

Historical Memory The Struggle for the Miners' Archive in Bolivia

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PRESENTATION / PRÉSENTATION

Historical Memory: The Struggle for the Miners' Archive in Bolivia

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IN LATE 2019, BOLIVIA'S FIRST INDIGENOUS PRESIDENT, Evo Morales, was toppled amid a wave of police mutinies and street demonstrations dominated by right-wing opposition leaders and civic associations. The dénouement came on 10 November, when the head of the armed forces – who, like many other officers involved in Morales' ouster, was trained at the US Army's School of the Americas – called on the president to step down. Morales, together with vice-president Álvaro García Linera, took refuge in Mexico. A Christian fundamentalist senator, Jeanine Áñez, proclaimed herself president. *Le Monde diplomatique* noted that Áñez has “surrounded herself with members of the military,” politicians with links to ultra-rightist anti-Indigenous groups, “and big employers' representatives. None of them have been elected to the posts they hold.”¹ From Washington, President Donald Trump and his secretary of state Mike Pompeo hailed the events as a triumph for democracy.

The presidential palace that Áñez took over, as a uniformed soldier helped her don the presidential sash, is called the Palacio Quemado – the “Burnt Palace” – because it was set on fire in an 1875 coup attempt. As of now, counting last November's takeover, Bolivia has had 189 coups.

1. “Bolivia's Coup,” *Le Monde diplomatique*, 18 December 2019. What came to be known as the “civic-police-military coup” had sought justification in allegations of irregularities in the October elections. These were endorsed by the Organization of American States, though that body, long known for the closeness of its alignment with US policy, has “not brought forward the new, detailed documents it promised would prove electoral fraud” (“Bolivia's Coup”).

Bolivia and Historical Memory

AN IN-DEPTH ACADEMIC HISTORY of labour struggles at one of Bolivia's most famous mines is titled *The Power of Memory*.² Perhaps nowhere else in the hemisphere is it more vividly apparent than in Bolivia that how history is told is a question of power in the present and that the relation between collective memory and social power is never fixed in time, nor set in stone, or in the pages of books. There, as I kept seeing and learning anew in the course of my research – much of it carried out at the Miners' Archive – history keeps bursting from beneath the cobblestones and into the present.

"The Bible has returned to the palace," declared Áñez upon her installation in the Palacio Quemado. The statement harked back to her denunciation, as "Satanic," of the annual celebration of the Aymara New Year, which Morales had launched at the ruins of a pre-Inca site built seven centuries before the Spanish Conquest. For Bolivia's traditional elite, laying claim to the heritage of the conquistadors, and often to direct descent from them, was long a matter of pride. In recent years, more than a few were alarmed when Morales's speeches evoked a different legacy: that of Tupac Katari, the Aymara insurgent who, from his base in El Alto, laid siege to La Paz in 1781 and is said to have declared, before the Spanish authorities had him torn to pieces, "I will return, and I will be millions."

As for Simón Bolívar, for whom the country is named, *El Libertador's* most famous brief for Latin American independence was a polemic over the facts and meaning of history, aimed at overturning Spain's claims to rule legitimately over its colonies.³ After defeating the armies of the Crown, in 1825 he revisited the battlefield of memory, travelling to the city of Potosí to climb the "silver mountain" that had given the vanquished empire so much of its wealth and *raison d'être*.

A century later, as tin – a commodity now central to armaments production and provisioning for soldiers – replaced silver as the basis for Bolivia's economy, miners drawn from Quechua and Aymara villages began to take their place among the most militant working-class sectors in the world. Though still a minority of the population, they spearheaded the Bolivian Revolution of 1952.

After a new cycle of coups installed a series of rightist regimes in the 1960s and 1970s, one of Bolivia's most influential intellectuals noted that the proletariat of this plundered and impoverished nation had developed "the best historical sense of any of the continent's working classes."⁴ The observation

2. Magdalena Cajías de la Vega, *El poder de la memoria: La mina de Huanuni en la historia del movimiento minero y la minería del estaño 1900-2010* (La Paz: Plural Editores, 2013).

3. Simón Bolívar, "The Jamaica Letter: Response of a South American to a Gentleman from This Island," 6 September 1815, in David Bushnell, ed., *El Libertador: Writings of Simón Bolívar*, ed. David Bushnell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 6–31.

4. René Zavaleta Mercado, *El poder dual en América Latina* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1974), 84.

came as new struggles erupted against military dictator Hugo Banzer, another School of the Americas graduate.⁵

In the 1980s, with neoliberalism sweeping the continent, privatization, mass layoffs, and mine closures decimated the workers' ranks. Yet, as I witnessed while researching a book on labour radicalism and the revolutionary Marxist movement in Bolivia, "history seemed to erupt through the earth's crust" in 2003 and 2005. In what came to be known as the Gas Wars, the *cascos café* – "brown helmets," as the miners are often known – occupied the front ranks "as workers and peasants faced off against the army and police in the colonial plazas of the capital." In the central square of La Paz, amid the sound of *cachorros* (dynamite blasts set off by miners), a retired miner told me, "The rich have stolen everything from us, all the way back to the Age of Silver" under the Spanish. Across town, an orator cried out "Remember the Tupac Katari rebellion!" as he evoked the pre-Inca deity of abundance, Ekeko, in a speech on the need for city-dwellers to back the Indigenous peasant insurgents then flooding into the city.⁶

The rebellion of 2003–05 overthrew two presidents, one of them the country's biggest mine owner, the other its preeminent historian. Channelling that upheaval into the renewal of state institutions through an "orderly transition," Morales won the special presidential elections of December 2005, with a landslide vote for his Indigenist-populist Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS; Movement toward Socialism). Early the next year, he was sworn in, as the country's first Indigenous president. The new administration was part of the "pink tide" of Latin American governments elected amid widespread repudiation of the neoliberal Washington consensus.⁷

In the years preceding Morales's election, the MAS built on his original base among peasant unionists in the department (province) of Cochabamba. Defending their right to grow the coca leaf widely consumed by Bolivia's labouring poor, the party developed a reputation for opposing US-backed administrations. (In 2002, the US ambassador went so far as to explicitly warn Bolivians not to vote for Morales.) Partly as a strategic decision given early competition from Aymara nationalists, the MAS also increasingly sought to identify itself with cultural, linguistic, historical, and symbolic aspects of

5. Banzer was inducted into the school's Hall of Fame in 1988. See Leslie Gill, *The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 78.

6. S. Sándor John, *Bolivia's Radical Tradition: Permanent Revolution in the Andes* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009), 13–14.

7. A vivid glimpse of how the Washington consensus had been promoted in Bolivia is provided by the documentary *Our Brand Is Crisis* (Rachel Boynton, dir., Koch Lorber Films, 2005). It features Clinton-aligned election strategist James Carville, who in 2002 ran the re-election campaign for President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, the US-educated mining magnate who wound up being driven from the presidency, and the country, the following year.

resistance to the oppression of the Indigenous majority that had characterized the country from its inception.

A political and economic balance sheet of Morales' thirteen years in office would be outside the scope of this brief presentation, but it is important to note that the underpinnings of the *status quo ante* remained unbroken. Its name notwithstanding, the MAS pledged from the beginning of its administration to promote an "Andean and Amazonian capitalism." The agribusiness magnates who dominate the country's eastern departments, mainstays of the hardline right, retained their property and power. Meanwhile, as he has stated, Morales "boosted" the armed forces, which were given munificent funding and praise as allegedly inseparable from the people.⁸ Nonetheless, anti-Indigenous rightists were enraged by the rise of Aymara and Quechua administrators, entrepreneurs, and intellectual and cultural figures, and by what US-backed fundamentalist politicians saw as challenges to traditional "white Christian" hegemony.

In the weeks following Morales's ouster, police and army troops killed 36 unarmed protesters in two massacres, on 15 and 19 November, according to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Others were "disappeared," while the new regime launched arrests and threats against "seditious" journalists. The commission also noted an outbreak of "acts of racism and discrimination," particularly "murders, beatings, wounding and humiliation" of Indigenous women known as *mujeres de pollera* because of the distinctive pleated skirts (*polleras*) they traditionally wear.⁹ In late November, "public administration" employees were banned from wearing *polleras*, ponchos, and other clothing associated with Indigenous culture.

This followed burnings of the Indigenous movement's multicoloured *wiphala* flag by supporters of ultra-rightist Santa Cruz businessman and paramilitary leader Fernando Camacho, a close ally of the new administration. Police had also cut *wiphala* patches off their uniforms in the course of the coup. Though its precise origins are contested, the *wiphala* banner is raised in homage to the civilizations subjected by the Spanish Conquest and to the present-day struggles of their living descendants. As contention over collective memory

8. "Morales asegura que se arrepiente de haber potenciado a las FFAA cuando era presidente," *Los Tiempos* (Cochabamba), 17 December 2019. Internationally notorious for its coups and massacres, Bolivia's military was smashed by armed workers in the 1952 Revolution. The nationalist regime that came to power then rebuilt it with US training, dollars, and weapons. After the Cuban Revolution, "Bolivia became a laboratory to test ... the new role Latin American militaries might play" in Washington's efforts to ensure a "friendly" hemisphere, with the United States training entire graduating classes from Bolivia's military academy. Kenneth D. Lehman, *Bolivia and the United States: A Limited Partnership* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 150–151.

9. "CIDH: Observaciones preliminares tras su visita a Bolivia," Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 10 December 2019.

entwines with issues of power in the present, even such symbolic evocations can be demonized as newly seditious, to be exorcised in new *autos-da-fé*.

The Miners' Archive

WE DO NOT NORMALLY THINK of archivists as people engaged in a heroic adventure. In Bolivia, they are. On the windswept *altiplano* (high plateau) in El Alto, beginning in the year 2000, former mine workers took the lead in rescuing their history.

For centuries, Bolivia's mines generated fabulous wealth, untold misery, and examples of struggle and sacrifice renowned throughout the world. They also produced a history full of secrets and revelations. A central part of that history was rescued, in a physically literal sense, at the Archive of the Bolivian Mining Company (Comibol), the state enterprise formed after mines were nationalized in the Bolivian Revolution of 1952. When most state-owned mines were shut in the privatization frenzy of the 1980s and 1990s, Comibol was gutted. Its archives were, again quite literally, consigned to the scrap heap of history.

"After we started work here in 2000, we discovered that two entire truckloads of documents had been shipped off to a toilet paper factory," archive director Edgar ("Huracán") Ramírez told me during one of my first visits to the site, where I was looking for documents about a famous meeting of the miners' union (FSTMB) in the town of Pulacayo. "An investigation found that this had already happened a number of times," added the former miner and labour leader from Potosí.

Staff members display "before and after" photos, with a mixture of indignation and pride. Before: precious documents left in barrels, piles, and dumping grounds, exposed to the elements, soaked in water, stained with rust and dirt. After: rescued archival materials arranged on shelves that the workers built from old doors, crates, and scrap wood. As for nails, "we got them the old-fashioned way, by gathering old rusty ones from the ground and sharpening them by hand," noted archive warehouseman Freddy Aguilar.

Under Ramírez's direction, his fellow former mine workers began the labour of classifying documents by enterprise, mine, historical period, and subject. The staff worked to "safeguard these elements of the nation's memory," in the words of Carola Campos, the archive's technical director. The three largest categories correspond to the mining empires created by Bolivia's pre-Revolution "tin barons": José Avelino Aramayo (1809–82), Simón Patiño (1860–1947), and Mauricio Hochschild (1881–1965). Aramayo was among the first to realize that the mines of Potosí – the "rich mountain" whose name had been a synonym for silver in colonial times – were a lucrative source of a more prosaic metal: tin. The fortunes of this malleable substance were linked to war, as it was used for munitions as well as canned ("tinned") food for soldiers. In an old Aramayo Company warehouse in El Alto, the Comibol Archive got its start.

For his part, Simón Patiño was “undoubtedly the greatest South American industrialist of his or previous generations.”¹⁰ In the decades before the 1952 Revolution, Patiño became world famous as one of the wealthiest men on earth, with a yearly income said to exceed Bolivia’s national budget. The third tin baron was Mauricio (Moritz) Hochschild, whose German Jewish background made him an early target of nationalist agitation. Today his descendant Adam Hochschild is known as the author of *King Leopold’s Ghost*, a history of the Belgian Congo, where it was not tin but rubber that the horrors of empire coined into gold.

At the Miners’ Archive, a crucial project has been “the classification of the Hochschild Archive,” archivist and historian Carlos Tenorio told me. Among this collection’s curiosities is the elaborate private code that the Hochschild company used for its internal telegrams. The code is one of an endless number of secrets dug up by the archive’s miners. Another is a 1937 contract in which Patiño Mines hired the legal services of a young lawyer named Víctor Paz Estenssoro, who a few years later became “El Jefe” of Bolivia’s Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (MNR), which would subsequently take power in the 1952 Revolution.

On a shelf nearby, one may consult a document listing the precise amounts that the Patiño firm paid to transport and feed government troops in the infamous Uncía mine massacre of 1923, an event often cited as the spark for the country’s 20th-century labour radicalization. Then there are the reports sent by company spies and government agents, pointing out which miners they considered most important to fire for “subversive” union and political activities, in the innumerable waves of repression against Bolivian labour.

One of those who experienced that history first-hand, going back to the 1960s, is archive director Edgar Ramírez. Born and raised in Potosí, he worked as a perforator at the Unificada mine from 1969 to 1994, when the mine was closed under the authoritarian Presidential Decree 21060, which aimed to destroy the miners’ movement while privatizing state enterprises and making union activity in the private sector as difficult as possible. Ramírez’s work in the mine was repeatedly interrupted by firings, imprisonment, exile, and periods of clandestinity as a leader of the FSTMB and the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB) labour federation.

The dates of these episodes track “milestones” of repression in Bolivia’s history, including 1965 (the junta of General René Barrientos, one of Lyndon Johnson’s favourites); 1971, 1976, and 1978 (General Hugo Banzer’s dictatorship); 1980–81 (Colonel Luis García Meza’s “narco-junta”); and 1994 (under Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, the US-trained mine magnate featured in *Our Brand Is Crisis*).

In 1997, Ramírez – often known as “Huracán” (Hurricane) – was transferred to the Mutún iron mines, “where the workers were abandoned and the damp

10. Charles F. Geddes, *Patiño: The Tin King* (London: Robert Hale, 1972), 11.

of the mountains had invaded all the structures of the enterprise," a friend relates. "It was really a new kind of exile which Banzer [who had returned to power] condemned him to. In that desolation, abandoned and alone, he contracted a chronic liver disease which brought him to the verge of death." A decade later he suffered a near-fatal relapse.

In 2000, Ramírez was sent to work as a warehouseman at the archive of Comibol, the government mining company. He found it in a state of near collapse, discovering that it had been subjected to what he calls "a process of strangulation" since the mid-1980s. This decay was a direct result of the privatization decrees. During one of our discussions in the drafty wooden warehouse where records were stored before the archive moved to its current, brick-and-cement location, he noted,

At one time, the Archive had an infrastructure and qualified personnel. All of that suffered a first blow with the decision to remove the personnel and put in some former mine engineers and others who knew nothing of archives. This is where the actual destruction began. Then Comibol decided to sell off all its buildings, like its headquarters, which had formerly been the Patiño Mines headquarters, as well as the Archive itself. From 1993 to 1995, the company rented dump trucks and they brought mountains of paper up here and dumped them out into the patio as if they were sand, gravel or trash, under an improvised roof.

Then came another phase when the company [supposedly to make up for these actions — Ed.] got half a million dollars from the World Bank to organize a so-called documentation center, with library technicians. They said they organized 47,000 files, which amounts to less than 300 linear metres of documents — when we have [tens of] kilometres of documents here! It boiled down to the World Bank giving that half million not to organize a documentation center but to destroy an archive.

Because history can be dangerous, the powerful often seek to reshape it in their image, or bury it entirely. Thus, the team of former miners that Ramírez eventually put together had to begin by digging anew into mountains, this time made of paper, to rescue documents of a history that it was up to them to defend.

Mobilizing their experience as organizers, they sorted and ordered papers that they saw as more precious than any metal and made them a home from scratch. Then they had to defend the archive, not only against attempts to remove its contents yet again but also against the material constraints of life on the impoverished, harsh yet beautiful *altiplano*. After years of struggle, the new building was specially constructed to better house the documents.

Because of the ex-miners' efforts, among the old papers we have the privilege of smelling the *copagira* (mineral-laden mine water), hearing the *cachorros* (dynamite blasts), and tracing the veins of a proletarian, Indigenous, rebellious history.

Conclusion: Memory's Persistence

IN EARLY DECEMBER 2019, news reached me that Comibol had fired Ramírez. Historians, archivists, writers, and filmmakers, together with labour-movement veterans, began spreading the word, calling for the 72-year-old former political prisoner and labour leader to be reinstated in his post.

Then, on 11 December, the Bolivian media reported on a government press conference in which the vice-minister of coordination stated that Comibol's dismissal of Ramírez had been "an error" and that he was being reinstated as director of the archive. In a posting on "the battle in defence of the archives," Luis Oporto, head of Bolivia's Library of Congress and a prominent voice in defence of Ramírez and the Miners' Archive, stated, "Many thanks to the *compañeros* and *compañeras*, archivists here in Bolivia and around the world, to journalists who followed this situation closely, to the academics and intellectuals, as well as the cultural and academic institutions which offered us the support we needed in this crucial time for the defence of Bolivia's archives."

The Miners' Archive remains little known outside Bolivia. Yet the story of its creation is part of the legacy of struggle and sacrifice by Bolivia's predominantly Indigenous working people and a vital contribution to collective memory by and for the working class, and for historians the world over.