
STUDY

Translated by John Bell

A HISTORY OF THE MIR

“IF THEY WANT A WAR, THEY’LL GET ONE....”¹

Cristián Pérez

Imbued with Chilean political history of the recent decades, this article analyses the most important combat structures of the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (the MIR) as well as the most relevant actions that they carried out between 1973 and 1983. The author pays particular attention to the development of the central military apparatus (the “fuerza central”), the fights at Neltume and the assassinations of several prominent men in the military regime.

¹ The phrase is one used by Miguel Enríquez, Secretary General of the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (the MIR) in reply to the proposal of Edgar Cevallos, from the Intelligence Service of the Chilean Airforce (SIFA), that they surrender. The document was published on the 10th of September 1974.

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“The robbers were tall and really good looking:
I thought they were great!”²

1. September 1973: the war that never was

From the evening of Monday the 10th of September 1973 to Tuesday the 11th around 50 were resting, despite the rumours that were circulating about military movements and a coup d’ etat. So as to make amends for the error that had been committed during the Day of the Tanks³, when they failed to group together and destroy the tanks that had fled, the men remained quartered in various safe houses in different areas of Santiago de Chile. In the houses were Garant rifles, which had belonged to the President Allende’s security force (the GAP), AK-47’s, .30 calibre machine guns and small arms with their respective ammunition together with explosives. The houses also counted on telephones for receiving instructions from the military head of the MIR.⁴

Those who were spending the night were members of Central Military apparatus, the elite of the MIR. There they were waiting for their orders to leave the houses, get in their cars and go to predetermined points, risking their lives, if necessary, so as the Socialist revolution, which they had longed for so much, should finally materialise.

About eight in the morning they heard that the military were intending to overthrow the government and that Salvador Allende was under siege in La Moneda (the Presidential Palace) awaiting the arrival of loyal forces. “Juancho”, the man responsible for the Central Military apparatus

² Comment made on August 20th to Tv’s Channel 13 by an attractive young girl who witnessed the assault on a branch of the Bank of London in Vicuña Mackenna street, that was carried out by a MIR squad.

³ The military uprising that occurred on the 29th of June 1973 was known as the Day of the Tanks or the “tancazo”. On that day a group of tanks from the Armoured Regiment, led by their commander, Roberto Souper, attacked the Ministry of Defence and the Presidential palace (La Moneda). The attempt was foiled personally by General Carlos Prats, Commander in Chief of the Army.

⁴ Conversation with “Carlos Perez”, interviewed by the author in New York, May 1999.

The name hides the identity of a member of Central Force who took part in the events. At that time he was a young University student. He had been sent by the MIR to Cuba where he received guerilla training. After the coup of September 1973 he was detained by the DINA. He escaped from his captors while he was being taken to a place where he could supposedly encounter his contact. He had invented the contact point so as to escape from the torture to which he was being submitted. Later on he hid in the houses of family and friends until he managed to leave the country and reach exile. He presently resides in New York.

of the MIR, told his men that the instructions from “Coño Aguilar”, military head of the party and a member of the Central Committee and the Political Commission, were to await further events.⁵

Meanwhile “Coño Aguilar” and “Pituto”⁶ went to the Cuban Embassy to take away some weapons, which had been promised to them. In the Embassy they spoke with the Cubans in charge who refused to hand the weapons over. They only managed to get hold of pistols from the Embassy guards, who knew them “and passed them over to us secretly”⁷. When they were coming out they had their first but not last confrontation of the day with armed civilians and policemen who had been starting to block access to the Embassy that morning. Running at high speed they managed to break through the cordon, firing as they went, and escaped via Pedro de Valdivia Avenue towards the south without stopping until they reached the safe house where the rest of the Political Committee of the MIR were quartered⁸.

As this was going on the Secretary General, Miguel Enriquez, accompanied by Roberto Moreno, another member of the Political Commission, turned up at the INDUMET factory to hold a meeting with representatives from the Socialist and Communist Parties. Roland Calderon was there on behalf of the Socialist together with Orlando Millas, ex Senator and Minister of the Communist Party, who announced that his party would not take part in anything until it was clear whether the military were going to close the Congress or not. The conversation lasted a few minutes and they agreed to meet up later⁹. Miguel and Roberto returned to the house

⁵ “Carlos Perez”, interview with the author, New York, May 1999. Coño Aguilar” was the combat name of Arturo Villabela Araujo. We will be coming back to him later on.

⁶ Combat name of Andres Pascal Allende, sociologist, nephew of Salvador Allende, member of the Political Commission of the MIR. In 1974, on the death of Miguel Enriquez, he became the Secretary General of the organisation, a post he held until 1985. In 1975, units of the DINA discovered the smallholding in Malloco where Andres Pascal was hiding together with other members of the MIR leadership. A savage firefight began with the arrival of the DINA agents in which MIR member Dagoberto Perez was killed and Nelson Gutierrez wounded. Nonetheless Andres Pascal and his wife managed to escape, taking refuge in the Costa Rican Embassy while Gutierrez and his wife hid at the Papal Anuncio's. Later they went into exile. As the maximum leader of the MIR, Pascal Allende entered Chile secretly several times. He lives at present in Havana.

⁷ Comment made by Roberto Moreno, who at that time was a member of both the Political Commission and the Central Committee of the MIR, in an interview with the author in Santiago, June 1999. Roberto Moreno was detained by the SIFA (the Intelligence Service of the Armed Forces) in 1974 and later went into exile where he rejoined the MIR. Today he is an active member of the Socialist Party and lives in Santiago.

⁸ Andres Pascal Allende, “El MIR 35 años” (2nd part), from the magazine Punto Final No 480, from September 21st to October 5th 2000, page 13. The details of the request made to those in charge at the Embassy were given to the author by Pascal in an interview in Havana, Cuba in August 1999.

⁹ Robert Moreno in an interview with the author, Santiago, June 1999.

where the rest of the leadership were. A little later “Coño Aguilar” and “Pituto” were chosen to accompany Miguel Enriquez to INDUMET, where they held the second meeting of the day with representatives from the Socialist Party. It was mid-morning when they left the safe house. By this time there was an intensification in the presence of military and police patrolling the streets, watching for any signs of resistance: in spite of this the MIR group had little difficulty in arriving at the meeting.

In the factory, in front of a map of Santiago together with representatives from the Socialists, they began to discuss plans for defending the government, concentrating on the actions, places and forces with which they could begin a counter coup and deciding that the first action should be to mobilise a column to get Allende out of the Presidential palace¹⁰. Suddenly police broke in who were repelled by members of the military apparatus of the Socialist Party, led by Arnoldo Camu (“Agustin”), in charge of the group and the Miristas who were present¹¹. There then followed a violent confrontation between the two groups, which left casualties on both sides¹². In the middle of the shoot out, and when it was seen that the police were trying to surround the group which was in the factory, Miguel Enriquez ordered his men —“Coño Aguilar, “Pituto” and “Leon”, who had joined them en route¹³— to open a breach in the wall and escape, since the objective, at this moment, was not to fight but to get back to the house and find the rest of the leadership so as to implement the measures necessary for countering the military coup. Arturo Villbela distinguished himself in the battle, fighting courageously, while “Leon” remained behind trapped in one of the factories in the area, where coup forces subsequently shot him down¹⁴.

¹⁰ “Raul Marcos” one of the most members of the military apparatus of the Socialist Party. Interviewed by the author in Santiago, May 1994.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² For an account of the battles for the INDUMET factory and La Legua see Carmen Castillo Echeverría “Un Día de Octubre en Santiago” (1987); Eduardo Gutierrez Gonzalez “Ciudades en las Sombras: Una Historia no Oficial del Partido Socialista de Chile” (2003); Patricio Quiroga “Compañeros. El GAP: La Escolta de Allende” (2201); Arnaldo Perez Guerra “Hernnan Barahona: Como se Salvaron “Las Ultimas Palabras de Allende” y La Resistencia en la Poblacion La Legua”, El Siglo newspaper, No. 1104, September 8th 2002. The military version of these events can be found in “Septiembre de 1973” by the Armed Forces and the Police (a publication sponsored by the Chilean Army, Navy, Airforce and Police. Undated, Subscription No. 41,832).

¹³ “Leon” according to Andres Pascal, was a member of the MIR “Workshops”. He was most probably Manuel Ojeda Disselkoe, 30 years of age, an active MIR member and ex member of the GAP (Group of Personal Friends of Allende). He died in the battle for the INDUMET factory on the 11th of September 1973.

¹⁴ Andres Pascal Allende, interviewed by the author in Havana July 1999.

After several skirmishes with police and escaping through side streets, at around 4 p.m. the group managed to reach the residence where they found the military staff of the MIR. But by this time the battle in the Presidential palace had been ended with the death of President Salvador Allende and the Chilean revolution had ended forever.

“*Raul Marcos*”, an important member of the military apparatus of the Socialist Party, who participated in the battles for the INDUMET factory and La Legua, explaining the little resistance to the coup by the Left, maintained that a lack of military staff training in their forces played a decisive role at this moment as it made it difficult to co-ordinate operations so as to launch a counter coup¹⁵. To this explanation we can add another decisive factor: the absence of a general plan for political and military co-ordination between the MIR and the Socialists. On the morning of September 11th this vacuum could not be filled owing to the arrival of the police at INDUMET and both groups were left without common objectives for mobilising their forces. The other key point was the lack of opposition to the coup from the members of the Armed Forces: in other words not one military unit stayed loyal to the President of the Republic. This destroyed all hopes of a civilian-military counter coup, based on the defence of the Unidad Popular (the Popular Unity Government).

Apparently the Cubans also thought that in the case of a coup there would be a long determined resistance. On the morning of September 11th a group of 36 members of the Chilean Socialist Party, who were in Cuba receiving military training, were ordered to get ready to return immediately to Chile, together with a group of Cuban Special Forces to help those forces loyal to President Allende. At the end of 3 days they were told that there was no more resistance and the operation was cancelled¹⁶.

While this was happening in Cuba the young men of MIR’s Central Military apparatus who had stayed in their quarters in Santiago heard President Allende’s last speech and heard about the bombardment of La Moneda and the take over of the country by the Military Junta in the Military College. They held on for several days and the answer was always the same: wait¹⁷. Thus the so called Fuerza Central, the Central Military apparatus, the elite paramilitary group of the MIR, never received orders to mobilise and fight on the 11th of September nor on the following days.

¹⁵ “Raul Marcos”, interviewed by the author in Santiago, May 1994.

¹⁶ “Juan Miranda”, Socialist militant, afterwards one of the most important military members of the military staff of the MIR. Interview with the author in the North of Europe, July 1999

¹⁷ “Carlos Perez”, interviewed by the author in New York, U.S.A. May 1999

There have been many volumes written about the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (the MIR) which have told us a lot about their historical development: nevertheless there is a great question mark hanging over their military capability, since we only know fragments from ex militants, which, although important, have not allowed us to get near to understanding the real dimension of their paramilitary structures and the actions they carried out. This article intends to shine some light on the development of the military structures of the MIR and the actions undertaken up to 1983.

The names in inverted commas are combat names which members of the MIR used, the names in inverted commas and italics are names which have been invented by the author to disguise various identities. All the interviews quoted in this article, with the real names of those interviewed, are in the hands of the author.

2. The Movement of the Revolutionary Left (the MIR)

A fragment of the MIR's anthem:

“Son los pobres con la clase obrera
los que cumplen la clara misión
de decirle al conjunto del pueblo
que han tomado ya su decisión.
Trabajadores al poder
Trabajadores al poder
Trabajadores al poder.
En la lucha contamos las horas
Ya a los ricos les llega su fin
Porque estamos seguros de triunfar
Con el pueblo, conciencia y fusil.
MIR, MIR, MIR.

It's the poor of the working class
Who comply with the clear mission
To tell the whole of the people
That they have already taken their decision.
Power to the workers
Power to the workers
Power to the workers.
In the struggle we are already counting
the hours of the rich are coming to an end
because we are sure we will triumph
with people, conscience and gun.
MIR, MIR, MIR

On the first day of 1959, the men of Fidel Castro, Camilo Cienfuegos and Che Guevara defeated Batista's army, assumed control of the country and inaugurated a new area on the continent: the Cuban Revolution had begun¹⁸.

The example of the guerrillas from the Caribbean would be quickly imitated in other countries throughout Latin America. All over the continent groups sprung up which valued armed struggle as a method of political action and which proposed carrying out the social, political and economic changes that region demanded. In the following years guerrilla movements opened up in various areas and began causing problems for the governments in the region. To confront this threat, the North American administration responded immediately with the creation of President Kennedy's Alliance for Progress. By supporting the area with economic resources and development plans, this organisation intended to eradicate poverty, illiteracy and unemployment which they believed to be the causes for making revolution in Latin America a viable proposition. The idea was to eliminate the threat before it became a reality.

At this time the President of Chile was a Conservative, Jorge Alessandri, whose administration had acceded to several of the suggestions made by the Alliance for Progress, such as the promulgation of a law for agrarian reform (1962). In his government the force of the law was not strictly applied: an example of this was the popular name given to the Agrarian Reform law:- "The Flowerpot Reform". Expectations far exceeded the results of the law and discontent among the peasantry as well as among other important sectors of Chilean society began to grow.

In September 1964 there were Presidential elections. Among those standing were Eduardo Frei Montalva for the Christian Democrats and Salvador Allende for the Popular Action Front (FRAP), an electoral coalition of Communists and Socialists¹⁹. Faces with the elections, those at the

¹⁸ "From afar came soul stirring news. In Cuba, descending from the green slopes of the Sierra Maestra, a hurricane of dishevelled troops had got rid of Batista and his gang. More by faith than ammunition, the 26th of July shook the land of America with the youngest and most surprising revolution of its history. The new leaders installed in Havana, some 80 miles from the North American coast, thus began a daring struggle which has lasted up to our own days...." This quote, so full of admiration, is from Raul Ampuero Diaz, Secretary General of the Socialist Party and, at various times, a Senator. See Belarmino Elgueta, Jaime Ahumada, Oscar Nuñez et. Al. "Raul Ampuero. 1917-1996. El Socialismo Chileno" (2002), pages 142-143.

¹⁹ The Popular Action Front was born on February 29th 1956. The founders were Baltazar Castro and Jose Oyarce, representing the People's National Front, and Humberto Martones and Raul Ampuero, representing the Popular Socialist-People's Democratic Bloc. The FRAP put themselves forward as being the "agglutinated nucleus of the forces that were ready to fight for an anti imperialist, anti oligarchic and anti feudal programme...".

top in FRAP were convinced that this time they would win, since in the previous elections (1958) Salvador Allende had lost by a narrow margin to the leader of the Right, Jorge Alessandri Rodríguez²⁰. Nevertheless when the ballot boxes were open and the votes counted, it was Eduardo Frei Montalva, the Christian Democrat candidate, who won a clear victory, thanks to the support he received from both Conservatives and Liberals²¹. On the Left, the defeat provoked different reactions. The Communist Party concluded that they had lost because the Alliance was not sufficiently wide enough, since it did not include vast sectors defined by them as the “petit-bourgeoisie” (or lower middle class). Therefore to win the next elections it was necessary to get agreements with the parties that represented these groups, such as the Christian Democrats and the Radical Party. On the other hand the Socialist Party radicalised its position, questioning an electoral policy based on the ballot box and making clear its support for armed struggle, which materialised in the congresses held at Linares in 1965 and at Chillan in 1967²². The 1964 elections penetrated deep into the Chilean Left and large sectors began to lack confidence in the electoral approach: under the influence of the Cuban Revolution they became convinced that the only option to carry out the transformations which Chile needed was by force²³.

To summarise, the frustration of an important part of the Chilean Left at the defeat of Allende in 1964, and the perception of a successful and revolutionary transformation of Cuba, allied with the emergence of guerrilla groups in Latin America, created the conditions for ex members of the Socialist Youth Federation (FJS) (who had retired from the organisation in 1963 due to the more legal leanings of Allende’s campaign) to form the Marxist Revolutionary Vanguard (VRM). These, united with ex militants of the Young Communists (JJ.CC), together with various Trots-

²⁰ This absolute confidence in victory can be seen in the Report of the 20th General Congress of the Socialist Party of Chile, “1964: Año de Prueba para la Revolución Chilena”, whose author was Raul Ampuero Diaz, the Secretary General of the party. The report is quoted in Belarmino Elgueta, Jaime Ahumada, Oscar Nuñez et. Al. “Raul Ampuero 1917 – 1996: El Socialismo Chileno”, (2002).

²¹ As a reaction to “naranjismo”, an event that took place at the beginning of 1964 in Curico, traditionally a Rightist area. There in a parallel election for Deputy, the FRAP candidate, Dr. Naranjo, defeated the candidate supported by the Liberal and Conservative Parties. These therefore decided to support Frei to prevent Allende’s victory: he was the “less bad” of the two.

²² For a detailed explication of this process, see Luis Corvalan Marquez: “Del Anticapitalismo al Neoliberalismo en Chile”, (2001)

²³ An example of this can be found in the documents of the Marxist revolutionary Vanguard (VRM), where the brothers Enriquez were active members after leaving the Socialist Youth Federation (FJS).

kyists who old members of the “Communist Left”²⁴, came together to create a new Left grouping.

After some preliminary meetings, in a room in the centre of Santiago, the Movement for the Revolutionary Left was born on the 15th of August 1965. A doctor, Enrique Sepulveda²⁵, who had been an active member of the “Communist Left”, was nominated as Secretary General, plus a Central Committee of 21 members. Among the founders were workers leaders Clotario Blest Rizzo and Eugenio Cossio, and young men such as Luciano Cruz Aguayo, Bautista van Schouwen, Andres Pascal Allende, Arturo Villabeta, Nelson Gutierrez and the brothers Miguel and Edgardo Enriquez²⁶. In this way and almost silently, the MIR was born: it would be a group that would have an unsuspected importance in the following years.

It was organised to be “the Marxist - Leninist vanguard of the working class and the exploited and oppressed masses of Chile, who are looking to break free from their chains for over 150 years, fighting for a national and social emancipation which would lead to Socialism and Communism”²⁷. The method for achieving these objectives was “a daring and revolutionary policy that would be capable of opposing this cynical and imperialist violence through the virile and arrogant *answer of the armed masses...*”²⁸. From the beginning they tried to base the Chilean revolution on armed struggle, following the example of Fidel Castro. It was a clear and forceful answer to the traditional Left, who they criticised as being pacifist and married to the electoral system and who had not been able to make the revolution possible by the only way possible: an armed confrontation with the bourgeoisie.

At the beginning they based their work on University campuses, especially those in Concepcion, Santiago and Valparaiso: they also approached peasants in the Central area of the country and Mapuche Indians in

²⁴ The “Communist Left”, one of the dissident groups of the Communist Party was Trotskyist orientated: among their leaders were Senator Manuel Hidalgo, Heraclio and Humberto Mendoza and Ramon Sepulveda Leal. The group was expelled from the Communist party during the 30's. See Cristian Perez: “En Defensa de la Revolution ?: La Expulsion de la “Izquierda Comunista” 1928-1936”, (2000)

²⁵ Enrique Sepulveda was a doctor who had been influenced by Leftist ideas since his youth, especially those of Trotsky. In the 30's he was an active member of the “Communist Left”. After the military coup of 1973, he went to France where he actively participated in activities organised by Chilean exiles. He died during the 1970's.

²⁶ Eugenio Cossio, teacher and a founder member of the MIR. In an interview with the author in New York, May 1999.

²⁷ “Chile en el Camino de la Revolucion Socialista”. Declaration of the Principles of the Movement of the Revolutionary Left, made in Santiago, August 15th 1965. Quoted by Carlos Sandoval Ambiado: “MIR: Una Historia”, (1990), pages 15-19.

²⁸ Ibid, pages 15-19. The italics are mine.

the South. Their presence was weak among unionised workers but they did get significant support from the slum areas of Santiago and other cities²⁹.

The physiognomy of the MIR

At the beginning the organisation intended to carry out its political work more or less along the traditional lines of the Left, but this changed at the 1967 Congress, when young students from Concepcion replaced the leadership of Enrique Sepulveda's group. Miguel Enriquez became the Secretary General of the party.

From 1967 the organisation began a policy of confrontation with the government. They paid particular attention to violent propaganda and operations to get funds, which they called "recuperative", but which in fact were no more than bank robberies³⁰. These actions were communicated to the public as follows: "To the Workers, the Peasants, the Urban Poor and the Students: 1. The Movement for the Revolutionary Left, the MIR, informs the people that our "Rigoberto Zamora Commando Group" has expropriated funds from the Banco Nacional del Trabajo. The action has finished. The useless members of the "Death Squads" do not need to torture or beat anyone. 2. (::) The MIR will return this money to all the workers and peasants of this country, investing it in weapons and organising the armed apparatus necessary so that all the bosses in Chile will return to the workers everything they have stolen from them, in other words so as to have a workers and peasants government for constructing socialism in Chile.....4. The people can rest assured that this money is theirs and not a peso will be spent that will not be strictly necessary for arming, organising and preparing the defence of the interests of workers and peasants.... 5. The MIR dedicates this action to the memory of the revolutionary Rigoberto Zamora, who was an active member of the MIR and who died fighting for the freedom of the Bolivian people, together with his comrades in the

²⁹ With the poor and people from the slums the MIR formed the "People's Revolutionary Front" (FPR): its most outstanding member was Victor Toro ("Melinka"), who was also a member of the Central Committee of the organisation. In 1974 he was detained by the SIFA (the Intelligence Service of the Armed Forces) and later expelled from the country, seeking refuge in Cuba, Nicaragua and Mexico. At present he lives in New York where he has become one of the most important leaders of the Negro and Latin communities in the Bronx. Another of the leaders of the FPR was Alejandro Villalobos, "El Mikey", who was detained and then "disappeared" after the military coup of September 1973.

³⁰ Andres Pascal Allende, "El MIR 35 años" (2000), page 10. In this article the author talks about one of these operations in detail where both risk and flirting were ever present.

ELN in 1969. National Secretariat of the Movement of the Revolutionary Left, the MIR, 23/02/70”³¹.

On the 2nd of June 1969, activists of the organisation kidnapped the journalist Hernan Osess Santa Maria, director of the newspaper “*Noticias de la Tarde*” of Concepcion leaving him stark naked on the University campus, just as they were finishing an activity called “Floral Games”³². The kidnapping was carried out by members of the regional apparatus of Concepcion, without the knowledge of the national leadership: “it was just a simple warning”³³. According to Patricio Rivas, ex member of the Central Committee of the MIR, it was actually quite a minor event but the authorities used it as a pretext to start repressing the MIR and the people’s movement³⁴. The Judiciary began an investigation and the police were ordered to raid the University of Concepcion, thus beginning the persecution of the MIR. The main leaders of the group were forced to go underground.

Between 1968 and 1969, Miguel Enriquez, as the head of the movement, defined the tasks and characteristics of the activists, which they complied with and which gave a definite physiognomy to the MIR. “The basic tasks of a party of the vanguard are the preparation of its cadres, penetration in sections of the masses that are considered strategic, street agitation, propaganda and *special tasks*..... The relative volume of these “special tasks” should increase enormously. “Special tasks” should not be left in the hands of one section of the organisation but should be carried out by the organisation as a whole. Political matters will be strictly linked to these “special tasks”. “ “Special” squads should be politically motivated and those who are politically motivated become part of the “special” squads. The integration of the military and the political will then become a reality.

(.....)

The militants must accept strict rules for working underground. The type of militant who will come into the MIR must be different from before.

³¹ Cecilia Radigan and Miriam Palma (ed) “Miguel Enriquez: Con Vista a la Esperanza” (1998), page 32. The communication was originally published in *Punto Final*, Issue no. 99, March 3rd 1970, page 5.

³² Daniel Avendaño and Mauricio Palma, “El Rebelde de la Burguesia: La Historia de Miguel Enriquez” (2001), pages 70-73; Patricia Arancibia Clavel, Maria de los Angeles Aylwin Ramirez, Soledad Reyes de Villar “Los Hechos de Violencia en Chile: Del Discurso a Accion” (2003), pages 154-155.

³³ The expression is Andres Pascal’s, made in an interview with the author, Havana, Cuba, August 1999.

³⁴ Patricio Rivas, ex member of the Central Committee of the MIR, in an interview with the author in Santiago, June 1999.

Amateurs must leave the organisation....(...). You do not come into the party or leave it when you want: your commitment must be total. The organisation will decide if a militant should work or study, where he or she should live etc. This is the only way to make a solid, disciplined and efficient organisation, capable of discussing less and of operating in complete secrecy. It is this organisation which will carry out actions and begin the class war in Chile”³⁵.

With Allende in La Moneda

As the election of 1970 got nearer, the MIR showed itself reluctant to support Allende’s candidature because, as we have seen, they considered that participating in elections would not lead to revolution and because “if there were evidence that a popular electoral triumph might succeed, then the Chilean upper classes and foreign interests would support a military coup from the Right, whatever the cost. They concluded that “the Movement of the Revolutionary Left would not participate in any electoral activity”. Putting the importance of the elections in context, they continued “Whatever the outcome of the elections, this will not impede the advance of the revolution, neither will it underwrite the need for a revolutionary strategy: on the contrary it will open a new period where, with renewed vigour, we shall move towards a socialist revolution in Chile”³⁶. Afterwards a meeting was arranged between Allende and Miguel Enríquez where it was agreed that the MIR would suspend all armed actions and make people available to guard the candidate³⁷. A little before September the leadership announced to the party activists that they were at liberty to vote for Salvador Allende³⁸.

On the 4th of September the elections were held and the Unidad Popular candidate obtained a narrow majority. According to the Constitu-

³⁵ Carlos Sandoval, “MIR: Una Historia” (1990), Volume 1, pages 46-47 (the italics are mine). The special tasks were related to paramilitary training, intelligence and counter intelligence such as the making of weapons.

³⁶ The National Secretariat of the MIR “El MIR y las Elecciones Presidenciales”, April/May 1970

³⁷ Among the Miristas who joined the security group for Allende were: Max Marambio, who became head of the group, Sergio Perez and an ex paratrooper from the Chilean Army, Mario Melo Pradenas.

³⁸ Andres Pacal, “El MIR 35 años” Part 1, published in the magazine *Punto Final*, Issue no. 478, August 25th to September 7th, page 13. On the ties of the MIR to Salvador Allende’s security, see Cristian Perez “Salvador Allende. Apuntes sobre su Dispositivo de Seguridad: El Grupo de Amigos Personales (GAP)”, 2000.

tion this had to be ratified by a full meeting of Congress. A little time after the ballot closed the MIR, via Augusto Carmona³⁹, announced publicly that Allende's victory would change " (...) the material conditions for making a Socialist revolution in Chile. This is the most important consequence of the recently held election"⁴⁰. Thus, from the moment of victory, the MIR was extremely worried about the political result of whether or not Allende would be nominated President.

Between the 4th of September and the 23rd of October, the MIR achieved great importance by denouncing a group of Rightists who had made various attempts to stop the Congress confirming Allende as President. The different plots were discovered by the Intelligence networks and analysed by the Movement's press, which counted on informants in the Armed Forces, in Patria y Libertad ("Country and Freedom"), the National Party and various bourgeois organisations. On the 21st of October they handed over detailed information to the magazine *Punto Final*, which allowed the government to act against the Frente Nacionalista Patria y Libertad ("The Nationalist Front for Country and Freedom" or FNPT)⁴¹. In spite of obtaining this important information regarding the attempts to stop Allende taking power, they did not manage to get the background information necessary to stop the attempt on the Commander in Chief, Rene Schneider⁴².

The change in position and acceptance of Allende's election as positive plus a certain collaboration with the government were initiatives taken by Miguel Enriquez, who drew up a document, known as the "Yellow Document", as it had been printed in that colour⁴³.

The collaboration of the MIR with the government was given mainly through the President's security force. This was made up, in embryonic

³⁹ Augusto Heriberto Tadeo Carmona Acevedo, journalist on the magazine *Punto Final* and other publications on the Left, a MIR activist.

He was assassinated by CNI agents on the 7th of December 1977, in front of No. 2524, Barcelona Street, a house in the San Miguel district of Santiago.

⁴⁰ Augusto Carmona, "Elección de Allende: Cambio en el Esquema", 1970.

⁴¹ This group was born a little after the 1970 elections. It took a radical Rightist position against the Unidad Popular (the Popular Unity government of Allende), its principle objective being to make sure that Allende never got to power: it also counted on paramilitary units. Among the most prominent of its leaders were Pablo Rodríguez Grez, Ro, Roberto Thieme and Manuel Fuentes. For a complete analysis of the group, see Claudia Abarca and others "Frente Nacionalista Patria y Libertad (1970-1973)", 1993; Manuel Fuentes Wendling "Memorias Secretas de Patria y Libertad y Algunas Confesiones sobre La Guerra Fría en Chile", 1999.

⁴² Andrés Pascal "El MIR 35 años", in the magazine *Punto Final*, Issue no. 478, August 25th to September 7th, page 13.

⁴³ Patricio Rivas in an interview with the author, Santiago, June 1999; Roberto Moreno, in an interview with the author, Santiago June 1999.

form, by Miristas and Socialists some months before the election and was completed after the attempt on General Schneider, which was carried out in October 1972. The members of the MIR stayed in this group, known as the GAP, until the middle of 1972, when they were replaced by Socialist Party activists. When they left the GAP, they also took some of the group's weapons with them⁴⁴.

3. 1974-1975, the cold winter of the MIR

The weapons "Commodore"⁴⁵

It was in the 3rd decade of the 20th century when a Catalan anarchist, called Villabela, arrived in Santiago. He established himself in the city and began working in his profession as an oenologist in one of the numerous vineyards in the area. A little time later he got married and soon afterwards Arturo was born.

From a child Arturo stood out for his intelligence and concern for the poor: he was a "lover" of solidarity. He studied at the Liceo Eduardo de la Barra de Valparaíso where he shone as a pupil. In 1961 he went to Concepción where he was accepted at the Engineering School at the University: it was there that he got to know the other young students with whom he founded the MIR a few years later.

At some time in 1967, with the agreement of Miguel Enriquez, he travelled to Cuba to undertake paramilitary training. Villabela left secretly on a journey that took him through various other countries before the plane landed at Havana. He was there to learn the art of war: in other words to acquire the basic concepts for transforming the MIR, on the military side, into a guerrilla army. The idea was to create a force and begin paramilitary operations in Chile.

He used to tell his subordinates later how, in the guerrilla camp at Punto Cero, dressed in his olive green combat uniform, he submitted himself, with gusto, to the training that would turn him into a revolutionary soldier. On the course he learned about how to move around, different ways of shooting, the making and transport of explosives, survival and the

⁴⁴ See Cristian Perez, "Salvador Allende, Apuntes sobre su Dispositivo de Seguridad: El Grupo de Amigos Personales (GAP)", 2000.

⁴⁵ Miguel used to use this name for the military chief of the party, instead of commander (comandante), as was more usual in radical Leftist groups: it was a kind of gesture of unconformity towards the normal rules practiced in Latin American guerrilla groups.

basic notions of intelligence and counter intelligence⁴⁶. On his return he developed, with others, the strategic plan of the MIR, which dealt with the creation of various structures, known as “special tasks” or simply “specials” and which consisted of setting up workshops for the fabrication of weapons and explosives, intelligence and counter intelligence units, logistic groups and the Central Military apparatus (la Fuerza Central), a select group of fighters depending on the top leaders, a kind of Mirista commando unit.

October 1974: Confrontation in Santa Fe street.

“We killed him.....we left him like a sieve, riddled with bullets.
That’s the end of the MIR”⁴⁷.

At nightfall the leadership of the MIR realised that there was no possibility of militarily opposing the coup. Curfew had begun to be enforced, the war, which had not existed, was now over and the military were totally in command of the country. Miguel ordered a withdrawal and advised that it was necessary go underground in complete secrecy in order to move to another stage. The instructions were clear: maintain the combat structures, re-establish and make secure communications and avoid casualties among the leadership. Nobody to seek asylum!. On the personal level, the members were to change their “look”. “On the third day.. or the fourth, “Tonio” and Miguel reappeared in the afternoon: they’d changed the car and their appearance. On the fifth the young women went out. They also came back looking different. We’d never seen them in skirts....they came and went in a Renault. Nobody on the block suspected anything”⁴⁸.

15 days later the contacts that had been lost were re-established. Several members of the Political Commission were made responsible for various geographical zones. The party began to be given documents and money, which was sent by the Revolutionary Workers Party: they also managed to recover part of their weapons, which the Cubans had guarded in an Eastern European embassy. It was also planned to replace those

⁴⁶ Dariel Alarcon (Benigno), Cuban, took part in the expeditions of Che Guevara. Afterwards was one of those responsible for training guerrillas in Cuba. In an interview with the author, Paris, January 2001.

⁴⁷ Expressions of delight expressed by agents of the DINA in the house on Jose Domingo Cañas street, where torture took place. The words were written down by prisoners who were taken there and survived. See Carmen Castillo “Un Dia de Octubre en Santiago” (1999).

⁴⁸ Carmen Castillo “Un Dia de Octubre en Santiago” (1999), page 24.

regional directors who had been “burned”⁴⁹. Everything seemed to be moving along well in spite of so many difficulties. However, disaster was around the corner: three months later Bautista van Schouwen, a member of the Political Commission and one of the historical leaders of the party was detained, together with his aid Patricio Munita⁵⁰. It was the first important casualty: as we shall see later others followed the following year.

During 1974, the Intelligence Service of the Chilean Airforce (SIFA) and the National Intelligence Service (DINA) launched an outright persecution of the MIR and hit them hard in all levels of their infrastructure.

On the 29th of March the SIFA captured “Coño Aguilar” (Arturo Villabela) in the district of La Reina when he was going to meet a contact: in the confrontation he was hit seven times by bullets. He stayed for a few days in the Military Hospital and was then taken to a building in the Academy of Aerial Warfare (AGA)⁵¹. At that moment in time, Arturo Villabela was a member of the Central Committee, the Political Commission and the military leader of the party. The SIFA also detained Victor Toro (Melinka), another member of the Central Committee and the man responsible for organising the poor in the shanty towns: Roberto Moreno (“El Pelado”), member of the Central Committee and Luis Retamar, the head of the Santiago zone.

While they remained detained at the Academy of Aerial Warfare an extraordinary piece of negotiating was going on that included, among others, Colonel Edgar Ceballos (“Inspector Cabezas”), second in command of Airforce intelligence: the Bishop of Linares, Carlos Camus: Laura Allende, sister of ex President Allende and Miguel Enriquez. Apparently Colonel Ceballos proposed to Miguel Enriquez, via intermediaries, that the MIR prisoners would be released if the MIR ceased all armed resistance and recognised their political defeat: in other words, if the MIR capitulated. In exchange for this all members of the MIR would be pardoned and could leave the country: Ceballos himself would guarantee this. The SIFA wanted to use this negotiation as a strategy for winning their “internal struggle” against the DINA. If the MIR leadership accepted the proposal, the SIFA could claim their greatest success.

Miguel Enriquez analysed the proposal and asked the ex deputy of Congress, Laura Allende, to visit the War Academy where the prisoners

⁴⁹ Roberto Moreno, in an interview with the author, Santiago June 1999.

⁵⁰ See Nancy Guzman “Un Grito desde el Silencio: Detencion, Asesinato y Desaparicion de Bautista van Schouwen y Patricio Munita”, (Santiago 1998)

⁵¹ Daniel Avendaño and Mauricio Palma “El Rebelde de la Burguesia: La Historia de Miguel Enriquez”, (2001), pages 162-163.

were held and speak to “Coño”: she asked Bishop Camus to accompany her. While this was happening in the light of day, in the cellars of the War Academy the prisoners were discussing the proposal but, in spite of the fact that they were promised their freedom, they rejected it⁵².

After Laura Allende had completed her mission and spoken briefly to Arturo Villabela, Miguel also rejected the offer. On the 10th of September 1974 the Political Commission officially rejected the deal⁵³. And so the hunting down of the MIR continued.

At the end of September 1974 the DINA (the National Intelligence Service) detained Lumi Videla (“La Negra” or “Luisa”) and Sergio Perez (“Chico”), her companion, and through this got hold of several links that pointed vaguely to the whereabouts of the leader⁵⁴. Analysing fragments of different information, a number of agents from the Falcon 1 and Falcon 2 Caupolicán group of the DINA, led by Miguel Krassnoff Martchenko, arrived at a blue house in Santa Fe street where Miguel Enriquez lived. At this moment Miguel was accompanied by Jose Bordaz (Coño Molina) head of the Central Military apparatus of the MIR, Tito Sotomayor (“Tito”), member of the Political Commission, second in the command structure and Carmen Castillo Echeverría (Catita, or “Ximena”), Miguel’s companion. After a violent gun battle, Miguel lay dead and Carmen badly wounded: the other militants managed to escape through the hail of bullets⁵⁵. The next day “Tonio” and his wife, Maria Luz Garcia “Marisa” got to the Italian embassy and asked for asylum⁵⁶. To obtain asylum in an embassy without authorisation went against the organisation’s policy. Later on the MIR forced “Tonio” to travel to Cuba and explain his behaviour. In Havana several members of the party made his life distinctly unpleasant: they blamed him for leaving Miguel in the middle of the battle⁵⁷ and many of the militants demanded that he be executed⁵⁸. Commandante Manuel Piñei-

⁵² Victor Toro, interviewed by the author in New York, May 1999.

⁵³ Eduardo Guriérrez Gonzalez “Ciudades en las Sombras: Una Historia no Oficial del Partido Socialista de Chile”, (2003), page 94.

⁵⁴ Between September and October 1994 21 of the MIR network closest to Miguel Enriquez were detained, out of whom only 3 survived.

⁵⁵ Details of the battle in Santa Fe street can be found in Carmen Castillo’s “Un Día de Octubre en Santiago” (1999).

⁵⁶ Ascanio Cavallo, Manuel Salazar and Oscar Sepulveda “La Historia Oculta del Regimen Militar: Memoria de una Época”, (1997), page 54.

⁵⁷ When Miguel saw the security agents, he grabbed his machine gun and opened fire: a little later a splinter from a grenade wounded him and he lost consciousness. “Tonio”, who was a doctor, examined him and, thinking he was dead, decided to break out via the patio. A few minutes later Miguel recovered consciousness and continued fighting alone.

⁵⁸ The one who reacted the most violently was Edgardo Enriquez (“El Pollo”). Roberto Moreno, interviewed by the author in Santiago, June 1999

ro ("Barbarroja"), one of the most powerful figures in Cuba, took pity on him and gave him protection. He got "Tonio" out of Havana to a provincial town where there were no Chileans. To improve his position in Cuba, he joined the Chilean Communist Party and, over a period of time, undertook several clandestine operations for them⁵⁹.

With the Secretary General of the party killed in battle, the baton of command passed to Andres Pascal Allende ("Pituto"). In this way the organisation continued its struggle: it therefore survived the deaths of its leader and of an important part of its Political Commission and Central Committee, but the losses would be difficult to make up.

The following year, on the 16th of October, the DINA discovered that Pascal Allende, the Secretary General, and other members of the Political Commission, were hiding out on a small farm in Malloco, just outside Santiago. One of them, Dagoberto Perez, who was in charge of the security of the place and armed with a rifle and several grenades, repulsed the agents. This led to a furious firefight in which he was killed and Nelso Gutierrez wounded⁶⁰. Although they broke through the cordon and escaped across the fields, they were forced to go into exile. The movement had practically no political impact in the country, as the organisation itself admitted: "The Party in Chile is going through its most difficult experience. Outside the cadres that organising the Party in the prisons, there are literally only a handful of groups that are working underground. These, structured as they are on the basic ideas of Miguel Enriquez, will have to assume the task of reorganising and reactivating the Party. What is left is an obviously very small Party, practically without structures, with minimum links to the masses and few Resistance Committees, centred on internal activities and underground propaganda. There are other small groups which are keeping themselves disconnected but carrying out partisan work on their own initiative⁶¹". In the country the movement was led by Hernan Aguilo ("Nancho"), the old head of the Revolutionary Workers Front (FTR), supported by the ex priest known as the priest Cortes ("Jeroni-

⁵⁹ A few years ago the author of this article got hold of a telephone number for Tito Sotomayor. He called him and they had a lengthy conversation but Tito categorically refused to give his version to clarify once and for all what happened.

The Cuban Secret Service agent, Jorge Massetti, says that "Tonio" was sent to Mexico, where he had to meet up with a Chilean fighter to carry out some clandestine operations designed to support the Chilean resistance. He confirmed that he was greatly surprised when "Tonio" came out to receive him. Massetti refused to work with him because of Miguel's death.

⁶⁰ Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR-Chile), "Resoluciones: Pleno Extraordinario del Comité Central, Enero 1984", page 10.

⁶¹ Ibid, page 10.

mo”)⁶² and probably by Dagoberto Cortes (“Yamil”)⁶³. On their shoulders fell the survival and reconstruction of the party in Chile.

Meanwhile, outside the country, to overcome the death of Miguel Enriquez, his brother Edgardo (“El Pollo”) agreed with Roberto Mario Santucho, head of the Revolutionary Workers Party of Argentina, that he, together with 15 others who were trained in Cuba, would join up with the rural guerrilla force at the centre that the ERP maintained in the mountains around Tucuman in the north of Argentina. “Pollo” and seven of his men, known as “chemically pure” as they had been MIR activists since the beginning, arrived in Buenos Aires at the end of 1975, the beginning of 1976. Once there, Edgardo was captured by the intelligence services of the country, put live into a coffin and taken to Chile where the DINA after torturing him in one of their concentration camps, made him “disappear”. The rest of the group were detained while they were on their way to the centre in Tucuman, and, it seems, murdered⁶⁴.

4. The Rebirth of the MIR

In September 1977 “Juan Miranda” returned secretly to Chile. He was the first Mirista to get into the country and with him began the implementation of “Plan 78”. In March 1977 he left Havana for Paris. He stayed six months in the city waiting to make contact because at that moment contact was broken. In September contact was re established and he managed to get into Chile. In Santiago he contacted “Sofia”, the person in charge of his reception and she took him to a house in a poor area in the south of Santiago, where a few days later he was visited by the priest Cortes (“Jeronimo”) who welcomed him saying “You opened the door: you’re the first”. Through “Jeronimo” he got to know about the precarious

⁶² German de Jesus Cortes Rodriguez, member of the Political Commission of the MIR, ex seminarist, was detained by the CNI on the 16th of January 1978 and driven to the Villa Grimaldi and cruelly tortured. On the 18th of January he was taken to his house and murdered.

⁶³ Dagoberto Cortes Guajardo (“Yamil”), member of the Central Committee of the MIR. He died on November 28th 1982 at the age of 33 in an engagement with police who were trying to detain at 5009, Aldunate Street, Santiago.

⁶⁴ “Juan Miranda” in an interview with the author in the north of Europe, July 1999. Eugenio Mendez says that Eduardo was killed in Argentina and that they sent his fingerprints to Chile. Later several Chilean officers travelled to Argentina and expressed their delight at what had happened. He also confirmed that Dago, a Chilean sergeant who was part of the ERP died fighting in the battle at the school in Machala. This means that several men of the MIR managed to get to the guerrilla centre and died there. See Eugenio Mendez “Santucho: Entre la Intelligencia y las Armas” (1999).

state of the party and the fact that there were no more than 50 activists in the organisation, a figure that included those people who gave help to the group⁶⁵.

But the struggle had to continue. In fact the MIR continued opposing the Military Junta from different countries in Europe and America and especially from Sweden and Cuba where “Pitudo” and Nelson Gutierrez were established. Added to those groups who had taken refuge in the embassies, there were now numerous activists who, after being in the torture centres (the Villa Grimaldi, Londres 38) and prison camps (Dos Alamos, Tres y Cuatro Alamos, Chacabuco and Ritoque), were expelled from the country without any possibility of returning legitimately. Once abroad, together with the MIR leaders, they explored the possibility of returning to fight the dictatorship in Chile. The leadership agreed a global strategy to restructure the party by bringing in political-military cadres and starting military actions in the country. The secret entry of these groups was known as “Operation Return”. One of its aspects was the idea of constructing bases to launch a rural campaign in the South, in the Neltume area in the cordillera around Valdivia, an area which they knew well.

“Operation Return” (in Havana)

Basically the idea of Operation Return was to bring together all those MIR activists who lived abroad and were willing to return to Chile to fight the military government. This was implemented after a group of Miristas who had stayed in Cuba fulfilled their promise to return. From September 1977, besides “*Juan Miranda*”, Ruben Orta Jopia (“El Chino”)⁶⁶ and Santiago Rubilar Salazar (“Flaco Carlos” in Havana and “Jaime” in Chile) returned to their country. Those MIR activists who were willing to return left for Cuba where they underwent a special course of training that taught them how to carry out subversive operations in the interior of the country. “The great majority of them never returned to the country”⁶⁷. An example of this was the case of Negro Castillo, who had accepted the idea of going back to Chile together with others but only made it as far as Peru. There they failed to find the connections they

⁶⁵ “*Juan Miranda*” in an interview with the author in the north of Europe, July 1999.

⁶⁶ Ruben Eduardo Orta Jopia, electrician, MIR activist, and member of the Central Military Apparatus. On the 7th of November 1980 he, together with Juan Ramon Olivares Perez, was detained by agents of the CNI and accused of planning to attack a CNI barracks. Later they were both executed.

⁶⁷ “*Juan Miranda*” in an interview with the author in the north of Europe, July 1999.

needed and took refuge in Ecuador where Castillo stayed for a year before he could return to New York⁶⁸. Thus, between 1978 and 1980 and in the midst of enormous difficulties, the MIR began to reconstruct their forces in the interior of the country. Little by little military cadres and leaders from the Political Commission and the Central Committee began to return. The Secretary General Andres Pascal Allende came back and, also we believe, Coño Villabela the man in charge of the military wing of the party, who arrived sometime before.

In this period one of the objectives of the movement was to develop a project for the construction of support networks in specific zones in the south for “the preparation of conditions which would make the future operation of permanent guerrilla forces possible”⁶⁹. The plan was that sometime in the near future stable guerrilla centres would be set up in these places, centres which could count on combat capability and significant help from the population in the areas that had been chosen. It has to be pointed out that these attempts to use this region for the formation of groups that could make revolution become a reality through the means of armed struggle, were not new ones for the Chilean left. Recent historical research has shown that the Communist Party tried the same thing in Lonquimay with the peasant-worker-indigenous revolt of Ranquil in 1934⁷⁰. Later on, at the end of the 60’s, members of the Chilean Socialist Party built the guerrilla encampment at Chaihuin. In May 1970 the Army discovered the refuge and captured a group of youths who were receiving instructions regarding guerrilla tactics. At the end of that year, when Salvador Allende was already in power, the government waived the charges brought against them under the Law of Internal Security of the State and they were freed⁷¹.

11th of September 1973: the attack on the Neltume police post

The MIR had continued with their idea of guerrilla forces at the beginning of the 70’s. In fact, up to 1973 they had developed an embryonic rural force, whose base of operations was in the Forest and Timber Com-

⁶⁸ Ernesto Castillo, ex Union leader of the MIR. Interview with the author, New York, May 1999.

⁶⁹ MIR “*Resoluciones: Pleno Extraordinario del Comité Central, January 1984*”, page 30

⁷⁰ See Olga Ulianova “Levantamiento Campesino de Lonquimay y la Internacional Comunista” (2003), pages 173-224

⁷¹ See Cristian Perez “Guerrilla Rural en Chile: La Batalla del Fundo San Miguel, 1968”, (2000), pages 181-208.

plex of Panguipulli⁷². This was a grouping of various farms that had been expropriated by the Corporation for Agrarian Reform (CORA) or taken over by peasants. The leader of the group was a young man of 28, an agricultural technician, called Jose Gregorio Liendo Vera, better known by his combat name “Comandante Pepe”. He had become the leader of the Movement for Revolutionary Peasants (MCR) of the MIR on the death of Moises Huentalaf, which had happened on the 22nd of October while he was leading the take over of Chesque farm in Cautin⁷³.

On the 11th of September, once he heard about the coup, “Comandante Pepe”, leading some 200 men armed with an ancient Mauser rifle that had only six bullets, some sticks of dynamite and Molotov cocktails, tried to occupy the police post at Neltume⁷⁴. The police post was defended by five policemen under the command of Sergeant Benito Carrasco Riffo: Corporal Juan Campos and policemen Rene Caceres and Belisario Navarrete made up the rest of the detachment. The families of the policemen also took refuge inside the post and helped to load the rifles⁷⁵.

In the afternoon of the same day “Comandante Pepe” met with several Miristas in a place on the timber complex, about 300 metres from the police barracks. There they took the decision to occupy the post. For some inexplicable reason the attack was delayed, maybe in the hope that the police would surrender or that the outcome of the coup in Santiago would become clearer. Towards nightfall and after haranguing his men, the “Comandante” went over to the police to explain why he was fighting and to appeal to them to surrender and hand over their guns: the answer was a hail of bullets. In the face of this, the attackers opened fire and the battle began. For some minutes there was a fierce exchange of fire but the outcome seemed to be indecisive, although it appeared to be swinging towards the Miristas. Then, in the semi darkness of the night a detachment of police from Choshuenco burst onto the scene to reinforce the men at Neltume⁷⁶. These attacked the guerrillas surrounding the police post in the rear. The police patrol, which was travelling in a jeep, managed to reach the combat zone because the ambush which the MIR group had prepared on the access road to detain any possible reinforcements, was not carried out, since those

⁷² “El Pinki” interviewed by the author in Stockholm, Sweden, October 1999.

⁷³ Miguel Enriquez “A conquistar el Poder Revolucionario de Obreros y Campesinos”, treatise in homage to Moises Huentalaf (November 1st 1971).

⁷⁴ “El Pinki” interviewed by the author in Stockholm, October 1999.

⁷⁵ The Armed Forces and Police publication “Septiembre de 1973: Los Cien Combates de una Batalla” (Subscription No. 41,832) page 24.

⁷⁶ The group of police were commanded by Captain Francisco Pereira, Lieutenant Paulino Flores and policemen Rufino Rodriguez and Carlos Godoy.

in charge of the operation inexplicably let the vehicle pass without shooting at it. The arrival of more police surprised the attackers who now began to receive fire from both fronts and so, in the middle of the night, before sunrise, they were forced to escape in different directions⁷⁷. The police at the post probably did not surrender because they knew of the outcome of events in Santiago and other cities and this, together with the fact that they had good weapons and an open field of fire kept their morale up.

The following morning, pursued by police and soldiers, a group, which contained, among others, Jose Gregorio Liendo, was apprehended in the Cordillera trying to cross the frontier into Argentina. The new authorities accused them of attacking the post at Neltume. In compliance with the sentences handed out by the War Tribunal in Valdivia, Liendo was executed on the 3rd of October 1973, together with Pedro Barria Ordoñez (22 years of age, student), Jose Barrientos Warner (29 years of age, Philosophy student), Sergio Bravo Aguilera (21, timber yard worker), Santiago Garcia Morales (26, timber yard worker), Luis Guzman Soto (21, ditto), Fernando Krauss Iturra (24, university student), Luis Pezo Jara (29, timber yard worker), Victor Rudolf Reyes (32, ditto) and Victor Saavedra Muñoz (19, ditto): Luis Valenzuela Ferrada, 20 years of age and also a worker in a timber yard, was executed on October 4th⁷⁸. This brought an end, for the moment, to guerrilla activity in Neltume.

The Central Military Apparatus (Fuerza Central): The MIR's War (1979-1982)

From 1977, the cadres designated to go back to Chile in Operation Return stealthily installed themselves in the country, forming new combat groups, which were intended to carry out small-armed actions. For example, to rob a car, they covered all the corners with group members carrying assault rifles. This display of force was totally disproportionate but was used as a response to the terror that the dictatorship had imposed. At that stage those who carried out the actions named the group "The Embryo of the Future Revolutionary Army", as they did not want to call it the Central Military Apparatus (Fuerza Central) yet, because of the enormous implications that this had⁷⁹.

⁷⁷ "El Pinki", interviewed by the author in Stockholm, October 1999.

⁷⁸ See the Report of the National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation (also known as the Rettig Report), 1991.

⁷⁹ "Juan Miranda", interviewed by the author in the North of Europe, July 1999.

The first actions that pointed to the recovery of the MIR began in 1979. In April 1980 they assaulted three banks at the junction of Santa Elena and Rodrigo de Araya streets: 15 days later a combat group attacked the Llama de la Libertad, killing the policeman on guard. At the end of 1979, the party leadership ordered an assault on the supermarket AGAS. The money from the supermarket was being carried in a van. There followed a shoot out with the police that ended with police casualties. The operation, however, was not a success because, although the guerrillas did not suffer any casualties themselves, they failed to get hold of the money. After the attack on AGAS the activities of the Fuerza Central really began: the group assaulted a tobacconists on Independencia and then carried out an operation on a CNI house near Irrarazaval, where Lumi Videla and her companion, Sergio Perez, a member of the Political Commission, had been tortured to death in 1974. The action consisted of shooting at the residence with two fully loaded AKA rifles and throwing two hand grenades⁸⁰. Between 1979 and 1983 the Fuerza Central could count on the so-called centralised battle groups. These represented a military force that was independent of other party structures, like those for the unions, the workers, and the students. Its principal characteristic was its own vertical chain of command, which was both national and regional. In short, we are talking about a professional structure, mainly made up of those cadres who had stayed in Chile, supported by others who were well trained militarily and who had returned secretly to the country: some of them had even belonged to the Chilean Armed Forces until 1973⁸¹. At this stage, the Central Military apparatus of the MIR, the Fuerza Central, was a professional group: all of its fighters were underground and all of them had an income which allowed them to live without doing another job, basically because if this were not the case it would have been easy for the security forces to pick them up. The group could count on safe houses and quarters: among their detachments there was at least one dedicated to information gathering. The leadership had no direct contact with the fighters, only with “Jose”, the person who had the connection with the heads of the groups, while the fighters themselves only knew their direct leader and the members of their unit whom they identified by their insignia. The operations were agreed at the highest level, by the military leader of the party in agreement with the Political Commission and the orders were transmitted to the combat groups

⁸⁰ Independencia and Irrarazaval are two streets in Santiago.

Information regarding the operations was provided by “Juan Miranda” (see above).

⁸¹ Report from the National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation (1991) and Fernando Villagran “*Disparen a la Bandada: Una Cronica Secreta de la FACH*”, (2002), page 277.

to carry them out. A large number of operations were decided on an economic basis, as funds were needed to finance the same organisation.

At the beginning the Fuerza Central counted on a combat group led by Ernesto Zuñiga Vergara (“Mexicano”, “Manuel”) who was an ex-marine. In the chain of command, the Argentinian Hugo Ratier (“Jose”) was above him and at the very top of the pyramid, and probably already in Chile, Arturo el “Coño” Villabela. Later on they were divided into two detachments, with the second under the command of “Rana”. The organisation fell under the political direction of “Jose”, whose philosophy was simple: “What we have to do is to show that we are defying the military: if we’re capable of challenging them once or twice, even if we suffer casualties, then our people will wake up and the youth in the working class areas will react more strongly”⁸².

The design of the movement’s military structures made it tremendously difficult for the fighters to lead a normal life. Because they lived in a semi-isolation that was only broken by the occasional contact, they were estranged from the masses. One of the most pressing problems was their inability to reproduce other fighting forces, since their isolation made it impossible to recruit new cadres who could fill the spaces left by casualties or capture: it was also impossible to create bases for social support. Generally these men and women were highly trained in military terms and this led them to create a regular military structure, rather than the irregular guerrilla force that was the objective of the party.

After the actions mentioned above, there was a lull for several months and then three banks were assaulted in Santa Elena street. The group also carried out a series of smaller operations: for example, putting a low explosive device in street X and detonating it so as to assess the time it took for the security forces to get to the place. They also drew up a map that showed all the CNI quarters and watched how the agents reacted when they had to come out and pursue the Miristas⁸³.

After a time the leadership of the movement gave its authorisation to a plan of greater magnitude, namely the assassination of a senior official of the DINA. A check undertaken by the reconnaissance group brought to light the routes that the officer usually took and his daily activities. The leadership decided to go ahead with the objective and designated “Jose” to carry out the action with one of the military groups. In the morning of the 15th of July 1980, the group led by Ernesto Zuñiga Vergara, in a red Chevrolet pick up with an Endesa emblem, pulled alongside a red Chevy

⁸² “Juan Miranda” in an interview with the author in the north of Europe, July 1999.

⁸³ Ibidem.

Nova. Two men armed with AKA-47 rifles opened fire from the pick up: the shots killed the driver and the Army officer and the car crashed into another vehicle. The mission had been completed.

In the middle of the afternoon, “Jose” reported to his superior to talk about the operational part of the action. The *La Segunda* newspaper had published the name of the dead officer: he was Colonel Roger Vergara, Director of the Army Intelligence School, a prize much greater than the one the group had hoped to eliminate. Was it, in fact a mistake?. The error in identifying the individual was down to “Mariano”, who was positioned at a bus stop nearby and was in charge of verifying the identity of the officer. “Mariano” knew the DINA officer, because when he was arrested after the coup, the man had tortured him with his face uncovered. Was it a mistake on “Mariano’s” part?. Or was the data regarding the operation handed over by an ex-DINA agent?. Was “Mariano” a double agent ?. We shall never know as he was killed on the 18th of October 1985 while leading a break out from the jail he was in. The only thing that is certain is that as a result of the operation the CNI (the National Centre for Information) was left without a head: on the 23rd of July General Odlanier Mena, director of the organisation and the eternal rival of Manuel Contreras in matters of state security, was replaced for not guaranteeing the safety of members of the Armed Forces. His place was taken by Humberto Gordon. This was a clear victory for those who were ex-DINA.

After the assassination of Roger Vergara, the Fuerza Central assaulted the banks on Santa Elena street once again. The operation marked the summit of the group’s actions but also proved to be its downfall. Eight guerrillas participated in the action. While it was being carried out a vehicle crashed and the group scattered. Guillermo Rodriguez managed to get out with four companions, among them “Rana”. “Jose” got out alone and made his way to a poor working class area in Santiago where a female companion hid him in a basket of dirty washing. Santiago Rubilar Salazar (“Jaime” or “Flaco Carlos”) commandeered a car driven by a mother with her child, sat behind the driver and got to Santa Rosa where they encountered a police post: the vehicle was stopped. “Jaime” shot and wounded a police officer with his .32 revolver: another received a bullet but managed to return fire. A burst from an UZI machine gun hit “Jaime” in the shoulder: he was arrested and taken to a public hospital where he died on the 2nd of August. The Fuerza Central had received their first casualty in combat⁸⁴.

In January 1981 “Negro Ramon”, the ex-marine, was detained. The CNI had known of his existence and, hoping that he would appear at his

⁸⁴ Ibidem.

mother in law's house, had rented the house opposite. With him the first combat group disappeared because Mirian Ortega, her brother Victor Ortega and Rodolfo Rodriguez Moraga, the husband of Mirian, were also arrested, together with Carmen Escobar. The debacle of the Fuerza Central had begun. It reached its apogee in the year 1980, when it had around 100 men under arms, including militia groups led by Guillermo Rodriguez Morales ("El Mono" or "Alma Negra"). The militia groups were made up of young militants with some para-military experience but they were not professionals. They were more involved in the dynamic of the struggle of the masses and street protests and also dependent on the party's regional leaders. It was these units that supported popular demonstrations and carried out relatively minor paramilitary actions, such as blowing up street lights, putting up barricades, cutting electric cables, burning vehicles used for public transport, protecting protest groups, and occasionally scaring off informers who had infiltrated working class areas.

Guerrilla War in the South: Neltume 1981

But with successes and errors the MIR continued the struggle. Only seven years had passed since the tragic end of "Comandante Pepe" and his guerrillas in Neltume when another group of Miristas came to the place: this time the group was led by Miguel Cabrera Fernandez ("Paine"), a worker from the south who had participated in the failed action of 1973. During the years of the Unidad Popular government "Paine" had worked politically in the Temuco and Valdivia areas under the command of "Comandante Pepe": he knew the area well and had been trained in rural guerrilla warfare.

In order to put Operation Return (Operación Retorno) into action and himself in the cordillera around Netulme, "Paine" travelled to different countries to recruit MIR activists for the expedition: he mainly looked for those who knew the region, either because they had participated in previous actions there or because they had been born in the South⁸⁵. In Sweden he looked for "El Pinki" because he had participated in the previous battle at Netulme on the 11th of September 1973. "El Pinki" was a young worker from southern Chile who had been sent to Havana to receive training in rural guerrilla warfare: he knew the area perfectly and was one of the survivors of the hunt organised by the military in the days following the Netulme battle. On that occasion he had taken refuge in the mountains,

⁸⁵ "El Pinki" interviewed by the author in Stockholm, Sweden, October 1999.

disguising himself as a peasant from the area. He stayed there for more than a year waiting for contacts or news from his companions: after being detained briefly, he managed to cross the border into Argentina: later he travelled to Sweden where he was treated as a political exile and where he was living at the time that “Paine” came to look for him. When “Paine” explained the mission to him, he replied that he had no intention of returning to Neltume, as he felt that it was not the right place to achieve the objectives that had been planned: he added that it was a mistake that could cost the lives of those who tried it⁸⁶. “El Pinki” paid a high price for refusing to participate in the mission as he was expelled from the MIR, even though this was never communicated to him officially. Despite this warning from one of the fighters who knew the region best and who had lived there for more than a year while on the run from the military, “Paine” went ahead with the plans for the operation. In ways in which we have been unable to define very clearly, it seems that the group were supported by the People’s Revolutionary Army (ERP)⁸⁷, whose members helped them to cross Argentina. Whatever happened, less than 20 young men arrived at Neltume, and determined to stay for a long time. The installation of a guerrilla group in such a remote place was one of the keys points of Operation Return.

The group established itself in the area either at the end of the summer or the beginning of the autumn of 1980. There they had to carry out jobs that were indispensable if the MIR were to install a permanent guerrilla force in the near future that would be strongly supported by the locals. They began exploring the area, making subterranean hideouts or *tatoos*, and adapting themselves to the cold and rainy conditions of the forest region. They also tried to make contact with the peasants of the zone, but although some had family and had lived in the region, they did not make much headway, since it was not possible to conceal themselves among the locals and therefore they did not have sufficient cover to disguise their real reason for staying in the area.

⁸⁶ Ibidem.

⁸⁷ The People’s Revolutionary Army (the ERP) was the military arm of the Revolutionary Workers Party of Argentina. The group was an active participant in Argentine politics during the first years of the 70’s. Its leader was Roberto Mario Santucho. For a thorough investigation of the group, see Eugenio Mendez “*Santucho :Entre la Intelligencia y las Armas*” (1999).

The author and others can find no proof of the ERP’s collaboration with the MIR in the events that unfolded at Neltume. However it is a known fact that there did exist a meeting of coordination between the guerrilla groups of the Southern Cone, which was known as the Revolutionary Coordinating Junta.

It seems that the military authorities were informed, by the peasants of the area, of the presence of strangers who were carrying out guerrilla activities. The Armed Forces prepared a huge search of the area, which involved soldiers from the nearest regiments, police, CNI agents from Santiago and commandos from the Army's Special Forces⁸⁸.

And so, on the morning of Saturday, June 27th 1981, a team of Black Berets discovered the main camp. The commandos opened fire and the group fled towards higher ground. In the *tattoo* they left behind food, medicine and important papers outlining the group's future plans. A number of the guerrillas managed to break through the cordon: however, short of food and clothes and with no support from the MIR they were very soon forced to send two men to the nearest town to get supplies and make contact with the party. It appears that these two were captured and were forced to divulge the meeting points and the password⁸⁹. Taking advantage of the data supplied to them, the state's agents were able to shoot down both Raul Obregon Torres, a topographic technician, on September 13th and on the 17th Pedro Yañez Palacios, an assistant electrician, whose gangrenous foot had been amputated earlier by his companions. The group now split up and three of them took refuge in the house of one of their relatives in Remeco Alto. However the same relatives alerted the army and on the 20th of September, while they were sleeping, Patricio Calfuquir Henriquez and Prospero Guzman Soto were eliminated while Jose Mosalve Sandoval was shot outside the house. On the 21st two more members of the group, who had been detained since the beginning of the operation and moved to Santiago, were also murdered. On the 28th of November Juan Ojeda Aguayo was executed in Quebrada Honda. A little after this, police discovered the whereabouts of Miguel Cabrera Fernandez ("Paine"), the military leader of the group, in Choshuenco. Asked to surrender he opened fire and after a fierce exchange of bullets, Comandante "Paine" was shot down⁹⁰. Thus the attempt to establish a guerrilla base in Neltume ended in

⁸⁸ Report of the National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation (1991)

⁸⁹ The underground members of the MIR used to use passwords when two of their people, who did not know each other, had to make contact. It worked in the following way: in any place, whether it was the corner of a street, walking along it or in a bar, the two people had to carry something that was distinctive, like a newspaper or an apple. Once they had met, one of them would ask a trivial question like "Do the buses that go to X, come through here?" and the other would reply with another trivial comment such as "No. Only the train that goes to Y." Once the contact had been established, the two of them would leave the place and carry on the necessary conversation elsewhere.

⁹⁰ The events above have been taken from "*La Historia Oculta del Regimen Militar: Memoria de una Epoca, 1973-1988*" (1997), pages 301-302 and the Report of the National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation (1991).

a bloodbath. The misgivings about the mission that “El Pinki” had had and expressed to “Paine” in a café in Stockholm one year previously, had, unfortunately, turned out to be correct. After this the movement made no attempt to launch a similar venture in the mountains of Chile⁹¹. The leadership of the MIR agreed that the main reason for the disaster at Neltume was the failure to develop a nucleus of peasant support in the area. This factor worked in favour of the military and against the Miristas who were established in the area. Another factor could have been the indiscretions committed by members of the party’s bases abroad, who used to name those in the groups being sent back secretly to Chile without taking any precautions at all. This meant that the CNI could get hold of this information through their agents who had infiltrated the exiles communities and relay it back to Chile. There they would keep a watch on the families and old contacts of those who returned, looking for clues as to where to locate them⁹². We believe there were other reasons behind the failure as well: the bad quality of the supplies that were moved to the area; that the training to survive in such inhospitable conditions was not adequate, because it was undertaken in Cuba where the climactic conditions are tropical rather than freezing and rainy; and perhaps the probability that someone from Cuba’s American Department, the organisation in charge of spreading revolution in Latin America, filtered data through to the CIA (data about itineraries, places and missions), who then passed it over to the Chilean government.

5. The sunset of the MIR: Fuenteovejuna and Janequeo (1983)

In March 1981, at the moment when “Ramon” (Carlos Garcia Herrera) was detained, Operation Return was at its height and the rural guerri-

⁹¹ The only Chilean Guerrilla organisation that tried something similar was the Manuel Rodríguez Patriotic Front (Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez – FPMR). In October 1988, four groups from the FPMR took over the villages of Aguas Claras, La Mora, Los Queñes and Pichipellahuen. The most important was what happened in Los Queñes because there was a shoot out at the police post in which a policeman lost his life. In operations that were carried out later and in circumstances which remain unclear up to today, Cecilia Magni Camino (“Tamara”) and Raul Pellegrin (“Rodrigo” or “Jose Miguel”) were both killed. “Rodrigo” was the maximum leader of the FPMR and “Tamara” one of the commanders of the organisation. See Ricardo Palma Salamanca “Una Larga Cola de Acero: Historia del FPMR 1984-1988” (2001). El Negro Palma (“Vasco”) was one of the members of the FPMR and took part in the action at Pichipellahuen. Later on he was arrested for the assassination of Senator Jaime Guzman and put in a high security prison.. In December 1996 he escaped from the prison in a helicopter, together with three companions.

⁹² MIR “Resoluciones: Pleno Extraordinario del Comité Central, Enero 1984”, pages 53-54.

illas were constructing their subterranean hideouts (the *tatoos*) in Neltume, the leaders of the Military Zone of Santiago met together for ten days. Two members of the leadership proposed that the majority of the fighters who made up the Central Military apparatus of the MIR (the *Fuerza Central*) should be moved to the provinces. In practice this meant the disappearance of the group in the way it had been designed. The proposal maintained that it was not necessary to keep the *Fuerza Central* in Santiago because if the leadership of the party wanted to carry out an operation that would have national repercussions, they could call all the fighters they needed to Santiago and hand them over a house and the means necessary to do the job. Once the operation had been completed, the groups could return to their respective provinces. What they wanted was for the MIR activists to focus their efforts on reconstructing the party in the regions, where at this moment the Party was weak. The proposal was rejected. The only reason given by the MIR leadership was that the *Fuerza Central* had a military structure that could not be changed. To reassert this criterion, they ordered the group to prepare six operations to celebrate the anniversary of the party⁹³. Those who participated in the meeting did not know (and there was no reason why they should have known) that at this moment the MIR was intending to carry out a series of operations in the south, using Neltume as their base.

After the meeting came the casualties. In June 1981 Guillermo Rodríguez Morales (“El Mono” or “Alma Negra”), the head of the MIR militias, was seized when he was trying to get help to carry out the six operations that had been ordered by the leadership to celebrate the party’s anniversary. This was a hard blow for the organisation. In prison Guillermo Rodríguez and other political prisoners were poisoned: although he stayed alive, he lost the power of speech.

In the middle of 1981, the *Fuerza Central* undertook an operation that we have called “Phantom”. This was an operation where, using classic rural guerrilla tactics, a group attacked a predetermined place and when security agents were on their way to the area, another MIR unit ambushed them. The surprise attack left four people, travelling in one of the security cars, dead. This action was not reported in the press or recognised by the CNI but as our source is highly trustworthy, there are reasonable possibilities that it did in fact happen: for the moment and until we receive more information, we shall continue to call it “Operation Phantom”⁹⁴.

⁹³ “Juan Miranda”, interviewed by the author in the north of Europe, July 1999.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

In December 1981, “Mariano”, a veteran fighter who had been detained in the Villa Grimaldi after the 1973 coup, was appointed to head up the Military Zone of Santiago. A few days later he went to a meeting place with people from logistics: later, in another place, they met up with an intelligence group where they received information about three possible objectives to attack. They then continued on their way to the Lo Hermida sector of Santiago, to a house where their superiors, “Jose” (Hugo Ratier) and “Yamil” (Dagoberto Cortes, a member of the Central Committee), were waiting. “Yamil” and “Jose” waited until three in the afternoon but “Mariano” failed to appear: together with the people who were living in the house, they then abandoned the area. It is possible that between 12 and 3 p.m. he was arrested by agents of the CNI and, maybe, several days later, he began to collaborate with them. This can be deduced from the following account:

Enrique Reyes Manriquez, known as “Oso” had been a corporal in the Chilean Airforce until the 11th of September 1973. Tried together with General Bachelet and other members of the same institution, he was condemned to 20 years and two days imprisonment. Under Decree No. 504, the penalty was commuted to exile. From prison he travelled to England. He then returned secretly to Chile as part of Operation Return. On the 6th of January 1982, “Oso” was carrying out his duties as head of the Fuerza Central, replacing “Mariano” who had disappeared. The MIR was not certain that he had been arrested but was certainly suspicious about his sudden absence. “Oso” went to a meeting with the “security” people at a place on Independencia avenue. In the middle of the meeting he went outside to call his house to find out how his wife and children were. The house was known to “Mariano” as the Fuerza Central had held meetings there. When “Oso” called, his wife said that “Mariano” was there: he spoke to him on the telephone and then, throwing caution to the winds, decided to turn up at the house. Once there he had a long conversation with “Mariano”, the content of which is unknown. Later on he went outside and found himself surrounded. Throwing a grenade with 200 grams of TNT in it, he pulled out his gun and managed to escape to the Central Market, where there was a violent exchange of shots until he was cut down by agents from the CNI. If “Mariano” was in Oso’s wife’s house, was it because he was collaborating?. We do not have the answer. We only know that in April of that year he went to prison. The CNI said that he had been arrested while renting a house on Catedral street a few days previously. The Miristas who were in the same prison were uneasy and suspicious of him: however, and this is important, he was protected by the head of the MIR militias, Guillermo

Rodriguez (“Alma Negra”) It is said that to vindicate his name he placed himself in the most dangerous position during the break out from the prison in 1985 and was killed as a result⁹⁵.

The security forces continued their work and the cordon around the members of the Fuerza Central grew tighter every day. On the 16th of January 1982, “Mexicano” (Ernesto Zuñiga Vergara) was gunned down: he was 29 years of age, ex commander of one of the battle groups and a key figure in the formation of the force. He was recognised by agents of the CNI at the corner of Teniente Cruz and Jose Joaquin Perez streets and after a confrontation, was shot. It seems that “Mexicano” died while mounting an operation to spring a companion who had been arrested and who was possibly collaborating with the authorities of state security⁹⁶. In any case, for the moment we have no further details.

The suspicious fall of “Mariano”, the head of the Fuerza Central, made the party leaders restructure the organisation. It was divided into two detachments. The first was put under the command of “Rano” and included those guerrillas who were most experienced in the use of force: its principal aim was to carry out economic operations of some magnitude. The second, led by “*Juan Miranda*” contained less experienced fighters, most of them from “security work”. From this moment on it is no longer a single force but two groups. The majority of the fighters from “Rana”’s group were arrested or killed during 1982: for its part, the group of “*Juan Miranda*” disconnected itself and in order to survive had to carry out a series of small armed robberies.

In the midst of this chaos the leadership decided to form a Regional Military Committee for Santiago, under the command of Jorge Palma Donoso (“Chico”), who was a member of the Central Committee. In 1981, in an operation with the Fuerza Central he had lost an eye when he was hit by a bullet from the police. The objective of the new structure was to end the dispersal of the group and create a single one that would reunite the two detachments. At the moment when the Fuerza Central was trying to unite itself secretly, the realities of Chilean politics had suffered an abrupt change, with the articulation of a wide spectrum of opposition to the military government Towards the end of 1982 and the beginning of 1983 dissidents began to carry out public demonstrations. These were the so-called national protests that began to materialise after May 11th 1983. They were called by groups of workers organised in the National Commando of Workers, led by Rodolfo Seguel. At the same time as the workers were being stirred

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

up, political parties were also coming alive and starting to become more active publicly. It was a rebirth of political life that had lain dormant for a decade.

In April 1983, the situation of the combat groups dependent on the Political Commission of the MIR had become critical: the accumulation of background information over a large period of time, the numerous arrests and the possibility of further denunciations were leading the agents of the CNI towards the military leadership of the party.

At the end of April 1983, Hugo Ratier (“Jose”) met with “*Juan Miranda*”, who was one of the most important military activists of the organisation. At the meeting point, there were numerous armed bodyguards, which showed the difficult situation that the MIR was living through. During the chat “*Juan Miranda*” was ordered to leave the country immediately, because information that had come into the hands of “Jose” led him to fear that “*Juan Miranda*”’s arrest was imminent. He also confirmed that the security of the party was in such a precarious state that both he and Arturo el “Coño” Villabela had studied the possibility of also leaving the country. It was the last time that they saw one another, after working closely together for more than five years. Two weeks before the first protest (May 11th 1983), “*Juan Miranda*” fled the country: this saved his life⁹⁷.

We do not know for sure if “Coño” Villabela was thinking of leaving the country for a while: what is certain is that he did not do it. We think that the way things were going, he knew he was being watched and that security agents were monitoring his activities. Maybe he thought that it was impossible to escape from the CNI. Without doubt, the end was not long in coming.

It came when the MIR decided to carry out a major operation, a kind military “swan song”. The decision, like all others that had national repercussions, was taken by the party leadership. This time the objective of the action would be internal. Through it they would try and discover who was infiltrating the Fuerza Central and the party. They thought that if the operation had as its aim the elimination of a high level personality, such as the Intendant of Santiago, then, if infiltration existed, the infiltrators would try and make the operation fail⁹⁸.

On the morning of August 30th 1983, a MIR commando group attacked and killed the Intendant of the Metropolitan Region, General Carol Urzua, his chauffeur, 2nd Lieutenant Jose Aguayo Franco, and his es-

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Roberto Moreno, interviewed by the author in Santiago, June 1999.

cort, 1st Lieutenant Carlos Riveros Beciarelli⁹⁹. The action was undertaken by members of the centralised combat apparatus of Santiago. The act provoked the immediate rejection of the military government and almost all the political opposition. As was to be hoped, intensive operations were carried out to capture the authors of the crime: various working class areas were raided, police controls increased, as well as vigilance on those who were under suspicion. As a result of these investigations and before the week was out, three members of the commando group were captured by the CNI. A few days later, on the 23rd of September, they were handed over to the military public prosecutor: we are talking about Jorge Palma Donoso (“Gabriel”), who directed the operation, Hugo Marchant Moya (“Moya”) and Carlos Araneda (“Gaspar”)¹⁰⁰. It is quite possible that elements did exist within the MIR who informed the state security agencies and alerted the authorities about the nature of the operation: maybe they preferred it to succeed and then fall with all their power on the Fuerza Central and the MIR, as in fact happened. We do not know this with any certainty and we probably never shall. What is certain that one week after the assassination of the Intendant, at 7 a.m. on the 7th of September 1983, a large number of agents divided into various groups blocked all the access points to a house in Fuenteovejuna street, in one of the more select areas of Santiago. In House No. 1330 guerree Arturo Villabela, Lucia Vergara Valenzuela and the veterinary surgeon, Sergio Peña Diaz. A military jeep with a machine gun pointing from its rear was stationed in front of the house. This immediately opened fire and glass and splinters cut through the air: a loudspeaker then demanded surrender. Sergio Peña emerged with his hands in the air and two agents promptly riddled him with bullets: from the house came return fire and the conflict

started again. Later on a flare was thrown by agents at the house that set it on fire¹⁰¹. Among the flames and the smoke the echoes of the combat slowly died away: three more guerrillas had given their lives for the revolution. It had been watched for two months. Alejandro Salgado Troquian, another veterinary surgeon, was shot down while trying to seek cover inside the house. The machine gun continued firing. Trying to escape from the back of the house, the Argentinian fighter, Hugo Norberto Ratier Noguera, was killed on the patio¹⁰². In only one day, “Coño Aguilar”

⁹⁹ Taken from a report in the August 3rd 1996 edition of the magazine *Que Pasa*, No. 1321, page 223.

¹⁰⁰ Ascanio Cavallo, Manuel Salazar and Oscar Sepulveda “*La Historia Oculta del Regimen Militar: Memoria de una Epoca, 1973-1988*”, (1997), page 362.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

(Arturo Villabela), the legendary leader of the Movemnt of the Revolutionary Left, and “Jose” (Hugo Ratier), his deputy, had disappeared and with them, the last centralised combat group. It was the end of the MIR, the way it was conceived by its founders armed Miristas, who were being intensely sought for by the authorities, because three of them were part of the commando that had assassinated the Intendant of Santiago, entered the house of the Papal Nuncio and asked for political asylum: they were Jaime Yovanovic (“Hugo”), Jose Aguilera Suazo (“Rodrigo”) and Elba Duarte (“Luisa”)¹⁰³. The fourth member of the group was Pamela Cordero. The incident produced a sharp dispute between the Chilean authorities and the Vatican. The case was resolved on April 7th 1984 when the group went into exile. These were the remnants of the Central Military apparatus of the MIR (the Fuerza Central) and a few of the survivors of its war.

In the extraordinary plenary session of the Central Committee in 1984, the MIR analysed these events as follows: “The wearing down of the centralised combat groups that are still in Santiago cannot be reversed. At the end of 1982 we received a heavy blow with the death of comrade “Yamil” (Dagoberto Cortes) of the Central Committee and the arrest of other cadres. In February we joined up with the group that had operated apart, trying to reorganise a centralised military apparatus that could maintain itself in Santiago. But the continuation of repressive measures in this area led the Interior leadership to ask our comrades to withdraw to outside the country¹⁰⁴. Thus only a small group remained, which was also badly hit after the judicial action carried out on the Intendant of Santiago that was a response to the assassination of more than 60 demonstrators of the people during the Days of Protest in August. This repressive blow extended as far as the National Leadership, as comrades Arturo Villabela (“Coño Aguilar”) of the Political Commission and “Jose” (Hugo Ratier) of the Central Committee, together with their aides, were assassinated by the CNI”¹⁰⁵.

In the following years the military actions carried out by the MIR were relatively important due to its decreasing military capability. Perhaps the armed action that had most impact on public opinion was the booby trap that they installed in a house in the borough of La Cisterna. On the 26th of January 1988 Major Julio Eladio Benimelli Ruz was killed by it: he was working as head of the Special Operations Group of the Police

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ One of the Miristas who left the country in this withdrawal was “Juan Miranda”, who had been acting as head of one of the detachments centralised in Santiago.

¹⁰⁵ MIR “*Resoluciones: Pleno Extraordinario del Comité Central, Enero 1984*”, page 64.

(GOPE) at the time. He was considered the best in the institution: during the Pope's visit to Chile in 1987 he had acted as the head of Chilean security for the Pontiff. The events began to unfold when the owners of the house, who had the property rented, received an anonymous phone call informing them that there weapons in the property. Alarmed by this they advised the police, who alerted the GOPE. A patrol under the command of Julio Benimelli arrived at the place. When they were revising the interior of the house, at least seven bombs exploded, killing Benimelli and wounding other members of the patrol. The Commission of Truth and Reconciliation, who investigated the human rights violations committed under the military government, were not fully convinced that the authors of the event were the MIR: nevertheless the communications the group made to the press and other actions of a similar nature undertaken previously¹⁰⁶ means it was very probable that those who carried out the action were members of the MIR¹⁰⁷. We believe this to be the last military operation of the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (the MIR).

6. Epilogue: under democracy at the end of the century

The year before the 1988 plebiscite the MIR held a congress and ended it divided into three factions: the "Military" faction headed by Hernan Aguilo who had led the Revolutionary Workers Front (the FTR) under the Unidad Popular government, the "Political" one under Nelson Gutierrez and the "Historic" under Andres Pascal Allende.

The last casualty of the MIR occurred on the night of Monday September 4th 1989, six months before the return of democracy, in Bulnes street, to the east of Santiago. That night Jecar Neghme Cristi, the spokesman of the Political wing of the MIR was assassinated by agents from the National Information Centre (the CNI). The Minister appointed to look into the case, Hugo Dolmetsch, has held the following members of the CNI's Blue Brigade believed to be responsible for the event to be put on trial: Enrique Leddy Araneda, Brigadier (retired), Pedro Guzman Olivares, Colonel (retired), and Luis Sanhueza Ros ("El Huiro")¹⁰⁸.

¹⁰⁶ On March 6th 1987, Eduardo Tamayo Medina, a sub-Lieutenant in the Concepcion police was killed. His death occurred when he was investigating a report that a flag of the MIR had been raised in the Laguna Redonda area. While taking it down it activated an explosive device and he was blown up. See the report from the National Commission of Truth and Reconciliation (1990)

¹⁰⁷ We have used the Report of the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation to reconstruct the event.

¹⁰⁸ From the newspaper *La Nacion*, Internet edition, May 29th 2003.

With the return to democracy in 1990 the three Mirista groups lost all influence in national politics. Their most representative leaders developed new activities: some went into business and exporting, others went back to work in their old professions, a few of them joined the Socialist Party and the Party for Democracy (PPD). Most of the activists who managed to survive the holocaust of the past decades have reconstructed their lives while there are still some who yearn for the time when utopia was within their grasp.

A few of older activists continue the guerrilla war: the most relevant case is that of Rene Valenzuela Bejar ("El Gato"). He was an intelligence expert and had worked with "El Pollo" (Edgardo Enriquez) in the group's information apparatus. "El Gato" was arrested and sentenced to prison in Spain for the kidnapping of the businessman Emiliano Revilla, which happened in January 1992. The operation was carried out in conjunction with the Basque group ETA¹⁰⁹.

Today, at the dawn of the 21st century there are still small groups of militants around, led by one of the older leaders, Demetrio Hernandez. With their red and black flags and their fists in the air, they are still hoping that things will change so that, once again, the MIR with their slogans and shootings will be at the vanguard of a new Chile.

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¹⁰⁹ From the newspaper *La Tercera de la Hora*, May 26th 2003.

* The Movement of the Revolutionary Left.

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