Apr 15th, 10:40 AM - 11:00 AM

Creating the Campesino: United States’ Influence on Agrarian Reform during the 1952-1953 Bolivian National Revolution

Carly J. Campbell

University of Montana, carly1.campbell@umontana.edu

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/umcur


https://scholarworks.umt.edu/umcur/2016/326/3

This Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Montana Conference on Undergraduate Research (UMCUR) by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
Creating the *Campesino*:

United States’ Influence on Agrarian Reform during the 1952-1953 Bolivian National Revolution

Carly Campbell

Prof. Jody Pavilack

12/9/2015
Abstract:

Throughout 1952 and 1953, Bolivia experienced a violent National Revolution. The Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR) rose to power on the platform of universal suffrage, nationalization of tin mines, and the breakup of Bolivia’s traditional agricultural system. On August 2, 1953, President Estenssoro of the MNR signed Agrarian Reform into law before a crowd of indigenous leaders, who celebrated the victorious moment. In appearances, the new government had fulfilled its promise of land redistribution, enfranchising the long-oppressed indigenous population.

However, the underlying presence of the United States convoluted reform. Unlike many other Latin American countries during the post-WWII era, the new Bolivian government had both the recognition and financial support of the United States. The relationship between the MNR and the U.S. changed the nature of the revolution, co-opting it in favor of U.S. interests during the beginning of the Cold War. This created a clash between the “official” Bolivian Revolution, and the one enacted in the countryside by an armed peasantry.

The purpose of this research is to reconstruct the moment of indigenous victory on August 2nd. Primary sources are translated accounts of rural Bolivians drawn from ethnographic accounts, as well as many declassified U.S. documents that explicitly draw a money trail. Along with secondary literature, these sources are used as evidence for an analytical historical narrative. It asserts that peasants, or campesinos, were an organized force in their rural communities, driving forward a revolutionary reform process that the MNR withdrew from due to U.S. pressure. As a result, the Agrarian Reform Law was not nearly as beneficial as it seemed. Instead, it illustrates the subversive dynamic between the Bolivian MNR, the U.S. government, and a radicalized native population.
On August 2, 1953, Bolivian President Victor Paz Estenssoro stood on an open-air platform in center of the city of Ucureña, Bolivia. Thousands of indigenous peasants gathered to watch him as he signed the country’s first Agrarian Reform Decree into law. The majority of the campesinos (a designation that from that day on would replace the traditional derogatory term, indio) had come to the city for the first time from rural villages and haciendas; they were organized and heavily armed.1 After the Decree was signed into the Agrarian Reform Law, the crowd fired round after round of ammunition into the air in celebration.2

It was a triumphant victory for Bolivian campesinos, who had lived for many generations under peonage of a land-holding class. During the spring of the previous year, 1952, Bolivia experienced a National Revolution that brought a new government to power on the platform of social reform, nationalization, and land redistribution. For President Estenssoro, representing the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR) Government of Bolivia, this law was a fulfillment of his government’s promise, as the Agrarian Reform Law toppled the old order of land-owning aristocracy in Bolivia. However, a third party was present in the signing of the Agrarian Reform Law; the interests of the United States heavily influenced the Law itself. The United States, through negotiation and monetary transactions with the MNR, played a heavy role in the direction of the Bolivian National Revolution and in how it implemented its policies.

Drawing on translated accounts of indigenous Bolivians and declassified U.S. documents, this paper aims to deconstruct the moment surrounding the signing of the Agrarian Reform Law on August 2, 1953, in Ucureña, Bolivia. Through an analytical-narrative history approach, it

2 James M. Malloy, *Bolivia: The Uncompleted Revolution* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), 209. Although most accounts agree that the President stood on an open-air platform while signing the decree, many leave out details that reference the arming of rural workers, such as firing arms into the air.
argues that the U.S. guided the “victorious moment” in Ucureña in order to bring the violent, armed peasantry under control with the rest of the Bolivian government.

After discussing the historiography and research sources, this paper briefly contextualizes the historical background behind the Bolivian National Revolution. The main body of the text first asserts that the campesinos were an active and organized force in their rural communities, driving forward a revolutionary process that the MNR withdrew from by mid-1953, due to U.S. pressure. The relationship between the MNR and the United States will then be explicitly drawn, followed by an analysis of the Agrarian Reform Law itself. Finally, the discussion will return to the moment in Ucureña with a critical narrative. The conclusion of this paper explores some of the aftermath, and failures of the Agrarian Reform Law, as well as analytical speculation as to why campesinos continued to support the MNR.

Literature surrounding the 1952-1953 Bolivian National Revolution has built up and changed over time. In the 1960s and early 1970s, American anthropologists published broad works based on extensive travel throughout rural Bolivia. In the form of ethnographies of indigenous communities, the discussion from this era reflects an interest in the development of Bolivia since the Revolution, including the implementation of agrarian reform.

The majority of indigenous accounts of the Revolution are available only through these anthropological works of the 1960s and 1970s, where authors have included interviews that have been translated, and transcribed alongside secondary analysis.³ The majority of peasants in

---
³ Roger A. Simmons, *Palca and Pucara: A Study of the Effects of Revolution on Two Bolivian Haciendas* (University of California Publications in Anthropology v.9, 1971). Simmons worked with a Quechuan translator and quotes interviewees and his own field notes. His work especially is influenced by indigenous memory of events. See also: Dwight B. Heath, Charles J. Erasmus, and Hans C. Buelcher, *Land Reform and Social Revolution in Bolivia* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1969). Each of the authors worked with a translator in a different region of Bolivia (including Quechua, Aymara, and multi-lingual communities), and compiled their interviews and findings into this book.
Bolivia were illiterate, and spoke dialects of the native languages of Quechua and Aymara. Traditional primary sources, such as reports, letters, and interviews, have been translated back and forth from these native languages to Spanish and English. Due to the ambiguous nature of the available primary sources, historical debate surrounds the question of indigenous activity in the National Revolution, and the degree to which they engaged in violence and self-organization. In contrast, there is a plethora of primary sources for research on the side of the MNR Government of Bolivia and the United States. U.S. and Bolivian officials communicated often and openly during the 1950s. Letters between the two governments are available through archival databases, and illustrate a collaborative political atmosphere as well as a money trail. In the 1980s, a series of publications from within the U.S. Department of State declassified materials from Bolivia, including memorandums of conversations and meetings between U.S. and Bolivian officials, throughout 1952-1953.

In the early 2000s, Bolivia faced a series of conflicts that gained international attention, including the Cochabamba Water War, the 2003 Gas War, and the 2006 election of Evo Morales. American political scientists began looking at Bolivian history in order to better understand current events, and produced an outpouring of articles and dissertations. While summarizing Bolivia’s past Revolution, these modern papers heavily cite the 1960s and 1970s literature. The discussion is from a different perspective, however, and more actively links

---

4 U.S. Department of State, “Bolivia: Agriculture,” United States Treaties and Other International Agreements, 3.2 UST 2978 (Washington, DC, 1952), 2978-2987. Only one example, many more will be discussed.
global market prices and U.S. involvement in revolutionary events.\textsuperscript{8}

Bolivia is situated in the center of South America, landlocked between Brazil, Peru, Chile, Argentina, and Paraguay. Its borders stretch from the Andean mountain range to the Amazon rainforest, with a high degree of biological and geographic diversity. The largest urban centers are in the La Paz and Cochabamba valleys, while the majority of the population is indigenous from the time of the Incan Empire, and spread throughout the rural Altiplanos.\textsuperscript{9} The region was ruled by a Viceroy from Spain throughout the 16\textsuperscript{th}-19\textsuperscript{th} centuries, during which the Potosi region provided a stream of Bolivian silver. The Spanish mined the silver through a system of forced indigenous labor called the \textit{mita}, setting a long historical precedent for official peasant exploitation.

Bolivia gained independence from Spain in 1825. By the middle of the century, Bolivia’s economy had plummeted, as it was unable to export silver at the colonial rate of production.\textsuperscript{10} The country declined rapidly, until the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century when mining production experienced a revival. Urban centers, road networks, and the Bolivian population, grew. This growth was supported by the development of the old \textit{mita} system into a food-producing \textit{latifundia} system. The \textit{latifundia} was a collection of \textit{haciendas}, owned by elite land-holding families, \textit{latifundistas}. The family provided peasants with a small plot of land to subsist on, in exchange for their unpaid labor and cultivation of the land. The indigenous population was coined under the term \textit{indio} as denotation of inferior race and status. Prior to the Agrarian

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{9} Andean “high-lands”
\item \textsuperscript{10} Malloy and Thorn, \textit{Beyond the revolution: Bolivia since 1952}, 27.
\end{itemize}
Reform Law, 70 percent of land was owned by approximately 5 percent of the Bolivian population.\footnote{Malloy and Thorn, 238.} 

Around the turn to the 20th century, tin replaced silver as the most important mining resource. Bolivia’s economy relied heavily on tin exports and international exchange prices, particularly to the United States. The tin industry itself was owned by only three individuals and their families, while the latifundia production of raw goods focused on exports to foreign companies. Bolivia imported as much as 40 percent of foodstuffs prior to the National Revolution, despite the fact the countryside produced the majority of imported items.\footnote{Malloy and Thorn, 238.} By 1952, Bolivia provided a full third of the world production of tin, which only accounted for 15 percent of its domestic GDP.\footnote{James Dunkerley, “Origins of the Bolivian Revolution,” in Proclaiming Revolution: Bolivia in Comparative Perspective, eds. Merilee Grindle and Pilar Domingo (Institute of Latin American Studies, University of London, and David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard University, 2003), 142.}

Bolivia in the 1950s cannot be fully understood without stepping back to the 1932-1935 Chaco War. The Chaco War was a three year conflict between Bolivia and Paraguay over the Gran Chaco region. Bolivia lost the war and suffered a high number of casualties, with the majority of foot-soldiers being indigenous, and drafted out of the haciendas.\footnote{Laura Gotkowitz, “Revisiting the Rural Roots of the Revolution,” in Proclaiming Revolution: Bolivia in Comparative Perspective, eds. Merilee Grindle and Pilar Domingo (Institute of Latin American Studies, University of London, and David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard University, 2003), 168.} As a result, many young veterans returned from a horrific war with military experience and an expectation of status, only to again be peasant serfs under the latifundia system.\footnote{Richard W. Patch, “Bolivia: The Restrained Revolution,” The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 334 (Sage Publications, March 1961), 128.} At the same time, young veterans of the urban upper and middle-class returned from war with an “intense national frustration,” anti-foreign sentiment, and a resentment of the ruling oligarchy for the loss of the
war. Psychologically and politically, Bolivia was heavily destabilized.

Between the end of the Chaco War in 1935 and the National Revolution in 1952, Bolivia experienced five different governments and three constitutions. As various military and civilian governments attempted to gain control of Bolivia’s politics, the economy deteriorated and social unrest increased. In August 1941, socialist and nationalist minded urban veterans founded the MNR, the first political party in Bolivia to enjoy popular support. From 1943-1946, a MNR-backed government led by Villarroel Lopez attempted to reform some of the dire social conflicts within the country. In particular, Villarroel supported indigenous agitation, which had been growing continually since the end of the Chaco War.

In 1936, directly after the end of the Chaco War, indigenous Quechua veterans established the first sindicato, as well as a school, in Ucureña- a small city in the Cochabamba

---

17 See: Klein, A Concise History of Bolivia, 178-209. And: Malloy and Thorn, Beyond the revolution: Bolivia since 1952, 25-53. Although important, there is not enough space in this particular paper to discuss each government. To concisely summarize: In 1936, Toro Ruilova came to power through a military coup. In 1937 Busch Becerra succeeded in a second coup. The Busch regime produced the Bolivian Republican Constitution in 1938, which failed to gain widespread support or bring about policy change. Busch committed suicide in 1939. In 1940, a conservative coalition (concordancia) elected Peñaranda Castillo as President. In response, local radical groups coalesced into political parties, including the PIR (leftist party), the POR (Marxist worker’s party), and most importantly, the MNR. These groups dominated the Congressional elections; the conservative Peñaranda presidency and radicalized Congress reached a deadlock and ceased to function. In 1943, a branch of the military called RADEPA and the MNR overthrew the President. Villarroel Lòpez took power, with MNR members in his cabinet (including Victor Paz Estenssoro). Villarroel’s regime lasted until 1946, and produced the Political Constitution of the Bolivian State in 1945. In June of 1946, a popular revolt by the PIR and RADEPA led to the sexenio, or six-year period of ineffective rule by civilian government backed by military junta- as well as the 1947 Political Constitution.
19 Gotkowitz, “Revisiting the Rural Roots of the Revolution,”166-170. In 1945, Villarroel sponsored the first “Indigenous Congress,” which met for 5 days straight with over 1,500 indigenous representatives. In general, the event was meant to win peasant support away from the PIR, establishing a precedent for MNR support of indigenous groups. In 1947, after the rise of the sexenio, the peasants tried to organize another Congress through strikes. Police brutality and repression was widespread as a result.
region, in a highland valley on the Andean mountain range. The organization served as a labor union for peasants who otherwise had no national recognition or representation. José Rojas became its leader in 1946 and the general leader of rural violence during 1952 and 1953. The school in particular represented an aspiration for education and reform of the _latifundia_ system, which terrified the _latifundistas_. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Ucureña was the center of local police suppression of peasant organization. Particularly in the region which surrounded the city, indigenous agitators began calling themselves _campesinos_ rather than the derogatory _indio_.

Bolivia was thus poised for revolution. On April 9, 1952, armed workers and civilians tied to the MNR staged a violent coup, which disintegrated the military and became the National Revolution within a matter of days. Victor Paz Estenssoro, who had been exiled after the fall of the Villarroel government, returned to Bolivia as President. His Vice President was Hernan Síles, who led the revolution, with Juan Lechin, the leader of the mine workers, as a close advisor. The MNR rose on a platform of social reform, with three basic premises: universal suffrage, the indigenous population included; nationalization of the tin mines and Bolivia’s industries; and the abolishment of the _latifundia_ system with land redistribution.

The indigenous peasants played little to no part in the actual days of revolution, and their relationship to the new government was not immediately clear. Although the MNR claimed the goal of bringing the peasantry into the nation, it was largely indigenous action that began land

---

20 Ucureña is approximately 30 miles south of the City of Cochabamba, and 245 miles south of Bolivia’s capital, La Paz. See Fig. 1.
redistribution. Prompted by the success of the National Revolution, *campesinos* began actively seizing *haciendas* throughout rural Bolivia, eventually constituting a powerful enough force to threaten the MNR, and United States.

After the National Revolution in 1952, and before the signing of the Agrarian Reform Law in 1953, *sindicato* formation exploded in rural Bolivia. In some cases this was the result of indigenous spread of information about the revolution; in others lone MNR agents ordered their creation. The strongest peasant impulses came from the Cochabamba region, where events at each *hacienda* “were precipitated by the news of revolution… and the arrival of organisers at the estate itself.” José Rojas played a large part in spreading information from the Ucureña *sindicato*, calling the success of the National Revolution “the signal for insurgency.”

As the National Revolution dissolved the military, guns and equipment circulated into the rural areas; in some cases peasants seized them by force, and in others MNR agents distributed them. By the end of 1952, the indigenous population “who had been legally forbidden to bear arms until 1952, were… given rifles, machine-guns, and mortars so that they constituted a force stronger than the Army.” Through the *sindicatos*, and loose militia contingents, peasants violently took land and resources with real firearm weight behind their actions.

In November of 1952, in the town of Colomi, four-thousand *campesinos* “carrying rifles, machine-guns, and dynamite overran the region, burning down three haciendas.” In January 1953, in the town of Pojo, “peasants armed with clubs… attacked the *hacienda,*” after gathering

---

25 Roger A. Simmons, *Palca and Pucara*, 197. The latter was the case for the town of Arenpampa.
26 Pearse, “Peasants and revolution,” 402.
27 Pearse, 405.
on a small hill and chanting “death to the *patrones!*”\(^{30}\) Regional leaders took control of local *campesino* contingents and began to redistribute land among themselves. In July 1953, only a month before the signing of the Agrarian Reform Law, *campesinos* in the provinces of Tarata, Clíza, Púnata, and Araní “marched into town[s] and forcibly entered houses in search of weapons” in several separate incidents.\(^{31}\) Although prompted in part by MNR members, between the beginning of the National Revolution in 1952, and August 1953, the situation in rural Bolivia became increasingly controlled by self-organized indigenous groups.

Meanwhile, President Paz Estenssoro was consolidating the MNR’s power through the creation of a new Bolivian government. Although some MNR agents were out on the field, the bulk of the party and major political figures were in the capital city of La Paz, Bolivia, working through the crises of the country. In July 1952, universal adult suffrage was declared.\(^{32}\) This was a radical change that turned the peasantry into the voting majority, but in many ways was the least controversial measure the MNR could take out of its promised reforms.\(^{33}\) The real controversy was in the nationalization of the tin industry and the role the United States would play in keeping the MNR in power. Within days, Bolivian and U.S. officials were locked into debate over not just tin, but the whole direction of the revolutionary movement.

On May 22, 1952, the U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson met with the Bolivian Foreign Minister, Guevara Arze, to discuss whether or not the U.S. would recognize the new government. Acheson expressed his concern that the MNR did not have control of the situation since “the civilian fighters of the MNR… broke into an arsenal and seized a large number of rifles.” Arze assured Acheson that the Bolivian government was “quietly rounding up as many of

\(^{30}\) Kohl, “The Role of the Peasant in the Bolivian Revolutionary Cycle,” 68. “Patrons.”
\(^{31}\) Kohl, 73.
\(^{32}\) Pearse, “Peasants and revolution,” 403.
\(^{33}\) Pearse, 402. Between 1951-1956, the voter count rose from around 100,000 to almost 1,000,000.
the arms as it [could] trace” and that it had “complete control of the national police.”34 At the same time that indigenous campesinos were arming themselves and claiming land in the name of revolution, the MNR pulled back on the revolution in the name of U.S. approval and consolidation of power. Although Guatemala, Paraguay, Argentina, and Spain had recognized the validity of the new Bolivian government immediately, the most vital ally to have politically and economically was the United States.35

Before the beginning of Revolution in 1952, the U.S. government and members of Bolivia’s sexenio had reached a deadlock on tin price negotiations. Negotiating an economic deal was an immediate priority of the MNR once in power, as Bolivia’s export-based economy could not function without foreign recognition and investment. In an interview with an American journalist, Lechín, the head of the miner’s labor union, stated “Understand I’m an anti-imperialist – naturally, because I’m Bolivian… who do we think we are—a small and impoverished country - that we can afford to disregard the fact that we are a part of the American orbit?”36

The United States, in contrast, regarded the Bolivian situation as one of many within the mounting Cold War. President Truman spent 1952, his last year in office, pressing Congress to support the Mutual Security Program, a global outline for foreign aid and assistance. In a speech to the House of Representatives, Truman called the Program a means of economic defense against the Soviet threat: “Our support and assistance for other nations… are not in the nature of charity… The problems of American survival would be multiplied to an incalculable extent if we

35 Acheson, “Memorandum by the Secretary of State to the President,” 493.
had to face the Soviet threat without… other nations.” U.S. concern toward Bolivia was less in the logistical needs of the Bolivian economy, and more in the political sanctity of Latin America as a whole.

The United States recognized the MNR government on June 2, 1952, and began economic assistance immediately. Point IV on the Mutual Security Program provided for aid in underdeveloped areas; for Latin America as a whole, President Truman recommended $62 million for military aid and $23 million for technical assistance. By the end of June, the Truman administration had provided $200,000 toward a “cooperative program of agriculture.” As the MNR pushed forward reform in Bolivia, the flow of U.S. money underlined their actions.

On Oct 7, 1952, Bolivian Vice President Hernàn Siles met with Dean Acheson for tin mine negotiations. Acheson presented two major concerns: that American stockholders invested in the current system be treated justly, and that the U.S. have input on “development and progress” as a “friend of Bolivia.” As a result, the mines were nationalized as an “expropriation” from the tin barons rather than a “confiscation.” The MNR recognized that “some form of compensation was necessary to avoid being labeled communist.” U.S. sway over the legal process of nationalization established precedent for following reforms.

The nationalization was announced on Oct 31, 1952, a date specifically intended to reduce negative publicity during the upcoming November elections in the United States. The

---

38 Malloy and Thorn, 62.
41 Acheson, “Memorandum by the Secretary of State to the President,” 510.
election of President Dwight Eisenhower marked a shift in the relationship between the two nations, as well as an escalation of the “Red Scare” against Communism.\textsuperscript{44} During the turnover of power in early 1953, Eisenhower announced an end to tin negotiations. On the surface, relations deteriorated. The MNR, cut off from U.S. money, opened trade relations with Guatemala. Briefly, the party returned to radical, revolutionary rhetoric.\textsuperscript{45} Negotiations continued behind the scenes, however, between U.S. representative William Hudson and Victor Andrade, the Ambassador of Bolivia. By May, 1953, they had an aid-package option on Eisenhower’s desk. Between May and July of 1953, as rural regions experienced heightened peasant violence, the MNR clamped down on anti-American rhetoric in the media, with President Estensorro himself having regular interviews with U.S. News stations.\textsuperscript{46}

In a matter of months, the Eisenhower administration drastically shifted its attitude toward Bolivia. Milton Eisenhower, the President’s brother, personally took a trip throughout Bolivia during the summer of 1953. He assured his brother that although the MNR had socialist tendencies, it was not Communist, and concluded that “Bolivia’s economic weakness” would allow the U.S to “establish clear guidelines for the revolution.”\textsuperscript{47} Unlike revolutionary movements in other Latin American countries happening during the same period, the Bolivian National Revolution was exploitable without necessitating a coup.\textsuperscript{48} During a conversation between Guevara Arze, and U.S. officials, Arze stated that “the [Bolivian] Government itself had until recently been split between two groups,” one of which was more radical and against the

\textsuperscript{44} It is highly recommended to look into McCarthyism, loyalty programs, and the Red Scare to fully understand U.S. politics during the 1950’s.
\textsuperscript{45} Lehman, 102.
\textsuperscript{46} Lehman, 103.
\textsuperscript{47} Zunes, 40.
\textsuperscript{48} Gregory Weeks, \textit{U.S. and Latin American Relations} (University of North Carolina, Pearse Education inc, 2008), 105-110. In 1952 the CIA overthrew the Guatemalan government, followed by an overthrown of the Venezuelan dictatorship in 1957. In 1959 the Cuban Revolution succeeded, although it had been building since events in 1953.
United States’ “imperialist hegemony.” The second group “maintained that it was the policy of the United States to help Latin America” as “such progress… was in its own interest.” President Estenssoro and his immediate cabinet fell into the latter group, and received U.S. support because of the accurate perception that they were open to working with U.S. interests. According to Arze, the program of U.S. aid “placed the latter group in a position of dominance” within Bolivian politics.49

In June of 1953, the Eisenhower brothers met to discuss options for Bolivia. The Assistant Secretary of State, John Cabot, wrote that “the President thought that we could move ahead immediately on the Point IV aid and spoke of the possibility of using a tin contract as lien to guarantee the proposed $10 million loan for agricultural development.”50 By July 6, 1953, the U.S. and Bolivian governments had signed a one–year tin contract.51

An Agrarian Reform Commission formed under Bolivian Vice President Síles in January 1953, and deliberated on the issue of rural reform throughout the year. As the bulk of the Bolivian government was focused elsewhere, the Commission became stymied against surmounting rural violence, concluding that “the movement developed its own dynamic and slipped out of the control of all national actors.”52 In early May, the Commission was told it had ninety days to develop a report.53 The June-July tin contracts, and resulting U.S. funds toward agricultural development, gave the MNR the opportunity needed to get the revolutionary

51 Lehman, 103.
52 Malloy and Thorn, 126-127.
53 Malloy and Thorn, 241.
peasantry under control. Although most Commission members agreed on the abolishment of the latifundia system, they debated on the issue of latifundista compensation and reinvestment. Many sections of the drafted Agrarian Reform Decree followed the same guidelines of expropriation and oversight that the U.S. put forward for mine nationalization. Subsequently, in response to criticism, the MNR stated that it “had been forced to move with great haste in the face of imperative peasant demand.”

By the time the Commission drafted the Agrarian Reform Decree, the majority of landowners had abandoned latifundia lands, which were under control of campesino sindicatos. This power vacuum, combined with the government’s reliance on foreign aid, leant to a policy of restraint and subversion. Although the MNR rose to power promising eventual agrarian reform, “no planned reform could have been as sweeping as the one initiated by the Indians themselves and only formalized by the government.” By the end of 1953, absent latifundistas meant major regional power was solely in the hands of campesino leaders. Local politics devolved into negotiation between peasant militias. In the case of the hacienda of Pillapi, the fleeing latifundistas took steps outside of the Bolivian legal system to attempt to keep the land out of campesino hands. Nine haciendas were sold to a United Nations Aid Mission, as “the families felt that by giving the land to… anyone other than the campesinos, the valuable land might be salvaged.”

---

54 Malloy and Thorn, 21–22. The drafted Decree contained 176 different articles that were largely ignored once the law was enacted.


It was under tense circumstances that President Estenssoro traveled to Ucureña in August 1953. The city stood as a symbol of indigenous power; the campesinos gathered to watch the President constituted the only active, organized political force in the region. The peasants, numbering around 50,000, “bedded down in previously inviolable parks, plazas and avenues” to watch President Estenssoro’s speech. Despite being heavily armed, “very few incidents of violence occurred.” Estenssoro represented the Bolivian government and the MNR party, which submitted “national interests to international supervision” as an assurance of power. After speaking, the President signed the Law while standing on an open-air platform, and the peasants’ fired celebratory rounds. Importantly, in his rhetoric the President used the term ‘campesino’ to refer to the gathered crowd, officially throwing out the use of the pejorative ‘indio.’

The ostensible goal of the Agrarian Reform Law was to fulfill the promise of land redistribution, and officially end the latifundia system. Validation of indigenous action was essential for curbing violence and appeasing regional militia leaders. However, the Law fundamentally ended the revolutionary peasant movement by imposing strict official procedures on the redistribution process, bringing sindicatos under national supervision.

Immediately following August 2, 1953, the latifundistas remaining in the countryside completely abandoned up to 90 percent of haciendas in a wave of panic. Despite their fears, incidents of campesino violence fell drastically, as the rural population embraced its new status. Over the next several years, party rhetoric encouraged indigenous pride and loyalty, constantly reminding the peasantry “that they had been liberated, that they now owned land…

59 Malloy and Thorn, 243.
60 Patch, 131-132.
that they must solidly support the government.” In actuality, the distribution of land titles immediately slowed and became caught behind “unbelievably cumbersome” legal mechanics.63

The Law aimed to capitalize on the growing number of sindicatos, and turn them into regional-national institutions through which a peasant could petition for land. To receive a title, an individual had to present a petition, as well as evidence that the previous land-owner had not effectively used the land, before the sindicato in a series of hearings. The case then went before a regional Agrarian Reform Judge. If the Judge ruled in favor for the peasant’s case, it went on to the National Council of Agrarian Reform, and finally to the most stagnant step; each land-title redistribution had to be personally approved and signed by the Bolivian President himself.64 Moreover, which cases received timely attention was “colored by political considerations, so that partisans of the MNR did not lose even excess land.”65

After 1953, the leaders of a local sindicato tended to be a mixture of community authorities and assigned MNR agents, which disrupted local village structures to some degree. Because the new official requirements for sindicato leadership demanded both a speaking and writing knowledge of Spanish, the majority of older male villagers were ruled out as candidates, being speakers of only Quechua or Aymara. Aymara communities, which had been distant from the action in the Quechua-speaking Cochabamba valley, practically ignored sindicatos imposed by the MNR, since older men were not eager to give up their status. The diversity and far-flung distribution of indigenous populations in Bolivia proved to be problematic for the Agrarian

63 Malloy and Thorn, 244.
65 Heath, Erasmus, and Buelcher, 293-294, 374. In a translated interview, one finquero (a peasant who successfully petitioned and gained a farm), complained that “the MNR doesn’t stimulate progress; it crushes it… I, too, have a backward finca.” He goes on to say that “what is important is that, as an enemy of the party, I have no rights whatsoever… Let’s say I clear so many hectares; then I plant cane. Then—poof— all of a sudden a new campesino sindicato is formed and they steal my land. They do it through the Agrarian Reform Judge, but I still call it stealing.”
Reform Law’s new structures, as “practically all rural programs emanating from the national government [were] set up for ‘syndicate’ members.” Both despite and in lieu of this organizational fact, by 1955 there were 2,000 registered sindicatos throughout Bolivia.

After the Law was signed in August 1953, the MNR and United States began negotiating for extended technical aid. As campesinos began the long process of legal landownership, agricultural production fell and traditional transportation and marketing networks, previously maintained by the land-holders, disappeared. An official from the Bolivian mine corporation, in regards to feeding mine laborers, said “we don’t know how to even start buying the wheat from peasants… we have an easier way of doing things: we can call the U.S. embassy, cry for help… and for this service we don’t even have to pay cash.” In 1954, the U.S. and Bolivian governments signed several treaties opening Bolivia up economically, including “exemption from internal taxation… of supplies and goods from the Government of the United States” especially in regard to food imports. Victor Andrade wrote that Bolivia obtained “first grants in foodstuffs, wheat, flour, oil, lard, and cotton on September 29, 1953.” He noted that the surpluses “were not distributed for free but were sold to the public for Bolivian pesos. These funds accumulated… to be used for projects undertaken jointly by the governments of Bolivia and the United States.” By 1955, 58 percent of imported goods from the United States were products that Bolivia’s campesinos were producing internally.

---

67 Dandler, 341.
68 Dandler, 349.
70 Andrade, My missions for revolutionary Bolivia, 175. He called this aid “a fresh breeze which carried away dark storm clouds on the horizon.”
71 Andrade, 176.
72 Lockwood, 371.
President Estenssoro himself personally negotiated with President Eisenhower. In the October following the Agrarian Reform Law the two exchanged letters and telegrams cementing their collaboration. As Eisenhower wrote: “We appreciate fully the fact that the present emergency situation in Bolivia is one which the Government and the people… are unable to meet without the assistance of friends.” Estenssoro’s reply welcomed “the attitude of Your Excellency” which demonstrated “the solidarity of the American people with their brothers of the continent.”

Indigenous communities were not oblivious to the shortcomings of the Agrarian Reform Law. Despite the victorious feeling of the moment in Ucureña, by the time American anthropologists traveled through Bolivia in the early 1960s, most conversations on the streets of Bolivian towns “reflect[ed] general disappointment with the entire movement.” Out of some 15,000 cases put forward by Bolivia’s peasants for land ownership, only a little over 7,000 were concluded before 1966. Of the 8,000 cases pending, approximately 4,000 were waiting only on a Presidential signature.

It is remarkable, therefore, that the MNR government in Bolivia maintained both U.S. and indigenous support until its end in the mid-1960s. In the translated words of one indigenous Bolivian, “the greatest benefit we received from the reform is not exactly that they have made us masters of a piece of land, but that now [we] feel ourselves to be men.” In particular, the change in national rhetoric from indio to campesino, the self-identifying term chosen by at least a vocal portion of Bolivia’s indigenous population, had a profound effect. In the 1960s,

74 Carter, 10.
75 Malloy and Thorn, 245.
76 Simmons, Palea and Pucara, 6.
anthropologists Dwight Heath and Hans Buelcher found that both government officials and peasant farmers were adamant about proper terminology. This was especially true in more diverse, bilingual communities, since ‘campesino’ lacked racial implications, unlike the former term. As one interviewee observed, in Bolivia “everybody is all mixed up—Guarayu, Chiriguano, Chiquitano, Spaniard, gringo, and all the rest.” His own label of campesino suggested only poverty in relation to los ricos, or “the rich ones,” while indio had made him feel like less of a person than those who called themselves “white.”

Through extensive similar interviews, Heath and Buelcher concluded that universal suffrage in 1952 and the Agrarian Reform Law in 1953 “marked virtually [indigenous] induction into the status of human beings… Campesinos are generally proud to have their vote and their own parcel of land, however tiny; even more important appears to be a cherished intangible, *dignidad de la persona.*” The MNR presented itself as the provider of that feeling of personal worth. Whether or not this was accurately the case was less important than the fact that the MNR government was successful in its “courtship of the campesinos and in maintaining a counterbalance of power in the militias.” As noted by an MNR official, campesinos “were willing to vote for the MNR when party agents provided transportation by truck to polling places,” as long as those polling places were in market towns where they could also sell their agricultural produce.

It should not be misconstrued that the Bolivian National Revolution of 1952 and

---

77 Heath, Erasmus, and Buelcher, 74.
78 Heath, Erasmus, and Buelcher, 383. “Personal dignity.”
79 Patch, 131. Also see: Carlos Walter Urquidi, *A Statement of the Laws of Bolivia in Matters Affecting Business* vol. 2 (Washington, D.C., Pan American Union, Department of International Law, 1956), 6-8. By June 1954, peasant militias were re-organized into mobile police brigades’ directly-subordinate to the regional Agrarian Judge.
80 Heath, Erasmus, and Buelcher, 277.
following MNR reforms changed the face of Bolivia. Through massive social reforms, the MNR enfranchised the majority of the population and broke up long-standing systems of power and exploitation. The indigenous peasantry emerged forcefully out from under the peonage of a land-holding class, re-defining themselves and their self-worth through action.

Equally undeniable, however, is the close role the United States had in defining, and co-opting, the Bolivian National Revolution. Through economic and political pressure, the U.S. government was able to supervise implementation of reform and guide the MNR. Both governments collaborated to moderate the Revolution and subdue radical action and violence. By the end of 1953, the Bolivian economy and government were fully reliant on aid from the United States, with the revolutionary peasantry appeased from apparent land distribution victory.

On August 2, 1953, Ucureña stood at the center of revolutionary Bolivia. A strange dynamic underlined the sweeping reform of the Agrarian Reform Law and the celebration of the crowd. For over a year, the campesinos present had experienced violent upheaval on their rural haciendas, actively inciting revolution. During that same time period, President Estenssoro and the MNR government worked closely with U.S. officials to negotiate monetary and technical aid, moderating the ‘official’ revolution. These forces came together for the signing of the Agrarian Reform Law, which validated, rather than gifted, extensive change in Bolivia’s agricultural system. The “victorious moment” that officially sanctioned ‘campesinos’ in Ucureña brought the same armed peasantry under control of the Bolivian government and over-arching U.S. interests.
Bibliography


