THE ANARCHISTS OF PATAGONIA[1]

In 1920 an anarchist revolution, called in the names of Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin and Malatesta, broke over the British-run sheep farms of Southern Patagonia. Its instigator was a lanky Gallician of twenty-three called Antonio Soto. He had chestnut hair and a thrilling voice and was slightly wall-eyed; he had been piously brought up by maiden aunts at El Ferrol, where he was a contemporary of Francisco Franco. At seventeen he read Tolstoy's condemnation of military service, skipped to Argentina to avoid his own, and drifted into the theatre and the fringes of the anarchist movement.

Employed as a scene shifter in a travelling Spanish theatre company, Soto ended up in Río Gallegos, a dismal seaport near the Straits of Magellan. Here a compatriot told him of the plight of the migrant farm workers, mostly mestizo Indians from the green but over-populated island of Chiloe. The situation appealed to Soto's messianic impulses. He switched from the theatre into politics, got himself elected secretary-general of the local workers' union and, with a crew of amateur revolutionaries, led his followers to loot and burn, and finally left them to the firing squads.

Osvaldo Bayer is a left-wing Argentine historian of German

[1] *Los Vengadores de la Patagonia Trágica*, Osvaldo Bayer, Buenos Aíres: Editorial Galerna, 1972–4.

descent. The facts speak for themselves; and the author is a brave man who has risked his life to publish them. The revolution of 1920–21 does indeed read like a prophecy of contemporary events in Chile and Argentina, though it must be said that Bayer's lapses into rhetoric and his polemical outbursts aimed at current military and foreign intervention in Latin America rather weaken the force of his narrative.

Patagonia, the backdrop to this story, is the wind-blown tip of the continent below latitude 42°, and is split between Chile and Argentina. The Chilean coasts are choked with rain forest, but east of the Andes there are deserts of grey-green thornscrub and grassy pampas that remind one of Nevada or Wyoming. After 1900, Patagonia actually became an extension of the rough-riding West: Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid came down and robbed the Bank of Tarapaca and London in Río Gallegos in 1905.

Magellan gave the name 'Patagon' to the Tehuelche Indian giant he saw dancing on the shore at St Julian in 1520. The word is supposed to mean 'Big-Foot' for the size of his moccasins, but this is not the case. The Tehuelches wore dog-head battle masks, and the Grand Patagon is a dog-headed monster in the chivalric romance *Primaleon of Greece* printed in Spain seven years before Magellan sailed. (Hence Caliban, who invoked the Tehuelche god Setebos, has additional claims to Patagonian ancestry – *vide* Trinculo's: 'I shall laugh myself to death at this puppy-headed monster.') The Tehuelches were guanaco hunters, whose size and booming voices belied their docile character. And after the sheep-farmers came, they died out – from drink, despair, disease and intermarriage.

Darwin had written of Patagonia: 'The curse of sterility is on the land', and for most of the nineteenth century Argentina had ignored it. There were a few Argentine settlements down the coast, but most of the colonising was Chilean. Chile occupied the Straits of Magellan in 1843, one day ahead of the French, and by

the late 1870s her convict station at Punta Arenas had grown into a thriving port. Then Argentina woke up, realising that Darwin's estimate was ill-judged and, as the price of her neutrality while her neighbour was at war with Peru, forced a division of Patagonia roughly along the watershed of the Andes. The Chileans felt they had been tricked out of the best land and always looked for opportunities to get it back.

Meanwhile, an English resident of Punta Arenas brought the first sheep over from the Falklands in 1877. When they multiplied, others took the hint. The two big pioneers were a charmless Asturian, José Menéndez, and his son-in-law, Moritz Braun, the son of a Jewish butcher from the Baltic. Between them, the Braun and Menéndez families got colossal land grants from the Argentine Government, throttled the territory with their company, La Anonima, and imported stud flocks from New Zealand, farm-managers from the British army, and shepherds from the Highlands.

They became immensely rich. When he died in 1918 Don José left the surplus of his millions to Alfonso XIII of Spain. In Punta Arenas you can still see the Palais Braun, imported piecemeal from France in 1902, where, in a setting of damasks, Cordoba leathers, hygienic marbles, and a painting of amorous geese by Picasso's father, the Edwardian era has survived the Allende regime.

Other foreigners also got land in Patagonia. The Land Department in Buenos Aires deliberately favoured Anglo-Saxons, since they were identified with Progress, and such Argentine proprietors as there were tended to install British managers. The result was that Santa Cruz province looked like an outpost of the Empire administered by Spanish-speaking officials. Some of the British farms were – and still are – run by big outfits, quoted on the London Stock Exchange. But many settlers were 'kelpers' from the Falklands, with memories of the Highland clearances and nowhere else to go. Their estancias, though almost bankrupt, are

still smartly painted up and remind one of an English boys' boarding school: the headmaster's house sits with its herbaceous borders, lawn-sprayers and bound copies of *Punch* and *Blackwood's*, while the peons sleep in spartan dormitories, have their orders posted on blackboards and make trivial purchases in the farm shop.

Bayer is not quite fair to the *latifundistas*. They had laboured for twenty-five years, and their position was still extremely precarious; what one government gave, another might take back without compensation so the temptation to get money out was irresistible. Because of their cheap labour force, Patagonian sheep-farmers had been able to undercut their Australian and New Zealand competitors and throughout the 1914–18 War there was a boom, but in the slump that followed there came new taxes, inflation, customs controls and workers' agitation. The farmers of Santa Cruz began to compare themselves with Russian aristocrats stranded on the steppe at the mercy of violent peasants.

One issue of the *Magellan Times*, the local English newspaper, carries a picture of a Russian country house, its owner grovelling to a slab-sided muscleman, with the caption: 'A nocturnal orgy of the Maximalists at the estate of Kislodovsk. 5,000 roubles or your lives!' Alongside an advertisement for 'party frocks by Marcells in beige georgette with a silver sash' was a profile of Trotsky, 'a sullen despot in the style of Nero, opening his murderous dispatches with a gold paper knife that once belonged to the Tsars ... note the sullen indifference with which he treats beautiful linen table cloths'.

The peons were almost all from Chiloe. They were tougher and poorer than the sun-loving Argentines and worked harder for less. Besides which, their employers could dump trouble-makers over the border and earn the approval of the authorities, who saw in the large numbers of Chilean nationals a threat to Argentine security. Bayer describes the Chilotes thus:

> All day on horseback; their backsides calloused; in heat and cold; without women; without children, books or schooling. Always wearing the same submissive smile; always the clumsy evasiveness of the Chilean peon. Men with skins the colour of those who never wash. Numberless men with glassy stares. Men repressed, looking as if capon flesh were incarnate in their lifeless faces, in their bodies without beauty, in clothes fit only to cover their nakedness, not to keep out the cold ...

But this picture of the Chilotes as mindless victims of foreign greed does scant justice to their own culture, for the folklore of these steel-hard people is full of hellish visions of the outside world and prophesies a time when they will sweep the land of their oppressors. Like other pinioned races, their reserve will suddenly break down in bouts of sex, drink and violence (and did so before the coming of the Spaniards). This aspect of their character is something Bayer has overlooked.

Río Gallegos in 1920 was a grid of streets lined with corrugated iron buildings, with the smoke-stacks of the Swift Corporation's freezing-plant rearing above the prison yard. Antonio Soto had found a mentor, a bald and dandified Spanish lawyer, José Maria Borrero, who had left the University of Santiago de Compostela with a doctorate in theology and drifted to the end of the world where he ran a bi-weekly newspaper, *La Verdad*, and laid into the Anglo-Saxon plutocracy. His language thrilled his compatriots and they began to imitate his style: 'In this society of Judases and Pulchinellas Borrero alone preserves the rare integrity of man ... among these egotistic gluttons of lucre ... these twittering pachyderms with their snapping teeth and castrated consciences.'

Borrero introduced Soto to the local judge, Ismael Viñas, a youngish demagogue who also hated the foreign pirates and had done his best to ruin a Scottish sheep-farming company that had contravened the Argentine fisc. The trio formed an alliance

against the landowners, hoteliers and general traders, and against two men in particular. One was the Acting-Governor of Santa Cruz, Edelmiro Correa Falcón, a tweedy anglophile and property agent, the chairman of the local Sociedad Rural. The other was Ibon Noya, the Spanish owner of the Buick garage and president of the Río Gallegos branch of the Argentine Patriotic League, a right-wing organisation formed to combat the bacillus of foreign ideology. In the case of Correa Falcón it was a case of love turned to hate; Judge Viñas had insulted the Acting-Governor's wife by appearing at a civic function on the arm of his concubine.

In September Soto began his career as a revolutionist by organising a strike of waiters at the Grand Hotel. The police chief of Río Gallegos was a big, bad-tempered Scot called Ritchie whose immediate reaction was to put all the rabble-rousers in jail. By the time he awoke to the real threat of a General Strike and the pitiful size of his own force, the Judge had already ordered the prisoners' release, but the strike spread and paralysed some estancias which were in the middle of lambing.

Soto then hoisted his political colours, the red and the black of anarchism. His next move, touching but not entirely to the point, was a march of Chilotes to commemorate the eleventh anniversary of the shooting of the Catalan educator Francisco Ferrer. Soto insisted that the workers were honouring Ferrer, as Catholics honoured the Maid of Orléans, or the Mohammedans Mohammed, but the police chief banned the demonstration, giving Viñas a chance to ridicule his ignorance of Ferrer's place in the history of ideas. The Judge squashed the ban and the march went ahead.

By the last week in October, the *Magellan Times* was giving gloomy warnings of the unrest. On the night of 1 November Soto escaped murder at the hands of a hired Chilean – the knife blade hit the silver watch in his waistcoat. Convinced of his mission, Soto called a general strike and marshalled a list of minimum

demands for estancia workers. The tone of the document was quite sedate. Borrero and the Judge wanted only to rout the other faction, not to topple the system. But Soto insisted on a final clause: that his own Federación Obrera should mediate all disputes between employers and their men and concluded with a barrage of insults against the landowners and their system that 'placed the value of a man alongside that of a mule, a sheep or a horse'. The farmers offered better wages and conditions but would not let the chorus-boy step between them and their men. As they hoped, their offer produced a schism among the workers: Soto and the anarchists rejected the terms; the syndicalists accepted them, speaking of Soto's 'mental obtuseness and total ignorance of how to run a strike'. Soto replied that the syndicalists were pimps for the local brothel, La Chocolatería.

Isolated from the moderates, he then took up with some 'propagandists by the deed', who called themselves the Red Council and wore red armbands. The leaders were two Italians, one known as the '68' who had once made shepherdesses in a Dresden porcelain factory and the other a red-bearded army deserter called El Toscano. Their followers were a fluid mixture of German *Wandervögel*, Russian anarchists, two Scots, some North American cowboy-outlaws, and the usual corps of Chilotes.

At the head of up to five hundred rough-riders, the Red Council swooped on isolated farms, burning, requisitioning firearms, provisions and liquor, and taking the owners and managers hostage. The centre of their operations were the steppes east of Lago Argentino within easy reach of the Cordillera. In Río Gallegos Commissioner Ritchie sent his sub-commissioner Micheri to size up the situation. Also in the party were sergeant Sosa 'the Peon-Beater' and Jorge Pérez Millán Témperley, a pretty upper-class boy with a weakness for uniforms, who had joined the Gendarmería as a subaltern.

Over Christmas Micheri's party patrolled the lake and beat up peons at random, then retreated back across the pampas in two Ford cars. Passing the hotel of El Cerrito they fell into a Red Council ambush. Two policemen and a chauffeur were killed, the sub-commissioner was wounded, and Témperley was shot in the genitals.

Soto went into hiding and Borrero went to jail. When he came out he found that Ritchie had raided the offices of *La Verdad* and destroyed the typeface. In Buenos Aires, President Hipólito Yrigoyen received a firm note from the British Embassy and decided to send in the troops. His choice fell on a small but patriotic officer, Lieutenant Colonel Héctor Benigno Varela.

With the tenth Argentine Cavalry there sailed Captain Ignacio Yza, the appointed Governor of Santa Cruz, who had done everything to delay taking up his appointment. He was a radical but knew nothing about Patagonia. He and Varela took the strikers' part against the foreign land-sharks, dismissed Ritchie, ignoring the warnings of Correa Falcón, and offered free pardons to all who surrendered their arms. The Red Council were suspicious but, in the best anarchist tradition, allowed themselves to be overruled.

Soto came out of hiding and claimed a total victory over the army, private property and the State. 'You'll see,' Ibon Noya told Varela. 'Once you go this will start up again.' 'If it starts up again,' the Colonel said, 'I'll come back and shoot them by dozens.'

Noya was right. Soto was puffed up with success and made the Governor's life impossible. He tried to organise a strike in the Swift freezer, but the new police chief outwitted him and herded the workers back into the factory. As winter closed in, Soto went to Buenos Aires to canvass for support at the eleventh Workers' Congress, but the professionals bickered over the policies of Lenin and Zinoviev and ignored the Patagonian delegate. Meanwhile the coastal towns of Patagonia were convulsed with arson,

sabotage and at least one murder. By spring, Soto was dreaming of a revolt that would spread up from Patagonia and engulf the country. He had three lieutenants – a Bakuninist ex-waiter called Outerelo; a Syndicalist official, Albino Arguëlles; and a courteous and silent gaucho called Facón Grande for the size of his knife. Dr Borrero was conspicuous by his absence. The wreck of *La Verdad* had silenced him and he saw the dangers of provoking the army a second time. Besides, he was having an affair with an estanciero's daughter and had taken advantage of depressed land prices to buy a little place of his own. Then it was discovered that he had, all along, been on the payroll of the Brauns and Menéndezes; the anarchist broadsheets spoke of Judas' thirty pieces of silver.

The Red Council began the second phase of the revolution on their own, but were betrayed to the police and bundled off to jail. Soto should have taken the hint, but he still believed the government was neutral, and sent 'evangelists of Bakunin' round the sheep farms giving orders to raid and take hostages. On the whole the prisoners were well-treated, but a Mr Robbins of Torquay cut his throat in a fit of depression.

President Yrigoyen called Varela a second time and told him to use whatever measures were necessary. The *Magellan Times* commented: 'So far the Argentine Cavalry has done nothing to justify its presence, but we hope that Commandante Varela is preparing a campaign that will completely stamp out this revolt and that the bandits will receive a lesson they will not forget for a good number of years.'

This time Varela had indeed come 'not to pardon but to clean'. (He used the words *limpiar* and *depurar.*) He interpreted his instructions as tacit permission for a bloodbath, but since Congress had just abolished the death penalty, he had to inflate Soto's Chilotes to 'military forces perfectly armed and better munitioned ... enemies of the country in which they live'. Many, it was claimed, were salitreros from the nitrate mines in northern Chile;

when three Chilean carabineers were captured inside the frontier, this was evidence that the Chilean government lay behind the revolt; a Russian Menshevik with a notebook of Cyrillic characters plainly signified the red hand of Moscow. (Bayer categorically denies Chile's involvement, though members of the Argentine Frontier Commission assured me that documents exist to the contrary.)

The ill-armed strikers melted away before the troops. Varela filed reports of stirring gunfights and arsenals captured, but the *Magellan Times* for once told the truth: 'Various bands of rebels, finding their cause lost, have surrendered and the bad element among them have been shot.'

The army's performance was one of outstanding cowardice. On five occasions the soldiers got the peons to surrender by promising to respect their lives. Each time the killings began straight afterwards: they were shot into graves they dug themselves or their corpses burned on bonfires of thornscrub. Borrero made an exaggerated estimate of 1,500 in his book *La Patagonia Trágica*, but the number of the dead is uncertain. Officially the firing squads did not exist.

Soto's megalomaniac dream finally collapsed at La Anita, the prize Menéndez estancia, ringed by snowy mountains, with a view of the Moreno Glacier sliding through black forests into a turquoise lake. Here, with five hundred men, he held his hostages in the big green and white house with its *art nouveau* conservatory. When he heard of the massacres on the plain, and of Captain Viñas Ibarra's column not far up the valley, he knew his number was up. His character became more frigid and austere, while his talk of the dignity of man more than ever obscured any understanding of real men. At nights he went off to sleep alone, and the Chilotes, who required their leaders to share every detail of their lives, began to loathe him. At his last conference, the hardliners, led by two Germans, wanted to barricade the shearing shed with wool bales

and fight to the last man, but Soto said he was not dog meat, he would run for it and continue the revolution elsewhere. And the Chilotes preferred to trust even the Argentine army rather than Soto's promises.

Soto sent two peons to Viñas Ibarra to ask for terms. 'Terms for what?' he asked and told them to make terms with Jesus Christ. Subsequently, he demanded an unconditional surrender, but said he would spare their lives. That night Soto and a few others rode out over the Cordillera and escaped into Chile. (He died at Punta Arenas in the 1960s, filled with remorse, the proprietor of a small restaurant run on anarchist principles.) In the morning the soldiers freed the hostages and herded the peons into the shearing shed. One of the hostages, who had been a professional Indian killer, said he wanted thirty-seven corpses for his thirty-seven stolen horses. The three hundred Chilotes thought they would be expelled over the border into Chile. But at seven in the morning the door of the shed opened and a sergeant ostentatiously distributed picks to a work-party. The others heard them marching off and then the chink of picks on stone. 'They're digging graves,' they said. The door opened again at eleven and the men were led out in groups for the estancieros to pick out the men they wanted back at work. It was just like sorting sheep.

The unwanted ones – mouths lowered and eyes distended – were led off past the sheep-dip and round a scrubby hill. From the yard the others heard the crackle of shots and saw turkey buzzards soaring in from the mountains. About 120 men died that day. One of the executioners said, 'They went to their deaths with a passivity that was truly astonishing.'

The British community was overjoyed. The *Magellan Times* praised Varela's 'splendid courage, running about the firing line as though on parade ... Patagonians should take their hats off to the tenth Argentine Cavalry, these very gallant gentlemen'. Ibon Noya's Patriotic League was already urging Varela's appointment

as Governor. At a luncheon, Noya spoke of the 'sweet emotion of these moments' and of his 'satisfaction mixed with gratitude at being rid of the plague'. The colonel replied modestly that he had only done his duty as a soldier, and the twenty British present, being men of few Spanish words, broke into song: 'For he's a jolly good fellow ...'

In Buenos Aires it was a different story. There was no hero's welcome for Varela, only graffiti reading: 'SHOOT THE CANNIBAL OF THE SOUTH!' Few left-wingers cared too much about Soto or the Chilotes, but the army had, unwittingly, killed a Syndicalist official and Congress was in uproar. Yrigoyen appointed Varela director of a cavalry school and hoped the crisis would simmer down. But at dawn on 27 January 1923, as Varela was on his way to work, he was approached by a a tall, red-haired man in a dark suit carrying a copy of the *Deutsche La Plata Zeitung* and a bomb. As the bomb exploded, the assassin fired his Colt twice and pierced Varela's jugular. 'I have revenged my brothers,' he mumbled in bad Spanish as he fell, 'I do not need to live.'

The killer was Kurt Wilkens, a thirty-six-year-old German wanderer from Schleswig-Holstein, who had been a miner and anarchist in the United States until the immigration authorities expelled him. In Buenos Aires he washed cars by day and read great books by night. In his lodgings police found framed photos of Tolstoy and Kropotkin, and copies of Goethe's *Werther* and Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*. He claimed to have made the bomb himself, but there were no traces and the police were sceptical.

One of the mourner's at Varela's funeral was an effeminate young man who moped round the coffin, sobbing and swearing revenge. The murderer, who had recovered, was put in the Prison of the Encausaderos ('those awaiting trial'). Wilken's new warder was strangely nervous; he paced up and down in the hot sticky night until his spell was over, then he entered the cell, rubbed the barrel of his Mauser against the German's shoulder blades, asked

him, 'Are you Wilkens?' 'Jawohl,' came the answer, and he fired. The young warder rushed to his superior and said, 'I have avenged the death of my cousin, Colonel Varela.'

The warder, the same boy who behaved so strangely at Varela's funeral, was Jorge Pérez Millán Témperley, last seen at El Cerrito and now permanently unhinged by the wound to his genitals. How he became Wilken's warder was never explained, for the inquiry smoothed the issues over. He got off with a light sentence, eight years, in view of his 'physical abnormality' and was soon transferred to a hospital for the criminally insane.

One of his fellow internees was a Yugoslav midget, a compulsive talker who had once murdered his doctor. On Monday afternoon, 9 February 1925, Témperley, in a black mood, was writing a letter to the National President of the Argentine Patriotic League, when Lukič, the Yugoslav, poked his head round the door of the cubicle, shouted, 'This is for Wilkens!' and shot him.

The mechanics of vengeance had taken their final turn. The question was: Who gave Lukič the gun? The police eventually pinned this on another internee, Boris Vladimirovič, a Russian of some pedigree, a biologist, artist and revolutionary writer who had lived in Switzerland and known Lenin. After the 1905 revolution he took to drink and then went to Argentina to begin again on a cattle ranch in Santa Fé. But the old life drew him back. In 1919 he bungled the robbery of a bureau de change in Buenos Aires to raise funds for an anarchist publication. A man was killed and Vladimirovič got twenty-five years in Ushuaia, Tierra del Fuego, the prison at the end of the world. But the cold, the clouds and black water drove him mad. He sang the songs of the Motherland, and for the sake of quiet, the Governor had him transferred to hospital in the capital. That Sunday visiting day, two Russian friends brought him a revolver in a basket of fruit. The case was hard to prove, and there was no trial. But Boris

Vladimirovič disappeared for ever, paralysed, into the House of the Dead.

Last year, I met near Punta Arenas an old Chilote sheep shearer who had escaped the massacre and had known Antonio Soto. His hands were knotted with arthritis, and he sat wearing a beret huddled over a wood stove. When I asked about the Revolution he said, 'The army had permission to kill everybody' – as if one could hope for nothing else. But when he talked of Soto and the leaders, he shook, and, as if surprised by the violence of his own voice, shouted, 'They were not workers. They never worked a day in their lives. Barkeepers! Hairdressers! Acrobats! *Artistas!*'

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