radical party, which had engaged in conspiracies and rebellions when the electoral path to power had been blocked, came to national power in 1916. While in power, the Radical government alternated between attempts to reconcile with organized labor and, when politically expedient, repressing it. Nonetheless, Radical rule was generally popular among the working class (Horowitz 2008). Hipólito Yrigoyen served as president twice, first from 1916-1922, and again from 1928, until he was overthrown in 1930. From 1922 until 1928, Marcelo T. de Alvaer, who was generally well regarded by the armed forces, was president. The right, which grew quickly after 1916, had strong links within the armed forces high command, dubbed Yrigoyen as the "Argentine Kerensky" for his supposed weakness in the face of the growing communist peril after the Russian Revolution and the ways that he politicized the officer corps. Massive labor protests and strikes in Buenos Aires (1919), Santa Fe (1921-1922) and Santa Cruz (1920-22) resulted in large casualties among foreign born workers, and Jewish and Catalan urban residents. For the right, however, these violent episodes were proof of the threat of communist subversion, even though few soldiers or police were even seriously injured. The market crash of 1929 and concern about Yrigoyen's ability to maintain order, both inside the barracks and among the working class, led to his overthrow in September 1930 by a civilian-military conspiracy headed by General Uriburu. Through the end of the 1930s, sectors of the deposed Radical party, including Army officers and non-commissioned officers, attempted a variety of armed uprisings and conspiracies against the authoritarian regimes that had banned their party (López Marsano and Salas 2017). Ironically, there had been virtually no viable conspiracies by the lower ranks against the established order until the coup, which had been justified in part as a measure to prevent such subversion. This cycle of civilian governments being overthrown in military coups continued until the restoration of democracy in 1983.

"Soviets" in the Barracks: From Jujuy to Campo de Mayo

In early October 1920, a fist-fight broke out between members of the 19th and 20th infantry of the Fifth Division (Jujuy) and the local police force during the annual religious festival of Rio Blanco, after a soldier was arrested on charges of being drunk and disorderly. After the ensuing fisticuffs, the local police arrested ten additional

soldiers (who claimed to be defending the honor of the armed forces) and charged them with "disrespect to authority while armed" [desacato a la autoridad a mano armada]. Following the initial confrontation, a group of as many as 80 conscripts and several non-commissioned officers assaulted the local police station where the men were being detained.[9] Armed with Mausers, revolvers, and crude weapons, the renegade soldiers attacked the police station in downtown Jujuy, until finally being ordered back to their barracks by Major Espinoza and two other regimental officers, Videla and Moscoso (neither rank nor last names were listed). The confrontation resulted in the death of two police officers and one soldier.[10] This event was the Jujuy "soviet."

The newspapers of Jujuy covered the story intensively for a period of weeks but it did not make it into the *porteño* press. *El Heraldo*, a paper critical of Radical governor Horacio Carrillo, distributed blame equally to the provincial police (for incompetence) and the Army commanders (for failure to maintain discipline). The police, it was alleged, had grown progressively incompetent and corrupt under the rule of the Radicals. Yet the paper wondered how a mass of conscripts and NCOs (non-commissioned officers) had ever obtained weapons and removed them from the barracks without the knowledge of commanding officers.[11] During the following months, charges went flying between Radical and the opposition parties over blame for the incident, and who were using it to gain political advantage.[12]

El Día, which was sympathetic to the Radical party, decisively sided with the local police, as did most of the local populace. The funerals of the murdered police officers were attended by "the whole city," while that of the dead conscript was attended by only "250-300 workers." In a sign of solidarity with the fallen policemen,

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[9] "Choque sangriento entre las tropas policiales y de línea en Jujuy-causas que motivaron los sucesos," *La Razón* (October 13, 1920): 5. See also "Choque sangriento en Jujuy-tiroteo entre tropas policiales y de línea," *La Razón* (October 11, 1920): 4. Dr. Adriana Kindgard, Jujuy, has kindly located newspaper accounts from the province. The trial records of soldiers whose cases landed in the provincial civilian courts are found in the Expediente 232 "Juzgado del Crimen" (1920) *Archivo de la Provincia de Jujuy*.

[10] "Las graves sucesos ocurridos en Jujuy-telegramas al ministro de la Guerra y al gobernador-Entrevista con Dr. Carrillo," *La Razón* (October 11, 1920): 1. The governor of Jujuy had warned the Ministry of War about problems with the 20th regiment. Subsequent to the disorders, he requested the regiment's transfer out of the city. Fifth Division commander General Cornell was investigating the situation.

[11] "Más sangre bajo el gobierno de Carrillo—conflicto entre el ejército y la policía—el asalto del domingo-muertos y heridos-los responsables," *El Heraldo* (Jujuy) (October 12, 1920): 1.

[12] "La prensa nacional y el as alto a la policia," *El Dia* (Jujuy) (October 16, 1920): 1; "La prensa nacional y el as alto a la policia—juicios definitivos," *El Dia* (October 25, 1920): 1.

shopkeepers closed on the day of the funerals and the widows were awarded pensions. As to the events of that bloody night, the newspaper noted that soldiers had ignored regimental commander Regalado's order to remain in the barracks.[13]

Quickly, the incident involved both the civilian and military judiciaries. Civilian judge Ricardo Baca (Jujuy) confronted the problem of investigating multiple crimes, including murder, the beating of a worker, and a disturbance at a local bordello. Eventually, roughly a dozen of the soldiers would be processed through the provincial courts system.[14] At the initial stages of the investigation, there was no mention of conspiracy or of a "soviet."

At the same time, military investigating judge [*juez sumariante*] Colonel Alfredo Córdova arrived from the province of Salta to determine the legal process of the remaining forty or so conscripts and non-commissioned officers. By October 14, *El Dia* reported, perhaps not entirely accurately, that the conscripts who had been under the authority of Judge Baca had been released back to the authority of the Army. The paper complained that, notwithstanding the valor of the officers on duty during the assault, the attack on the station was widely discussed in the bars and clubs of the city, and could have been prevented altogether. Would the perpetrators of the crime, the paper asked, ever be brought to justice?[15] Especially important was that the military judge determined early on that notwithstanding mutual recriminations and blame from the political parties, the incident was a riot/brawl with no significant political designs. Similarly, the judge's report [*sumario*] determined that commanding officers were negligent, but had in no way been complicit in the assault.[16]

As the case slipped out of the news, Jujuy welcomed news that they were to host the annual Army manoeuvres. Courted by governor Carrillo, no doubt well before the violent incident, the newspapers celebrated the arrival of 3,000 soldiers to the province, an event which promised to be a boon to the local economy.[17] *El Día* published an editorial, "Greetings to the conscripts," which praised young men who

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[13] "La asonada de los conscriptos—-recompensa al valor y al mérito—documentos oficiales—más detalles," *El Dia* (October 13, 1920): 1.

[14] It is not clear why some ended up in the civilian courts and others not.

[15] "Ecos del as alto a la policía," *El Día* (Jujuy) (October 14, 1920): 1.

[16] "La prensa nacional y el as alto a la policia-juicios definitivos," *El Dia* (Jujuy) (October 25, 1920): 1 cites the Buenos Aires daily *La Unión*.

[17] "El gobernador y el ejército," *El Día* (Jujuy) (November 26, 1920): 1.

did their year of service. But the editorial also lamented the corrosive leftist ideologies and cosmopolitanism that denigrated both service and patriotism.[18]

The events of October 1920 were, on the surface, simply a case of a military unit off the rails. But the military's investigation, which began to gain attention in Buenos Aires, led them to conclude that the root of the disorder was more nefarious. Influenced by "advanced ideas" [ideas advanzadas]—shorthand in the period for leftist ideologies or concepts—which had been disseminated to the lower ranks by unscrupulous non-commissioned officers, the attack on the police station was in fact an effort at "social revolution." General Cornell, commander of the Fifth Division, noted that one important lesson was to improve the selection criteria for NCOs.[19]

Between their arrest and the trials was a delay of a year and a half that troubled even papers that supported the subversion interpretation. *La Razón*, a paper aligned with the ruling Radical party, argued that the delay of the legal process of so many men was damaging to morale and discipline. Worse, what of the men who were in fact innocent? In contrast to earlier critiques of military justice moving too fast, here it was the opposite problem.[20] For entirely different reasons, the anarchist *La Protesta* also condemned the delay; "an unjust sentence is better than the infamy of uncertainty."[21] *La Protesta* reported that the accused had been held *in communicado* and tortured—a charge that I cannot verify with certainty—with a variety of means including the threat of execution. This paper also raised the question of why the men had been transferred from Jujuy all the way to the military prison at Campo de Mayo in Buenos Aires [This was common practice for major military trials]. There, the forty-two men were brought before the *Consejo Superior de Guerra*. The anarchist paper went to great lengths to

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[18] "Saludo a los conscriptos," *El Día* (Jujuy) (November 26, 1920): 1. For further evidence of cordial relations between the Radical government of Jujuy and the Army, see "Jujuy y el ejército," *El Día* (December 4, 1920) and "Ecos de las maniobras realizadas en Salta y Jujuy," *El Día* (December 24, 1920): 1.

[19] "Propaganda inconveniente en el ejército—comprobaciones del caso de Jujuy-manifestaciones del General Cornell," *La Razón* (March 14, 1921): 1

[20] "Justicia militar-propaganda anárquica en el ejército—una causa interminable," *La Razón* (November 8, 1921): 6. "La justicia militar-los recursos ante el Consejo Superior," *La Razón* (July 20, 1922): 1 noted that conscripts, who had left home to do their service, had by now spent over two years imprisoned.

[21] *La Protesta* (12 March 1922): 1. "[e]s preferible una condena infame, a la infamia de la incertidumbre". The article went on: "La 'justicia' militar, que aunque tan mala como la civil no es más diligente que esta, se propone mover una pata. Cuidado! El monstruo se va a mover hacia adelante en busca de presas. Las victimas que esperan turno para ser devorados son esos 40 y tantos soldados de los regimientos 19 y 20 de infantería que están procesados por sedición".

emphasize that the accused conscripts were not "anarchists" and that the non-commissioned officers were not either, even if they thought they were.[22]

The actual trial records have not surfaced to date, nor have they been made available, in any public archive in Argentina.[23] From the Army's own digest of the trial published in *Boletín Militar* we can draw several conclusions about how the Army viewed the matter and also the logic of the sentencing. First, it was believed that the propagation of revolutionary doctrines inside the barracks was likely contained to Jujuy and that the actual number of men involved with political work was limited to about ten non-commissioned officers. Second, the Army did not take the actual threat of a soviet seriously. In one document, court officials note that the intercepted communications of the ringleader, Sergeant Cipriano Wertel Medina (his middle name is spelled differently in some accounts) was planning to create a "workers and soldiers soviet" but the texts that he wrote on the subject "cannot be read without laughing."[24] Third, the court noted that the Military Code of Justice was insufficient with respect to problems of subversive propaganda so the court had to look to the 1910 civilian "Law of Social Defense." Fourth, at no point in the published record is there any mention of *El soldado rojo,* a point to which we will return later. Finally, the court noted that the assault on the police barracks and the subversive activities were distinct but were rooted in a common problem, the unit's "state of disorganization and indiscipline."[25] The military court's final report and sentencing about the October 1920 incident revealed that the accusations of seditious actions on behalf of a revolutionary movement were a fabrication (Who had created the story? Perhaps non-commissioned officers who were trying to cover themselves by accusing the lower ranks). It was, instead, a riot of sorts, led by non-commissioned officers, against a local police barracks to settle a personal score. The sergeants and corporals were given longer sentences than the regular soldiers and conscripts.

The trial, or the printed trial record, quickly spread to the newspapers of Buenos Aires. News stories often quoted *Boletín Militar* reports word for word. Our interest here is in what the papers found interesting or important but also how some of

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[22] "Los soldados 'ácratas': Porque se les condenó," *La Protesta* (March 25, 1922): 1.

[23] The court documents could reveal important information, including the accused's service records, evidence of specifically which clandestine texts they were reading, who they were in contact with in the community and detailed testimonials by witnesses and character witnesses.

[24] *Boletín Militar* 6185 (May 18, 1922): 567-68.

[25] *Boletín Militar* 6185 (May 18, 1922): 571.

the papers amplified the marginal revolutionary impetus of the riot into something more threatening.

La Protesta, which as an anarchist paper was most deeply invested in separating the incident from their movement, quoted from the judge's final statement.

> An unheard of loosening of unit discipline, and an incomprehensible negligence by the commanding officer in not adapting emergency measures. Upon receiving concrete information about the rebellious sentiments that were wreaking havoc in the minds of subordinates and criminal weakness [the officer in question did] not decisively punish the innumerable proven misdeeds.

For *La Protesta,* especially noteworthy was the judge's comment that "it was not an army unit of the line but a gang of armed men [montonera]."[26] The comment inverted the long-standing tradition of equating anarchism with the forces of disorder. Here a military judge acknowledged that the forces of order were not what they seemed.

Whereas the military court offered a balanced assessment of the relationship between the assault on the police and the subversive activities, the bourgeois press moved closer to the conclusion that the events in Jujuy had in fact constituted acts of subversion. A wider context of this loose reading of the trial transcripts was that the case fit into the growing argument that President Yrigoyen's lax oversight of military discipline was fomenting these kinds of problems (Potash 1969).

It was in the process of this tortured logic that the myth of the soviets emerged. For *La Prensa*, judge Lt. Col. Argañaraz's suggestion that anarchist and subversive propaganda had created a moral climate of rebellion was itself evidence of a revolutionary situation. These dangerous ideas had been introduced by NCOs, and especially Sergeant Medina, who received the heaviest sentence of six years.[27] *La Prensa* wondered both about the role of non-commissioned officers but also how their commanding officers had failed to monitor revolutionary activities. How had a sergeant managed to maintain a correspondence with "anarchists" to whom he had offered "to help with the army to turn a general strike into a dream for social revolution with a corresponding government run by a soviet of workers and soldiers?" [28] The paper also complained that this was not the first time that leftist propaganda had penetrated a

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[26] "La justicia militar," *La Protesta* (14 marzo 1922): 2.

[27] "Justicia militar-propaganda sediciosa en el ejército," *La Prensa* (March 11, 1922): 9; "Justicia militar-fallo de la causa por conspiración," *La Prensa* (March 12, 1922). For a list of the sentences issued, see *Boletín Militar* 6209 (October 27, 1922): 1084-1099. They noted that Sergeant Medina was often drunk.

[28] "Proyecciones de un proceso militar", *La Prensa* (March 15, 1922): 1.

military unit, a cryptic remark with no mention of specific incidents. Contrary to the *Consejo*'s conclusions, the paper believed that subversion was widespread among Army installations. They concluded that higher-ranking officers should be investigated especially with regards to the breakdown in discipline. Such a position was consistent with wider criticisms of how the Radical government mismanaged the armed forces but also demonstrates a certain anxiety about non-commissioned officers, a group notorious for their brutality towards conscripts.

La Razón—a paper that was closely aligned with the president's Unión Cívica Radical party—also ignored the nuance of the court's findings and continued to present a certain ambiguity about the case. On one hand, *La Razón* noted that lower-ranking soldiers were too often blamed for the failure of commanding officers to enforce appropriate discipline. Indeed, the Consejo Superior de Guerra had passed along the case to the Ministry of War to have them determine if any officers should be held accountable. Specific cases of abusive NCOs, like that of Corporal Mora, raised the question of how it was possible for officers to not know of the situation. The paper speculated that officers might tolerate the abuse believing that it fosters better discipline by lower ranks. At the same time, the paper concluded that other NCOs had induced uneducated and "mentally weak" conscripts to accept "anarchistic and maximalist propaganda."[29]

A month later, after President Yrigoyen had confirmed the sentences, *La Razón* continued in its line of both critiquing the military but also raising the alarm about sedition.[30] While cases of widespread sedition with the ranks were notably absent from Argentina, the Radical paper noted with alarm the evidence that the indiscipline at Jujuy within the ranks had been fomented by Sergeant Medina, who had frequented union and anarchist meetings. The paper reasoned that such ideas were attractive to those who were ignorant and poor and with "disturbed minds" ["cerebros perturbados"] and "low intelligence" ["poca inteligencia"]. The sergeant, described as of low mental capacity, seemed to embody that characterization. There was evidence that he had indeed conspired to foment an uprising, with the goal of creating a soviet, but it was, in the newspaper's view, a risible project. A case in point was the crude effort at communicating with civilian conspirators with a homemade system of codes. Still, the poor discipline and order within the barracks, including the mistreatment of conscripts,

[29] "La justicia militar-la responsibilidad del superior", *La Razón* (April 11, 1922): 6.

[30] In Argentina, military justice falls under the authority of the Executive branch of government.

created fertile ground for radical ideas; proper food, schooling, and a nurturing environment would serve to repel the attraction of these notions. The paper repeated the court's assessment that "this regiment was not a line unit of the army but a gang of armed men" ["aquel regimiento no era ya un cuerpo de línea del ejército, sino una montonera"]. Despite the lack of a threat, the events had revealed the danger of revolutionary agents and the paper echoed the court and called for the application of Law 7029, the Law of Social Defense from 1910, so as to more thoroughly deracinate those potential and real revolutionaries from the social fabric.[31]

The Socialist *La Vanguardia* reported the trial in more subdued tones and rejected the conspiratorial approach. While noting presiding judge Argañaraz's criticism of the commanding officers at Jujuy, the paper reported that about half of the accused were absolved. The article failed to mention either the men's long detention or the allegations of torture.[32] Yet, by May of 1922, waiting for final confirmation of the CSG's sentences, *La Vanguardia* attacked President Yrigoyen's hypocrisy, observing that the president's early career had been full of conspiratorial acts against the government of the day. Ironically, he had become the upholder of order. The paper did not deny the presence of leftist thought in the ranks, but suggested that it was probably a product of "readings little understood" by non-commissioned officers of little education or culture. In truth, the riot reflected the poor living conditions of soldiers and a distorted command structure in which higher level officers were out of touch with life in the barracks. Finally, the paper alluded to the 1910 Social Law (which was used to expel foreign born leftist from Argentina) to suggest that military trials were operating to enforce the political order.[33]

The cryptic and vague discussions of soviets and revolutionary indiscipline mentioned at the start of this paper focused on two incidents, one in Jujuy and one near the capital of the republic. Pending further research, there is little evidence that the latter was more than a simple case of badly behaved conscripts. As best I can determine, the following case is likely what spurred the specter of another soviet. In late 1922, a number of conscripts had been arrested and jailed for indiscipline after they had created

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[31] "Justicia militar-la causa por sedición y propaganda anárquica," *La Razón* (May 29, 1922): 6. The article listed some of the men convicted to serve in a *compañía de disciplina* for varying terms: Rufino Corpus, Nabor Rivera, Andrés Gallan, Julio Orellanes, Bartolomé Ocampo, Navidad Vázquez, and Gregorio Trejo. An unspecified number were absolved. The four principals, including Sergeant Medina, were expected to receive much longer sentences.

[32] "Sedición militar: ecos del as alto a la policía de Jujuy-sentencia del consejo de guerra para suboficiales y tropa," *La Vanguardia* (March 12, 1922): 4

[33] "La 'ley social' en el ejército," *La Vanguardia* (May 30, 1922): 1.

disorders on the Pacífico line between Buenos Aires and the Campo de Mayo base. *La Razón,* in a December 1922 article, complained that throughout the republic men under the flag had lost respect for the uniform. Claiming such incidents were not commonplace, the paper celebrated the Ministry of War's plan to crack down on indiscipline within the ranks. The article connected the Campo de Mayo incidents to the "seditious efforts" of the soldiers in Jujuy; there was a dangerous trend in which the line between simple indiscipline and more nefarious designs was growing difficult to discern.[34] And while their goals were unlikely to have been revolutionary, conscripts did occasionally stage protests over their mistreatment and neglect.[35]

Other Accusations of "Subversive"

In a moment in which acts of indiscipline, a rather flexible term in the military, came to be seen by the hierarchy and many newspapers as signs of revolutionary potential, soldiers may well have been vulnerable to unfounded accusations. The cases that follow capture the power of accusation, although as in the first case below, sometimes these accusations were met with skepticism even from newspapers inclined to worry about soviets and subversion.

In 1921, conscript José León Schwartz fell under military suspicion after he was found to have attended a meeting sponsored by the "Medical School Center ["Centro estudiantes de medicina"] in the city of Córdoba. An investigation determined that he "held 'advanced ideas,'" had made "unpatriotic" comments and had denigrated the armed forces.[36] He was sentenced to a term with a disciplinary brigade in either Chaco or Formosa. Even the conservative *La Prensa* expressed concern, however, that Schwartz's civil protections were being ignored and even worried that anonymous accusations of communism should not be taken at face value. The paper noted that a defense of the student was being organized by classmates in the university.[37]

The problem of accusation being equated with fact is seen in the case of a civilian barber in the employ of the Army. In March or April of 1921, Jenaro di Giorgio, employed at the Arsenal de Guerra, told a sergeant that conscripts who were within 45 days of their release from service were not required to receive regulation haircuts. The

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[34] "Desordenes de conscriptos: El respeto al uniforme," *La Razón* (December 6, 1922).

[35] "El servicio militar—las protestas," *La Vanguardia* (April 8, 1920): 1.

[36] "La reacción en la provincia—el confinamiento del conscripto Schwartz", *La Vanguardia* (July 28, 1921): 4. See also "En defensa del conscripto Schwartz—La Federación Socialista adhiere a la protesta", *La Vanguardia* (June 26, 1921): 7.

[37] "Sobre la condena de un estudiante Schwartz", *La Prensa* (June 12, 1921): 12.

sergeant called in his immediate superior, Captain Martínez, who proceeded to beat the barber before having him placed under arrest. Soon after his arrest, the commanding officer Colonel Arroyo issued formal charges: the barber "was spreading anarchist propaganda among the ranks." According to *La Vanguardia*, not only did the military justice lack jurisdiction over a civilian employee of the military, but it was a clear case of using the accusation of subversion to cover for the violation of the military prohibition of corporal punishment.[38] Di Giorgio enjoyed good luck in this case. Unlike the isolated soldiers in Jujuy, his case made it into the dailies of Buenos Aires, and for some reason he attracted the support of both Radicals and Socialists, and a federal judge ordered a writ of *habeus corpus* and his case was eventually dropped.[39]

Officers may have also thrown the accusation of rebellion or sedition around to cover their own crimes. *La Vanguardia* made this allegation in the case of a barracks in Corrientes. Junior officers accused senior officers of engaging in an unspecified fraud (perhaps selling exemptions?). The senior officers, in turn, accused the junior officers of "rebellion" and had them confined to a military prison in Paraná territory for fifty days.[40]

El soldado rojo *and the Barracks 'Soviets'*

While rumors of subversive soldiers often emerged from a confluence of anxiety and confusion about the line between ordinary indiscipline and subversion, the case of *El soldado rojo* had very different origins.[41] The paper appears sometime around December of 1919. The paper exhorted soldiers, sailors, and police officers to organize revolutionary cells and begin to plan the overthrow of the Argentine state. The paper's ideological and practical perspective is encapsulated in an essay entitled "Our Voice" ["Nuestra Voz"].

> We soldiers have the mission of defending what we call the *Patria*, and this is what they tell us, and they take us from our homes and crowd us into barracks, and they submit us to a brutal discipline, and they arm us to the teeth, not in

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[38] "En el Arsenal de Guerra—después del inicuo atropello, la ocultación", *La Vanguardia* (April 13, 1921): 1.

[39] "Recurso de habeas corpus a favor del obrero Di Giorgio", *La Razón* (April 27, 1921): 5; "Lo del arsenal de Guerra—luego de fiscal, falla la Cámara Federal", *La Vanguardia* (April 28, 1921): 1.

[40] "De Corrientes—los escándalos del regimiento 9 de infantería-todas las denuncias confirmadas", *La Vanguardia* (December 6, 1922): 6.

[41] Enrique Nido, *Informe general del movimiento anarquista en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Talleres Tipográficos 'La Protesa,' 1923): 16, lists the paper as one of many that were published by anarchists.

> order to fight against an enemy that comes from without to enslave us, but rather to go out into the streets with the workers, our own fathers and brothers, those of Argentine conscripts, and we massacre our own fathers and brothers who are demanding from the capitalists, owners of the *Patria*, a bit more bread, light and liberty and Justice.[42]

The letter was signed "Numerous conscripts of the soviet of soldiers of the 7th Infantry" on January 29, 1921.

In addition to providing an ideological foundation for resisting military discipline, the paper also analyzed the ways in which the military and police hierarchy coaxed troops into fighting against their class interests. In an unsigned essay entitled "The Crime," the author(s) explained that officers leading troops in the suppression of labor movements in the Patagonia region (Santa Cruz territory) had deceived troops into believing that they were being sent to fight against "ferocious bandits and they thus proceeded without consciousness."[43] Another article reported that members of the Mobile Gendarme Unit of Santa Fe were deserting their posts rather than having to be sent north (where?). "They say that they do not want to be cannon fodder, and much less work in favor of the interests of the exploiters."[44]

A February 1921 article, ascribed to members of the "Barracks Pichincha Street, Fourth Infantry" ["Cuartel calle Pichincha, 4 de Infanteria"] explained how to form a soviet in a barracks or police station. They claimed as their models the Russian and German armies during the last years of the First World War, but they also cited similar movements afoot in Spain, Italy, England and France. With the participation of "common soldiers, ganchos [an antiquated term referring to draftees], and conscripts" the troops of the Fourth Infantry had created a *Consejo Central* of five men. Each of these men then formed a cell of five men in such a manner that members of one cell did not know the identity of members of a different cell.[45]

In early December 1919, *La Vanguardia* came into the possession of the paper. In two extensive articles, they explained why they were fraudulent and what purpose the fraud might serve. The Socialist Party had already been subject to false accusations of fomenting revolution during the *Semana Trágica* of January 1919. They laid the scheme at the feet of the Radical Party, in power since 1916: "The 'Radical' Police, that

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[42] "Nuestra Voz", *El soldado rojo* 2:8 (February 22, 1921): 3.

[43] "El crimen", *El soldado rojo* 2:11 (August 1922).

[44] "La gendarmería volante de Santa Fe," *El soldado rojo* 2:8 (February 22, 1921): 3.

[45] "Cómo hemos organizado nuestro soviets o consejo de soldados", *El soldado rojo* 2:11 (August 1922): 4.

invented the famous plot which led to the arrest of the leader of a soviet that resulted in the false accusation of a peaceful citizen on charges of the illegal possession of arms, can now perfectly weave more ambitious schemes."[46] The earlier machinations of the police made understandable what they characterized as an "undignified and criminal deceit." "*The Red Soldier* is not a crude flyer, but rather it pretends to be the mouthpiece of an organization boasting a hand-stamped seal that says 'the soviet of the workers and soldiers of the Federal Capital.'"[47]

Two weeks later, *La Vanguardia* issued a more detailed and contextualized analysis of the paper. They noted that both *El soldado rojo* and its "ultimatum to the government and the capitalists" were clearly the product of government officials. "They put a lot of care in the little seal/stamp, a detail more common among bureaucrats (by habit) and of more or less clever 'detectives.'" *La Vanguardia* also noted that the design of the stamps looked a lot like those of the conservative *Agrupación Regional Agricultura***.** Finally, the article placed the fake documents and the strategy of its creators into a wider context of agents provocateurs who were attempting to conflate the Socialist party with a decidedly minority wing of the workers' movement that claimed allegiance to the Soviet model—so called 'anarcho-bolsheviks" or maximalists.[48] Rarely considered in histories of the Argentine left, unions, newspapers, and other organizations were infiltrated by agents of the *Orden Social*. It is likely that such work was more important than the much-discussed outright arrest and deportation of foreign-born leftists[49] (Doeswijk 2013, 149-54). Recent work on the idea of the Russian Revolution in Argentina makes it clear that events in Europe were of intellectual importance but there were no serious currents of thought arguing to take up arms (Pittaluga 2015).

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[46] Here the reference is the case of Pinie Wald whose autobiographical novel recounts his arrest and torture, accused of leading a soviet, during the 1919 Buenos Aires pogrom, *La Semana Trágica*. Pinie Wald, *Pesadilla: una novella de la semana trágica* (Buenos Aires: Los precursores, 1998)

[47] "Maniobra jesuítico política !Alerta trabajadores!" *La Vanguardia* (December 6, 1919): 1.

[48] "El plan terrorista—a la luz de los documentos. El 'Soldado Rojo' y el 'ultimatum al gobierno y a los capitalistas'—un sello más sospechoso que otro—un ministro radical demasiado bien informado—El diario de gobernador Bascary soplaen la hoguera revolucionaria", *La Vanguardia* (December 21, 1919): 1.

[49] A file from the 1930s is suggestive of the level of police penetration of leftist publications and groups. See Archivo General de la Nación, Fondo Justo Caja 45, Doc. 90 "Sección Especial: memorandum" (April 25, 1933) names a "Zamudio" as an informant in the Fábrica de Cigarillos "Condal" and also the anarchist publication *Insurrexit*. Caja 45 is replete with reports of police informants.

Other elements of the available issues of the paper also invite scrutiny. In 1922, *El soldado rojo* claimed to have a circulation of 40,000. This is a remarkable figure, when we consider that *La Vanguardia* during the same period ran 70,000 per issue and *La Protesta* was the world's largest anarchist daily paper with a circulation of close to 10,000 (Walter 1980, 12; Cane 2011). It also seems odd that someone would publish a widely-circulated newspaper and distribute it within the army in order to encourage the secret organizing of "soviets" to take over the army. It is also striking that many of the publication's articles are signed by members of specific units; such an action would have been foolhardy, even suicidal, given the strict internal policing of the barracks. Indeed, the military prided itself on the strict and harsh internal control of its soldiers through both exemplary punishment and a draconian military tribunal system which generally found accused conscripts guilty (Ablard 2018).[50] When newspapers reported on bad conditions at a base or aboard a ship it was common for the commanding officer to order an investigation to determine who was talking with the press.[51] *El soldado rojo* also claimed to have adherents among law enforcement but the Federal police explicitly and publicly rejected the rumor that their forces had been infiltrated during this period (Doeswijk 2013, 151).[52]

It is also surprising that the paper, if it was indeed as dangerous as some would claim and with such a wide readership, it appears neither in Ministry of War annual reports nor in the General Uriburu or General Justo *fondos* in the *Archivo General de la Nación*. There is also no mention of *El soldado rojo* in the Army's weekly digest *Boletín Militar*. There is also no mention of the paper in the Army's *El Soldado Argentino*, a publication that was distributed to conscripts starting in 1920. It is difficult to imagine

[50] When a civilian professor of the Colegio Militar left a copy of the *La Vanguardia* behind in a classroom, Minister of War General Agustín P. Justo issued an edict barring civilians who might be inclined to spread "antipatriotic ideas or ideas that might contravene discipline" from military installations. Rosendo Fraga, *El General Justo* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1994): 141. Justo was president from 1932-38.

[51] Dirección de Estudios de Historia Naval, "Publicaciones en 'La Vanguardia' y 'Nueva Provincia' por abusos", Caja 152, Expediente 764/13696 (1923) and Archivo General de la Armada de la República Argentina, "Tribunales militares: hoja histórica penal" Justicia 276, Caja 16279, "Arsenal Naval (Buenos Aires" (December 14, 1927) both track cases of sailors' communications with civilian newspapers and suggest a high level of internal monitoring.

[52] "Alarmas infundadas," *Revista de Policia* Vol. 23, XXIII: 520 (February 16, 1920): 114-115. Doeswijk (145-47) describes the occupation of police stations by the Army, and the discovery of copies of *El soldado rojo* in the possession of police officers who had joined FORA. 150-200 police officers were arrested, though it is far from clear if they had insurrectionary goals or if they were simply striking. Curiously, while Doeswijk admits to have never been able to locate a copy of the paper he does not go as far as to conclude that the paper was fraudulent (Doeswijk 133).

that the Army would have completely ignored such an egregious challenge to discipline and internal authority as this publication (Ablard 2017).

A textual analysis of the paper is also revealing. The design of paper is very rudimentary and does not reflect any of the artistry or skill seen in the traditional press of the left. Absent from the paper are discussions of the everyday concerns of working class men who were conscripted: military justice, mistreatment by non-commissioned officers, the material conditions of barracks life, or pay. Also notably absent from the newspaper is any mention of masculinity, a prominent thread in anarchist and syndicalist critiques of the military. Finally, unlike any other paper of the left, it is bereft of humor (Ablard 2017).

El soldado rojo appeared at a time of intense labor strife in Patagonia, the pampas and other agricultural zones of Argentina. In these areas accusations against organized labor often included discussion of the creation of "soviets." a dynamic operated between labor militancy, the repression of workers by the police and the Army, and the creation of rumors and counter-propaganda. Rumors of worker soviets in Pampa towns like Castex, Villaguay and beyond (like Leone, Córdoba) multiplied.[53] A similar dynamic, of course, developed in the military reaction to the strike of rural workers in Santa Cruz (Patagonia). There, strikers were painted as "bandits" and "revolutionaries."[54] The dynamic of violence during this era is painted in vivid terms by journalist Osvaldo Bayer (Bayer 2017). The workers, faced with a vastly better armed and organized opposition, did not have the illusion that their cause could be won by force of arms. At the same time, the violent repression of the state was often justified by the claims that strikers had violent revolutionary goals.[55]

If *El soldado rojo* was a fake, its utility to the forces of reaction is complex. An October 1920 report in the Radical *La Razón* claimed that the local chapter of the *Liga Patriótica Argentina* was busy exposing the false claims of labor organizers in Santa Fe and Córdoba provinces. Most notably, the *Liga* claimed that leftists were boasting that

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[53] For an analysis of the fabrication of such plots, see "'complot maximalista' fantasías interesadas", *La Vanguardia* (March 13, 1921): 1 and "La mazorca en la Provincia de Entre Ríos bajo un gobierno Radical—la Liga tenebrosa en Acción pretende torcer el curso de la historia y ahogaren sangre el movimiento obrero", *La Vanguardia* (May 2-3, 1921). See also "Sospechoso !Alerta Trabajadores!", *La Vanguardia* (December 22, 1919): 1.

[54] "Lo de Santa Cruz—En vísperas de nueva campaña militar", *La Vanguardia* (December 20, 1921): 1.

[55] "Los sucesos de Villaguay", *La Vanguardia* (February 15, 1921). Reports on violence against strikers, against the province's Jewish community, and the violent arrest of the Jewish Socialist Julio Serebrinsky.

they belonged to an "imaginary soviet of soldiers and workers."[56] Is it possible that the police or military were planting false documents and newspapers and then denouncing the false newspapers' claims that they even existed as a way to prove that labor organizers were only full of hot air?

Yet the discovery of copies of *El soldado rojo* was also reported as evidence of the violent intentions of striking workers and the organizations that supposedly were fomenting the disorder. *La Razón* reported a case where "the criminal judge confirms preventive prison imposed on the student Mr. Hurtado who was distributing copies of the paper *El soldado rojo*".[57] Reports of the paper from the workers' press present a series of unusual ambiguities. For example, the anarchist *La Protesta* reported on a police and military raid against anarchists in Río Cuarto, Córdoba province. In the raid, the police claimed to have seized a "flyer entitled *El soldado rojo*". *La Protesta* actually accused "communists" and "apolíticos" of planting the paper on the anarchists. They also noted that several of these same people were left untouched in the police raid, thereby raising further questions about their complicity in the raid.[58] A Chilean anarchist paper reported on a raid in the Córdoba province (possibly the same raid?). Students with the *Federación de Estudiantes Cordobés*, working with striking workers, had had their offices raided. Among the accusations was for having distributed *El soldado rojo*. The Chilean paper did not speculate about the veracity of the incriminating evidence.[59]

Another factor that raises questions about the legitimacy of this paper is bound up with its alleged editor, Catalan-born Enrique García Thómas (1883-1950).[60] Biographical information on this individual is sparse. According to historian Horacio Tarcus, he rose from being a mechanic to owning his own shop. He used the proceeds of this business to fund a number of newspapers, most of short duration. He was expelled from Argentina twice, in 1906 and later in 1930 (Tarcus 2007, 242-43).[61] After the early 1930s until his death in 1950 there is no available information as to his

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[56] "Liga Patriótrica Argentina-Engaño a los jornaleros del interior", *La Razón* (October 10, 1920): 6

[57] "Córdoba",*La Razón* (March 16, 192/): 3

[58] "Reacción militar y policial en Rio Cuarto", *La Protesta* (August 11, 1922): 2.

[59] "Crónica retrospectiva desde Buenos Aires para 'Acción directa'", *Verba roja* (September 1, 1921): 3

[60] Doeswijk, 133. "El grupo de García Thómas, además, era el responsable de esa revista que incitaba a los soldados y a las policías a asumir la causa del pueblo. Nos estamos refiriendo a *El soldado rojo* […]". Tarcus cites Doeswijk in crediting García Thómas with the paper.

[61] Thómas García appears among the deportees from 1930. James Baer, *Anarchist Immigrants in Spain and Argentina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

employment or whereabouts. He was married to the anarchist midwife Eva Vivé (1882-1947). In 1919, he was arrested and condemned to six years in the Ushuaia penitentiary for his work with the "anarcho-bolshevik" (a term that historians dispute) periodical *Bandera Roja*. According to Tarcus, García Thómas received a commutation of the sentence from Yrigoyen in May of 1920.[62] In August of 1921, he was expelled from the Federación Obrera Regional Argentina del IX Congreso, a syndicalist labor federation, for his support of the Russian Revolution and his deviation from the union's strategies and goals (Munck 1986).[63] García Thómas went on to participate in the creation of the Unión Sindical Argentina (a labor federation of syndicalists and communists) and also the Alianza Libertaria Argentina. The ALA has often been characterized as "anarcho-bolshevik" and looked admiringly at the Russian Revolution. Such a view was antithetical to most anarchists and syndicalists. Both before and after his expulsion, he helped to found a number of newspapers, including *Bandera Roja* and *El soldado rojo*. It is difficult to imagine how García Thómas would have been prosecuted for his involvement in *Bandera Roja* but not for *El soldado rojo*. The latter paper, on the face of it, was much more explicitly insurrectionary and subversive.

Moving from organization to organization is not in of itself suspicious in a moment in which ideological orientations were fluid. However, the press coverage of García Thómas is also strikingly peculiar. Some articles cast him as a martyr of the revolutionary working man. When sentenced to the Ushuaia penitentiary for his work with *Bandera Roja*, papers sympathized with him and his wife, who was also briefly imprisoned.[64] But at other times both the bourgeois press and working-class press mocked him for engaging in questionable behaviors. One article reported that he was the only one of those arrested in the *Bandera Roja* case not deported to the Ushuaia penal colony.[65] *La Crítica* later published an article that described an alleged phone call made by García Thómas to the paper telling them that he, along with two other

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[62] The chronology of García Thómas is full of contradictions. For example, *Caras y Caretas* reported his arrest for making bombs in late March, 1920. "La Nota de la Semana", *Caras y Caretas* 23: 1120 (March 20, 1920): 10-11.

[63] *La organización obrera: Organo de la FORA* 2 (1922): 66-88.

[64] "Tribunales", *La Vanguardia* (September 16, 1919): 5; "Tribunales", *La Vanguardia* (June 15, 1921): 17; "El asunto de 'Bandera Roja'", *La Crítica* (May 15, 1919): 2; "La horrible situación de los presos por cuestiones sociales—el delito de la rebelión", *La Crítica* (April 26, 1920): 1.

[65] "Los presos por cuestiones sociales", *La Crítica* (May 21, 1920): 2.

defendants, were free.[66] *La Crítica* was especially interested in his expulsion from FORA.

> Well known for his revolutionary position (it is possible that he has created up to a dozen revolutions) during the months he was imprisoned because of his newspaper *Bandera Roja* and after terrible "agitations" in order to obtain his liberty, he decided to create a tremendous mess with sergeants and investigators and declare "the revolution" of March, and got the federal council [presumably a worker group] into trouble. […] All of these revolutions have ceased since he was freed and all that remains as a souvenir are the poor victims of his ridiculous pirouettes. The product of his machinations are [*sic*] an infinite number of imprisoned comrades.[67]

Brief mentions and praise of *El soldado rojo* appear in two other newspapers that García Thómas is credited with founding and/or financing. In an article in support of labor organizing in rural Tucumán, *El Trabajo*, reportedly published in Tucumán, praised *El soldado rojo*.[68] Another paper, *El Libertario,* which was published by the ALA, both praised the paper and also criticized *La Protesta* for questioning the paper's legitimacy.[69] A subsequent article, also published in 1923, praised both *Bandera Roja* and *El soldado rojo* for embodying the revolutionary fervor of the 1917-1920 era.[70] Two years later *El Libertario,* now in the hands of a splinter faction of ALA, issued a scathing report about the man who had founded the paper. The article described the people who followed García Thómas as "acaudillados", a term that denotes blindly following a self-appointed leader. And they termed both the followers and the leader as "ridiculous."[71] Finally, after the 1930 coup that deposed President Yrigoyen, García Thómas appears as part of a group of "yrogoyenistas subversivos" who were organizing clandestinely against the military government but were being monitored by the *Sección Especial* (a police unit that tracked political dissent). This suggests the possibility that the erstwhile anarcho-bolshevik may have developed hidden ties to the ruling party (Lopez Trujillo 2009, 84; López Marsano and Salas 2017, 79). In sum, the reporting on García Thómas

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[66] "!El peludo es un vivo! Un tigre para despistar," *La Critica* (December 25, 1920): 1.

[67] "Tribuna libre—responsibilidad a los proletarios—un testamento sin herencia", *La Crítica* (February 22, 1922): 8.

[68] "A.L.A.", *El trabajo* (May 19, 1924) and "A.L.A.", *El Trabajo* (May 1, 1924). See also "La propaganda antimilitarista", *Adelante* (Tucumán) (October 15, 1922): 2 which made a call to "revolutionize the spirit of the army."

[69] "Un proceso revolucionario", *El Libertario* (November 2, 1923).

[70] "De frente a la situación", *El Libertario* (December 10, 1923): 2

[71] "La Rebelión—organito", *El Libertario* (June 30, 1925): 2. "Tomar en serio los desahogos de Enrique García Thómas importaría tanto como reconocer que alguna vez serán capaces sus servidores de fiscalizar las actividades de quien los hace servir para el ridículo".

is unusual and a wide range of sources raise questions about his allegiances, competence, and honesty.

The apparent absence of mention of *El soldado rojo* in the capitalist press is also noteworthy. One exception is a 1920 article in *Revista del Mundo*, but it seems strange. "La policía contra el maximalismo en Buenos Aires por Masin Sawyer" reports on the 1918 meeting of the tenth congress of the FORA in December 1918 and notes the widespread support for the Russian and German Revolutions. The article observes increasing "revolutionary ardor in certain workers who until now had been preoccupied with cementing the progress of their unions."[72] The proof of the shift is the appearance of *El soldado rojo*.

> It is noteworthy that many soldiers have denounced to their superior officers the existence of this newspaper and there were cases of soldiers personally handing over issues of "ESR" to officers so that they could be destroyed. A similar thing happened with *La Barricada* and *Afirmación*, sectarian publications who have a strong subversive tendency.[73]

The article continues, listing a number of subversive pamphlets that the police have confiscated. These documents describe how to wage social revolution, including bomb-making instructions and how to destroy a crop.

Conspiracy Theories' Long Shelf-life

Stories about the soviets of soldiers and of *El soldado rojo* continued to circulate and recirculate within right-wing and left-wing circles and to some degree filtered into academic scholarship. In the first of Robert Potash's three volumes on the Argentina military, he describes a situation following the Semana Trágica: "The subsequent discovery that soldiers and noncommissioned officers in at least two garrisons had been forming 'soviets' exerted a direct influence on several of the officers who two years later took the initiative in forming the Logia General San Martín" (Potash 1969, 12).[74] Potash cites the president of the Logia San Martin (the group was founded by officers concerned by President Yrigoyen's undue politicization of the armed forces and disbanded during the Alvear government. When Yrigoyen returned, the same officers

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[72] "La policía contra el maximalismo en Buenos Aires por Masin Sawyer", *La Revista del Mundo* 11:18 (1920): 310.

[73] "La policía", 310.

[74] Potash cites Luis Jorge García, "La verdad sobre la Logia General San Martín" (Unpublished manuscript), as quoted in Juan V. Orona, *La logia militar que enfrento a Hipólito Yrigoyen* (Buenos Aires: Colección Ensayos Políticos y Militares, 1965): 83. Sandra McGee Deutsch cites Potash in *Counterrevolution in Argentina,* 76, footnote 19.

began to plot.), Colonel Luis Jorge García, whose unpublished manuscript had been reproduced in a 1965 work by García's son-in-law, Colonel Juan V. Orona, on the origins of the 1930 coup. Orona transcribed the following from García (whose text is not available for comparison) (Fraga 1993, 106-107):

> As a consequence of the total breakdown of military discipline in the Army non-commissioned officers and soldiers in some units began form soviets. One was located on a base just outside of the Capital and another in a northern province. Fortunately, a premature rising of one of these groups, around 1921 [*sic*], allowed it to be prevented and contained.[75]

Orona also cited and reproduced the account of another officer, Colonel Enrique R. Pilotto (1878-1960), who served as the second president of the Logia General San Martín and later was named chief of the police of Buenos Aires by the dictator General Uriburu.[76]

> In the second Artillery there was a soviet that enjoyed the participation of non-commissioned officers, soldiers, gendarmes, firemen and some officers; in Jujuy the Twentieth Regiment (R. 20) had gone into the streets on the orders of non-commissioned officers; and in the Campo de Mayo the most horrific indiscipline reigned, and the chief of the *acantamiento*, General Dellepiane […] was unable to restore discipline.[77]

Vague reports about soldier soviets also appear in Jorge H. Frías' 1932 *El peligro social en la República Argentina*. This work appeared during a resurgent Argentine "Red Scare" when agents of the state were taking a renewed interest in rooting out communist influence, a task that was likely simply a cover for eliminating supporters of the deposed Radical government.[78] Frías, a prominent judge who may have been involved in the trials of anarchists, argued that before 1916, there were strikes but no subversion. A central theme in his book was the collapse of order and discipline in all facets of the state, including the armed forces during the presidency of Hipólito Yrigoyen. He blamed the deposed president for fostering subversion, especially within the barracks, through his reckless policy of issuing pardons (Frías 1932, 205-208). Referring to the 'soldier soviets" of 1920-1921, he reported that: "They had their tentacles extended

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[75] Luis Jorge García, "La verdad sobre la Logia General San Martin" (Unpublished manuscript), as quoted in Juan V. Orona, *La logia militar que enfrento a Hipólito Yrigoyen* (Buenos Aires: Colección Ensayos Políticos y Militares, 1965): 83.

[76] Rosendo Fraga, *Justo*, 143.

[77] Enrique R. Pilotto, "Recuerdos de un logista", Unpublished manuscript, cited in Orona (1965): 83.

[78] AGN, Fondo Justo, Caja 45, mentioned earlier, is replete with memorandum from the *Sección Especial* about infiltrations of leftist groups, lists of suspected leftists and deportation manifests. See also Matias G. Sanchez Sorondo. 1937. *Represión del comunismo: informe y replica. Senado de la Nación* (Buenos Aires: Senado de la Nación).

among police and even in the Army division that had conscripts from working class neighborhoods of this city where women, children and men expressed a deep hatred of the bourgeoisie (Frías 1932, 223-24)."[79] Frías cites a number of pamphlets and court documents but never provides specific details. One pamphlet, called "Comité de los Soviets comunistas argentinos", lays out a plan for the creation of an "Ejército Rojo" and a plan for a "golpe de estado".[80] The pamphlet comes from a court document (*expediente*) entitled "Carta de E.V. a P.M. de Sanford (ECCA) de fecha 23 de marzo de 1920" (Frias 1932, 231-32). It is possible that "E.V." refers to García Thómas' wife, Eva Vivé. Frías also describes a letter that presumes to be from Eva Vivé to her husband and refers to García Thómas as the editor of *El soldado rojo* (Frías 1932, 285, footnote 1).

Frías also provides a transcription of a letter that supposedly comes from a criminal trial, presumably from the 1920s. A section reads: "My primary goal of this letter is to send you an issue of *El soldado rojo* so that you might read it and know about it." The letter continues, noting the importance of organizing soldiers for the impending revolution. The unnamed author of the letter requests "the exact addresses of corporals, sergeants, NCOs, 1st and 2nd lieutenants, and captains, and soldiers so that they can receive by mail-without knowing sent them *El soldado rojo*." The letter is signed "M.O.R." (Frías 1932, 291-94).

Communist infiltration of the armed forces is the major theme in Antonio H. Varela's 1933 *Las hordas comunistas*. The author, a well-known right-wing activist and author, attempts to link the supposed efforts of Enrique García Thómas in the 1920s to more recent plots by Radical party members. Varela cites Frías' work, and takes the step of conflating left wing movements with the Radical resistance to the Uriburu government (Varela 1933). For Varela, evidence of the continued "disruptive campaign" is the appearance of a new clandestinely published anti-military newspaper, this one called "El Lampazo".[81] According to *La Nación*, which Varela mentions, the plot involved "a plan of action organized to foment discontent among the conscripts and incite them to commit crimes against certain officers ('militares'), to convince them

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[79] Frías (1879-1966) was the founder the *Patronato de Liberados y Excarcelados del Capital.*

[80] This may be a reference to a pamphlet of the "Comite Central de los soviets de la R. Argentina" entitled *Declaración de Principios: Organización y propósitos*, which Roberto Pittaluga kindly shared with me. This pamphlet fits within the pattern of falsified documents. It makes claims about the formation of soviets and calls for open revolution.

[81] Varela cites two sources on *El Lampazo.* He directs readers to the August 1932 issue of *Aconcagua* for a facsimile of the paper and cites *La Nación* (September 17, 1932).

to rebel against their officers with the goal of subverting the social order through violence."[82]

Discussion of *El soldado rojo* reappeared during the post-Cuban revolutionary period when Argentines on both the left and the right were confronting the reality of guerrilla groups infiltrating barracks (Moyano 1995). Rubens Iscaró (1913-1993), who joined the Communist Youth in 1930 and later became an important communist labor leader, wrote in his history of the syndicalist movement that the Alianza Libertaria "published a clandestine paper directed to soldiers and non-commissioned officers, *El soldado rojo*, which had not an insignificant distribution in the barracks, where because of its small size it was nicknamed *El soldadito rojo*" (Iscaró 1974, 173). Isidoro Gilbert's 2009 study of the Communist Youth cites Iscaró, while elaborating about a number of clandestine military papers, including *El Lampazo*, which he incorrectly claims began publishing in 1922 (Gilbert 2009, 489).[83] According to Gilbert, the Communist Youth advocated for shortening service terms but not for the abolition of military service, a position more in alignment with the Socialists than with the anarchists. They also supposedly followed Rosa Luxemburg's call: "you make revolution neither without nor against the army; it is with the army that we direct the proletariat to seize power" (Gilbert 2009, 195).[84]

The Argentine right also took up the history of leftist infiltration of the barracks. Alberto Daniel Faleroni, a self-described expert on the Soviet Union, recounts the history of *El Lampazo* as a way to illustrate the historical problem of the armed forces as the left's "Trojan Horse" of Argentina. Aside from the newspaper, which he claims was found in over 6 different bases, including Campo de Mayo, hunger strikes by soldiers are a sign of communist infiltration. As with reports about *El soldado rojo*, Faleroni reports the case of two soldiers, Juan Carlos Canosa and Alberto Cechi, who were arrested for being found in possession of the clandestine paper. Faleroni claims

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[82] "Un grupo comunista que dirigía y redactaba un diario, incurrió en el delito de asociación ilícita", *La Nación* (September 17, 1932): 1 mentions "una campaña disolvente" in the 1st and 2nd Infantry Regiments. "Fallóse el proceso de los ex-redactores de 'Bandera Roja' *La Vanguardia* (September 17, 1932): 1 makes no mention of subversion in the barracks.

[83] Other papers listed by Gilbert included *La Fajina (*12th infantry, Santa Fe); *Alas Rojas* (Fábrica Militar de Aviones); *La Churrasca* (1st Infantry, Palermo). I have not been able to locate any of these papers in civilian or military archives.

[84] After 1926, the Communist Party intensified its rhetoric directed at soldiers. See also, Emilio Corbiere, *Origenes del comunismo argentino: el Partido Socialista Internacional* (Buenos Aires: Biblioteca Política Argentina, 1984): 50.

that for the left, anti-militarism without seizing power was "completely insufficient" (Faleroni 1961, 47, 53, 56).[85]

Unlike *El soldado rojo*, *El Lampazo* appears in the archives in a collection of material concerning indiscipline in the barracks. The existing issue is typed, not typeset, and is fairly rudimentary in design. While it makes some calls to revolutionary action, it concerns itself far more with the quotidian issues of barracks life than did *El soldado rojo*. The tone and issues raised in *El Lampazo* fit with traditional working class calls for improvements to working life for soldiers and sailors, including raising salaries. Claims by the left and the right that the paper commenced in 1922 are likely inaccurate; the May 1933 issue was listed as "year 4" of the paper's existence.[86] The paper did not generate excessive concern on the part of the military high command.

Conclusions

Conspiracy theories about revolutionaries in the barracks offer an opportunity to reconsider how the Argentine left and the right wrote and remembered their own history, but also how propaganda and counter-intelligence operations shaped memory and action. The cases described suggest that for contradictory reasons, left and right exaggerated the revolutionary potential of the barracks. Historian David Tamarin, quoting Eugene Sofer, was ahead of the game when he noted that the Argentine left never had a chance of seizing power: "The Argentine elite, allied with foreign capital, were still better prepared to suppress a revolution than the working class was to make one" (Tamarin 1985, 72). Between its own internal divisions and the infiltration it endured, it was too divided and weak to present a military threat. More importantly, and really the key issue which is recognized by all scholars, is that only a small fraction of the Argentine left considered military options before the 1960s. Conspiracies about the left's infiltration of the barracks are ironic considering that if anything, the obverse was true; the left was the one being infiltrated and compromised.[87] However, the evidence remains more conjectural than a historian would like, but the signs are there.

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[85]Faleroni's political trajectory is ambiguous. In the 1930s, he founded an Argentine branch of the Peruvian nationalist party, APRA.

[86] Archivo General de la Nación, Fondo Justo, Caja 45, Documento 114, "El Lampazo".

[87] On infiltration of the guerrillas by the military during the 1970s, see Ricardo Ragendorfer, *Los doblados: las infiltraciones del Battallón 601 en la guerrilla argentina* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2016). On infiltration of the Army by guerrillas during the same period, see María José Moyano, *Argentina's Lost Patrol: Armed Struggle 1969-1979* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012)

The matter is made more confusing by sectors of the left's tendency to exaggerate their own revolutionary potential and to employ language that evoked images of an armed struggle.

It is possible, as was the case with the "communist" rebellion in El Salvador in 1931, that both the left and the right contributed to the impression of revolutionary conspiracy (Lindo-Fuentes, Ching and Lara-Martínez 2007).[88] While anxiety about the development of post-World War One style military insurrection was probably based on some level of sincere fear (albeit through a misreading of the analogy of the European case to that of Argentina), the fear was also stoked and manipulated through the deliberate spread of misinformation, including the creation of phony revolutionary propaganda. Ironically, the anxiety about threats from the left far exceeded actual danger to the military but was useful to justify increasing levels of internal control and discipline. Paradoxically, "anarcho-bolsheviks" and self-styled "maximalists," whose numbers and significance were probably small, appear to have embraced the Russian Revolution's violent rhetoric, and employed propaganda that exaggerated their revolutionary potential.

Fear that soldiers might rise up and lead a soviet-style revolution against the Argentine state fit with right-wing post-1917 narratives about the possibility that the Russian Revolution could be duplicated. These fantasies also fit with a certain delusion on the part of the elite that Argentina, and especially Buenos Aires, was really more European than Latin American. From a century later, we can see that the conservative read of Argentina through the Russian experience makes little sense. It is true that the Russian, Berlin, and Hungarian revolutions (1917-1919) enjoyed critical support from "soldier soviets." But those soldiers' ideological and organizing effort was the result of intense politicization after four years of warfare, and in many cases, capture by Russian forces. (Hanebrink 2008). Those soldiers confronted a decaying political and financial order. By contrast, the Argentine armed forces were small, with just a fraction of the male populace mobilized, and they had virtually no combat experience. Another important factor is that in the wake of the Soviet revolution, categories of what constituted subversive activity became quite capacious; few understood, for example, where to draw the line between revolutionary communism and anarchism (Craib 2016; Lindo-Fuentes, Ching and Lara-Martínez 2007).

[88] The Library of Congress' *Communist Internation (Comintern) Archives Project* has a searchable database. The files on Argentina reveal no concerted effort to infiltrate military units.

Attitudes about military indiscipline were further driven to the right by a wave of urban and rural strikes between 1917 and 1922. Seen by conservatives and the military as portends of the global revolutionary process, the increasing deployment of the military in anti-strike activities raised the problem of using conscripts against fellow Argentines. And especially troubling was the use of working class conscripts, as middle class men increasingly avoided service, against their comrades and family members.

The anxiety about the revolutionary threat of soldiers was further fueled by the belief that President Yrigoyen had undermined military discipline by using promotion as a political tool, by increasing the use of the army in federal interventions, and paradoxically, by failing to keep the lid on labor agitation that supposedly necessitated the need for military action against strikes. All of these factors had led sectors of the military hierarchy to reach the conclusion that Yrigoyen was the "Argentine Kerensky" who would inadvertently usher in the era of the Argentine soviet.[89] Ironically, after Yrigoyen's overthrow, Radicals organized a series of armed uprisings, in most cases with the collaboration of officers and non-commissioned officers (López Marsano and Salas 2017).

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[89] See Potash on the growing rift between Yrigoyen and the officer class.

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