

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WHM - 12
 Reaction to the
 Argentine Revolution

Hotel Ferrocarril
 Cuzco, Perú
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
 Institute of Current World Affairs
 522 Fifth Avenue
 New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Arequipa first heard of last week's revolution in the Argentine through its Catholic newspaper, EL DEBER. A late evening extra was hawked through the streets, banner headlines proclaiming the news of the insurrection and, perhaps more important, Perón's excommunication by the Pope. News releases from Buenos Aires were so vague, however, that most of the revolution stories were filled with "might have" and "it is said". Even after several days, no one really knew what was going on behind the Argentine government's blackout curtain. Rumors flew: Perón had fled the country; hundreds of priests had been brutally murdered; the naval revolt had been successful; the navy had been crushed. Arequipeños took time out from work to listen to their radios, feverishly twisting dials in an effort to get through the static and hear the official communiqués as they came through. In the midst of the excitement, Perón made his first speech. Talking in a high, loud voice, he heaped abuse upon the rebels, calling for the extermination of the "cowards" and "traitors". Then, a few days later, came the second speech, a sort of fireside chat gone awry. "All we want is peace", said the dictator. By week's end it was evident that Perón was still in power, although that power may have been reduced by negotiations with the Vatican as well as religious and political elements within his own country. Except for the resistance of scattered naval forces and a few clandestine radios, all appeared to be sweetness and light again.

In Arequipa, reaction to the revolution seemed unanimous on one point: Perón's days were numbered, and everyone was glad of it. Arequipeños had read about the persecution of Catholics in the Argentine and had ground their teeth. Public protests against Perón's anti-Catholic campaign had been numerous. Students in the University of San Agustín had declared a one day strike in sympathy for Peruvian students jailed by Perón and for the downtrodden Catholics. During the religious processions of Corpus Christi, young men carried anti-Perón banners, and priests spoke out against the imprisonment of their colleagues in Argentina. Arequipa is an old hand at the revolution game, but she is devoutly and conservatively Catholic. Interference with churchly affairs is looked upon here as the most heinous of sins. It is one thing to unseat a government but quite another to revolt against what the arequipeños consider to be the holy and absolute authority of the Catholic Church.

People with whom I was in direct contact during that week of rumors and uncertainty were unanimous in their criticism of Perón, but their reasoning differed greatly. One man told me, "Perón is a fool. Like most other dictators in South America, he has knocked out all political opposition and turned the country into his personal playground. But, unlike most other dictators, he has attempted to put down religious opposition by destroying the Church. No one but a fool would attempt that in a country where Catholicism is so strong."

Another friend, a critic of the all-powerful curas (priests) in Perú, told me: "I think Perón had the right idea when he tried to reduce the power of the priests, but he certainly went about it in the wrong way. Perhaps he was trying to copy the Mexicans by using force and dictatorial methods to curb their activities. But Argentina is not Mexico, and besides, the Mexican revolt against the Church went too far in its annihilation process. It des-

troyed the churches, but it didn't replace them with anything the people could grasp and cling to. I think Perón is a poor student of history."

The people at whose house we were staying immediately before we left the city took most of what they read with a grain of salt. Our host read us an article in Lima's LA PRENSA about a priest who was decapitated while he was trying to calm a mob by holding a cross in front of them. "That's very good propaganda," he said, "but coming as it does from a clandestine radio report, I don't think it's true." Unfortunately, there seemed to be few in the city who shared his skepticism. The decapitation story and others far more gruesome were taken as the gospel by the more zealous Catholics.

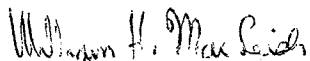
One unique idea came from the director of one of the city's primary schools. He connected the arrival of Cardinal Spellman in Brazil to the beginning of the Argentine revolution. There is a rumor that Cardinal Spellman might be the next Pope. With a man that powerful close enough to give the rebels moral support, he said, what better time could be chosen to start the revolt?

The Church here has made a capital gain out of the Argentine revolution. There are all the factors which go into the making of a first class morality play - martyrs, defenders of the faith, and Good finally triumphing over Evil (as the Perón government now seeks to make amends to the Catholics). Through its masses and its street processions, the Church has had an excellent opportunity to grieve for the oppressed of Argentina and, at the same time, publicize its solidarity and power for all to see. It would be a foolish man indeed who would buck that solidarity and power in an attempt to force the Peruvian Church out of political and economic fields and back to purely religious matters. That man would be a dead pigeon before he started. In all its processions and publicity, the Church was saying to its Aprista, agnostic, or atheistic enemies, "It can't happen here!"

Reaction to the political aspects of the Argentine revolt centered around an I-told-you-so attitude. Most people with whom I talked told me that they had been expecting Argentina to blow wide open at any time. They were disappointed with the results of the revolution and sharply critical of the manner in which it was carried out. Too many people killed, they said. And trying to carry the thing off in the middle of a fog! Well, that was lo peor!

Although the revolt failed, partly through bad planning and partly through last minute switches of loyalty on the part of several commanding officers in the armed forces, it has proved that Perón is not as absolute as he claimed to be. That proof spells out political death for the Argentine dictator. The general opinion of my Arequipa acquaintances, therefore, is that another revolution is in the offing, although the chances are that it will not be one which will sweep up a storm of popular approval. "Now that Perón has shown himself to be vulnerable," said an Arequipa architect, "he is fair game for any general or politician who can drum up enough friends to turn the trick." In other words, Perón is now small enough to be taken by the usual method of changing governments in Latin America - the small, tidy, quick revolution at the summit.

Sincerely,


William H. MacLeish

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