VI. LATIN AMERICA

By Louis Shub*

Anti-Semitism

Latin American countries which enjoyed relative political stability in the past few years again relapsed into the tradition of palace inspired revolutions and swift military coups. Of particular interest and concern, because of their fascist implications, were the successful coups engineered in Argentina and Bolivia.

Since the army colonels, the majority of whom have been promoted to generals, seized the reins of government on June 4, 1943, Argentina assumed the characteristics of a fascist state. The present government has abolished political parties, muzzled the press, largely disorganized labor unions with the ultimate objective of incorporating them in a labor front, and arrested without warrant and imprisoned without trial anyone who dared criticize the acts or ideology of the party in power.

This characteristically totalitarian disregard for democracy has been accompanied by a series of officially sponsored anti-Semitic decrees and actions. On October 14, 1943, President Pedro Ramirez suspended the publication of Yiddish newspapers, an act which evoked a stiff rebuke from President Roosevelt who asserted that the arbitrary suppression of Yiddish newspapers was "of a character closely identified with the most repugnant features of Nazi doctrine." Roosevelt further cited the resolution endorsed by Argentina at the Lima Conference in 1938, condemning "any persecution on account of racial or religious motives." A few hours after the President's criticism, Yiddish newspapers were permitted to resume publication, but were ordered to publish concurrently Spanish translations of their editorials.

This ostensibly favorable response to democratic pressure was short-lived, for on October 18, members of DAIA, the leading Jewish organization in Argentina, in which all Jewish

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groups are represented, were compelled to issue a statement saying that no anti-Jewish discrimination was practiced in that country. Five days later, the Argentine government issued an order banning Jewish welfare and mutual-aid groups.

Each succeeding month witnessed an increase in anti-Jewish measures. The November raids on Jewish homes in Buenos Aires by the political police headed by Leopold Luzones led to the flight of many Jews to Uruguay and Chile. These raids were coupled with increased demands by the pro-Nazi press in Argentina that the government take even stronger action against the 300,000 Jews in the country. Clarinada, a viciously anti-Semitic publication, demanded that the Jews either be deported or isolated in ghettos. In December, in the city of Salta, a Jewish theatrical company was assailed on two consecutive nights. Anti-Jewish propaganda in the press continued unabated despite the appeal of Dr. Moises Goldman, president of the DAIA, to President Ramirez, requesting that his government conform to the decree of August 4, 1943, forbidding publication by newspapers of anything that might “wound or mortify” any section of the Argentine population by attacks upon its “nationality or origin, religious beliefs or customs.”

Though on January 26, 1944, Argentina broke off diplomatic relations with Germany and Japan because she feared that the United States and England would apply economic sanctions, there was no democratic resurgence. This gesture of appeasement towards the United Nations by President Ramirez was considered too liberal in certain circles and, on February 25, he was deposed by Eldemiro Farrel.

This led to a further deterioration in the position of Argentinian Jewry, particularly the Jews in the province of Entre Rios. Previously, the Federal Commissioner of Entre Rios had prohibited ritual slaughter, closed the Hebrew schools, revoked the corporate status of the Chevra Kadisha, discharged Jews in the civil service of the province and changed the Jewish names of towns and streets. Appeals to higher authority had brought about the countermanding of these measures. However, in April, 1944 the Jewish Colonization Association was informed that the governor of Entre Rios was imposing a levy of $2,500,000 on the eleven Jewish colonies in
the province on the pretext that they had not paid taxes in the last ten years. This action was taken despite the fact that the ICA was recognized since 1890 as a charitable organization and had been exempted from taxation.

In May and June there were additional manifestations of anti-Semitism in the province. 250 Jewish teachers in the public schools were dismissed; physical assaults upon Jews occurred more frequently; and Jewish shops were vandalized.

Towards the end of May, 1944, the streets of Buenos Aires were strewn with pamphlets urging violence against the Jews who were allegedly planning a general strike against the Farrel regime scheduled for June 6, the anniversary of the overthrow of the Castillo government.

In June, 1944, the Argentine authorities issued a decree introducing compulsory teaching of the Roman Catholic religion. Though this measure was not aimed specifically against Jews, they were nevertheless the hardest hit. Under this system each child must state his religion, and children registering as Jewish are separated from the others. This has resulted in the introduction of separate benches for Jewish children, which has in turn led to the boycott and humiliation of Jewish children by their non-Jewish schoolmates.

Argentina's fascist orientation manifested itself in the same month when a decree was issued banning the broadcast and publication of President Roosevelt's message to the United States Congress announcing the establishment of a temporary haven for 1,000 refugees in Fort Ontario, Oswego, New York.

Argentina's anti-democratic and anti-Jewish excesses so considerably strained diplomatic relations with the United States that Norman Armour, United States Ambassador to Argentina, was recalled to Washington on June 27, 1944, though diplomatic ties were not severed.

In Bolivia, the government that followed the overthrow of General Enrique Pennaranda on December 19, 1943, was considered fascist inspired because its chief support came from the National Revolutionary Movement party (M.N.R.) led by Victor Paz Esterssoro, a known anti-Semite. This party is an advocate of extreme Bolivian nationalism and
sought a "repudiation of anti-national Jewish manipulations" and "absolute prohibition of Jewish immigration."

But from its very inception, the government of the new president, Gualberto Villaroel, sought to impress the outside world with its democratic orientation by the following actions: ratification of the declaration of war on the Axis, reaffirmation of Bolivia's support of her international obligations concerning inter-American solidarity and proclamation of free elections. Moreover, to remove any suspicions that the present government is anti-Jewish, President Villaroel issued a statement repudiating anti-Semitism. Also, in receiving Dr. Natalio Berman, a member of the Chilean Parliament, the president of Bolivia expressed disapproval of the anti-Semitic propaganda circulated by certain Bolivian newspapers.

Thus, a situation that appeared fraught with danger for the nearly 6,000 Jews of Bolivia, seems to have turned out advantageously, because the Bolivian government was compelled to adopt pro-democratic measures before achieving recognition by the United States.

That anti-Jewish agitation and outbreaks are used merely as an entering wedge to institute totalitarianism, was again demonstrated, this time in Peru. On January 15, 1944 the Peruvian government disclosed the frustration of a plot by German and Japanese agents who planned anti-Jewish disorders as a prelude to overthrowing the legally constituted government.

The use of the Jew as a scapegoat serving to divert public protest from those in power, was apparent in Paraguay, following several large anti-government demonstrations held in April, 1944. The Paraguayan government launched an official anti-Jewish drive in a series of articles in its newspaper, El Paraguayo. One of the articles insisted that "Jewish infiltration constitutes a serious danger to Paraguay," although the number of Jews in the country is only 1,800 out of a total population of 1,042,240.

The Jews of Colombia were disconcerted by two anti-Semitic incidents that occurred in August, 1943. When the Montefiore Jewish Society of Bogota applied for incorporation, the government rejected the application contending
that the Jewish religion is anti-Christian. Granting that the Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, the document denying the request of the Montefiore Jewish Society stated that "such freedom may be granted only to those who are not opposed to Christian morality." Following further representations, however, the above ruling was cancelled. Not long thereafter, the Chancellor of the Colombian Senate made a statement reviling Jewish character and opposing Jewish immigration into Colombia.

In May, 1944, Colombia ordered the freezing of the assets of German nationals in that country. Jewish refugees, although officially stateless, were nevertheless included within the scope of the decree. There was also considerable agitation on the part of native importers against Jewish newcomers who demanded that the government impose restrictions on foreigners engaged in the importing business.

Late in 1943, the Venezuelan government decided to discontinue the issuance of transit visas to people in Europe holding end visas for Colombia, Ecuador, or other countries requiring entry through Venezuela. In Venezuela proper, however, there was little or no restriction imposed upon refugees who were already settled in that country.

Immigration

Although anti-immigrant sentiment prevailed in most Latin American countries, there were encouraging exceptions. Responsible Ecuadorean officials such as Dr. Maria Velasco Ibarra, provisional president of Ecuador, and S. E. Duran Ballen, Ecuadorean consul-general at New York, respectively denounced anti-Semitism and endorsed the free immigration of peoples. Francesco Trujillo, Mexican minister of labor, in May, 1944 expressed the belief that Jewish immigration to Mexico would have a beneficial effect on that country's development. In an article in the Inter-American of April, 1944 by the Colombian journalist Baldomiro Sonin Cano, it is admitted that "the war has brought to Colombia European scientists, technicians, and specialists in many branches of industry whose knowledge and energy will be extremely valuable in the post-war period."
Although some dissatisfaction was expressed in official quarters in Brazil with the concentration of Jewish immigrants in urban areas, the government agreed to admit 500 Jewish children from France. Neutral governments on the European continent were advised of this decision so that they might provide temporary asylum for the children before their eventual transportation to Brazil.

From private advices, it was learned that the 700 Jews of Costa Rica have good reason to welcome the new president, Teodore Picado, who was elected in May, 1944. Among his first official acts were the rescinding of the ban on Shehita that had been in effect for several years, and the renewal of naturalization rights for Jews who had been in the country more than five years.

Community Life

Between 1933 and 1944, about 125,000 Jews, largely from Central Europe, had found havens in Latin American countries. They joined almost half a million older Jewish settlers who had come to the countries of Latin America in two distinct waves of immigration: the Sephardim from the eastern Mediterranean countries who arrived about 1890 and the East European Jews who came in large numbers in the years immediately following World War I.

It is estimated that the Sephardic Jewish community in Latin America numbers between 75,000 and 100,000; the East European numbers from 300,000 to 350,000 and the Central European from 125,000 to 150,000. More than half of the Jewish population of Latin America (350,000) resides in Argentina. The remainder is distributed approximately as follows: Brazil, 110,000; Uruguay, 35,000; Chile, 25,000; Mexico, 20,000; Cuba, 13,000 and the rest in varying numbers in other countries.

The past year was marked by genuine gains in the development of Jewish communal institutions and activities. Though these developments took place primarily in the large centers of Jewish population: Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Santiago, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Havana, and Mexico City, similar constructive trends were apparent in smaller Latin American communities.
Many welfare institutions of long standing were expanded so that they might better meet communal needs. In Buenos Aires, the Chevra Kadisha which is the largest and most influential Jewish organization in that city constructed a new building to house its own office and those of other related institutions. The Jewish hospital, Sociedad de Beneficencia Ezrah Hospital Israelita, inaugurated a campaign for $500,000 to build a new wing and modernize its facilities. The Bikur Cholim opened an unusually well-equipped out-patient clinic. The Asociacion Filantropica Israelita (a welfare organization of the German Jews), the Liga Israelita Argentina Contra la Tuberculosis, the Children's home and the Home for the Aged conducted campaigns to erect new buildings and purchase new facilities. In October, 1943, the new building of the Sociedad Hebraica Argentina was opened.

The coming of age of the Jewish communities in Latin America is best illustrated by the celebration in July, 1943 of the 75th anniversary of the Congregation Israelita of Buenos Aires, under the presidency since 1922 of Max Glucksman. Other manifestations of the maturity of Latin American Jewry were the twenty-fifth anniversaries of Zionist organizations in Argentina, Uruguay and Chile. Almost an institution in himself, Jacob Botoshanski, Yiddish dramatist and journalist, was roundly feted upon the advent of his thirtieth year of activity in Argentina. And in Uruguay, The Association of Jewish Merchants, celebrating their tenth anniversary, planned to issue a book dealing with the role of Jews in the development of that country's commerce and industry.

On the other hand, new Jewish groups are constantly appearing on the Latin American scene. The first Zionist Congress ever held in Colombia met in Bogota, on September 8, 1943. Montevideo played host, in March, 1944, to the first Revisionist-Zionist convention ever held in Latin America. Another first in Jewish community life is the establishment of an Agudas Israel branch in Montevideo. After considerable preliminary planning, the first Hachshara (training camp for halutzim) in Argentina was founded near Parana, capital of the province of Entre Rios.

The emergence of new educational institutions in the past
year also bears witness to the growth of Jewish community life in Latin America; in Goez, Uruguay, a Mizrachi center and school was established; an ORT school was opened in São Paulo, Brazil; in Mexico, the B’nai B’rith sponsored an adult extension school for Jewish studies, and the Yeshivath Aiz Chaim was founded in Mexico under Rabbi Mordecai Merzel. In Buenos Aires, plans were made for a secular school to accommodate 1,000 children. Smaller Jewish communities in Quito, Ecuador; Cali, Colombia; and Lima, Peru have expressed need for rabbis and trained religious teachers.

Jewish education in Latin America is either primarily religious in character and under the influence of the synagogues and gemeinden or under the auspices of those who believe that Yiddish culture should be preserved and developed. Although Zionism has made important inroads among the Jews of Latin America, Jewish education is not, to the degree that it is in the United States, Hebraic and Palestine-focused in content.

Latin American Jews are for the most part bilingual and are frequently trilingual. Last year an Ashkenazic Mahzor was fashioned by a German immigrant after the style used in southern and western Germany. This prayer book for the High Holy Days is significant for its parallel columns of Hebrew, Spanish and German. The Mexican Zionist Conference in October, 1943 was conducted in Spanish but many of the speakers digressed into Yiddish and it was necessary for the chairman to translate the proceedings into Spanish for the benefit of the Sephardic Zionists. When the Federation of Polish Jews held a “trauer” meeting on the fourth anniversary of the invasion of Poland, speeches were delivered in Spanish, Polish and Yiddish.

Even in the smaller communities with a Jewish population of between 1,000 and 3,000—Barranquilla and Cali in Colombia; Lima, Peru; Quito, Ecuador; Paramaribo, Dutch Guiana—there are two and even three community buildings maintained separately by the Sephardim, central Europeans and eastern Europeans. The young people, however, have been more successful in attempting to cut across country-of-origin lines and their organizations include Sephardim, Central Europeans, and East Europeans.
Relief Activities

As in past years, the plight of the Jews in Europe continued to arouse great concern among the Jews of Latin America and they responded generously to the appeals of organizations engaged in relief and rescue work. In Argentina, the Committee for Refugees and War Victims worked unceasingly, and, on March 23, cabled $60,000 to Reuben Reznick, representing the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in Turkey. The Jews of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro contributed $52,000 and $17,000 respectively and the congregation of Nidhei Yisrael in Mexico, $3,000 to the J.D.C. The World Jewish Congress also conducted a campaign for relief funds. The Central Federation of Polish Jews in Buenos Aires concentrated its relief activities on shipping parcels of food and clothing to Polish Jews who managed to survive the Hitler terror. The Jews of Uruguay contributed $5,000 to war relief.

Intensified campaigns were conducted by the Keren Hayesod and the Jewish National Fund in most Latin American countries and quotas were for the most part surpassed. A number of Jewish organizations in Buenos Aires contributed 70,000 pesos to the victims of an earthquake that occurred in January, 1944 in the San Juan province of Argentina.

Through their representative organizations, Latin American Jews commemorated the anniversary of the Battle of the Warsaw Ghetto and held protest meetings against the carrying into effect in Palestine of the policy of the White Paper.

From this review of Jewish life in Argentina during the past year, it can be readily seen that Latin American Jewry is alert and sensitive to its responsibilities.