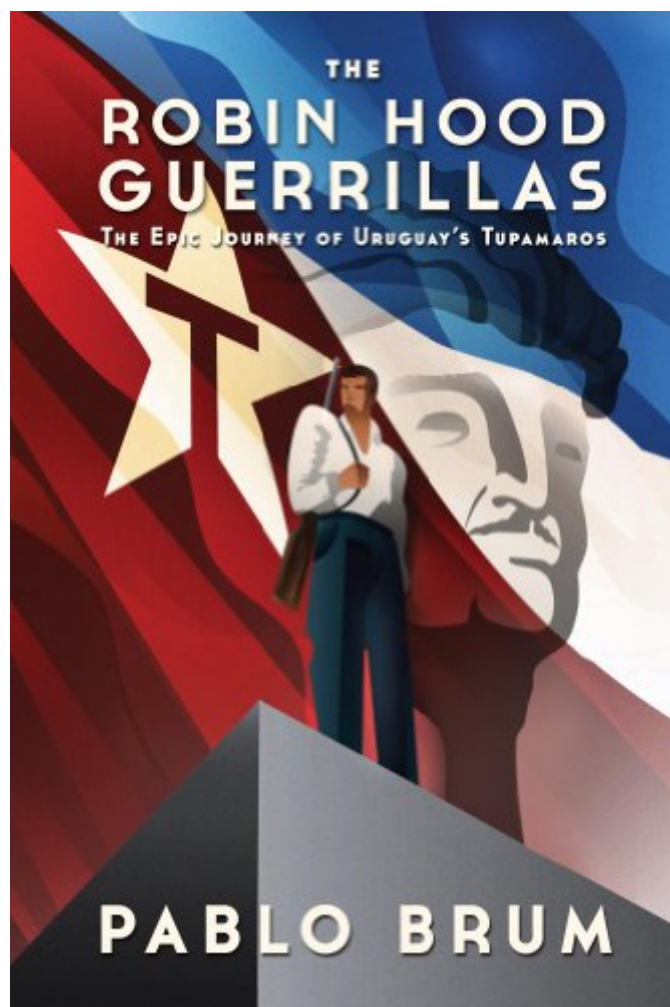


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The Robin Hood Guerrillas: The Epic Journey Of Uruguay's Tupamaros



Synopsis

The President of Uruguay, Jos  "Pepe" Mujica, has recently become a global icon. Among other things, he lives a notoriously austere lifestyle; eschews luxury and protocol like no other head of state; has legalized marijuana and same-sex marriage; has agreed to take in Guant namo detainees and Syrian refugees, and more. According to Mujica himself, all of his conduct and ideology is rooted in his time as a guerrilla: as a Tupamaro. Beginning in the late 1960s, the uprising of the Tupamaros shook Uruguay and rippled across the Western world. Born in a middle-class, urbanized society, these guerrillas did not fight within the natural shelters of jungles and mountains, but rather in the concrete maze of the city. Infiltrating residences, bars, movie theaters, sewers, police stations, and mansions, the Tupamaros were everywhere and nowhere. Uruguay's under-resourced police had to face the world's most sophisticated urban insurgents. The Tupamaros employed diverse, though often contradictory, tactics: from hunger relief commandos and the armed propaganda that gave them the Robin Hood title, to taking hostages and descending into murderous terrorism. In doing so, they integrated women like no other guerrilla force before, and staged memorable prison escapes. This is the first complete English-language history of the Tupamaros and of Mujica, who under the codename Facundo was directly involved in many operations. As the president himself has said, the way to understand him as both man and politician is as a Tupamaro.

Book Information

File Size: 965 KB

Print Length: 404 pages

Publisher: Pablo Brum; 2 edition (April 29, 2014)

Publication Date: April 29, 2014

Sold by: Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B00K1H14MA

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Not Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #717,881 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #11

inÂ Books > History > Americas > South America > Uruguay #298 inÂ Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > History > Americas > Latin America > South America #270144 inÂ Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Nonfiction

Customer Reviews

- pronounced former MLN/Tupamaro leader Efrain Martinez Platero, inscribing (p. 343) as suitable an epitaph as any for his movement and the ideals of his generation. Pablo Blum's volume describes the inner workings of this struggle, and his own struggle to piece together the course of its rise and fall was an operation worthy of its target. Blum details the operations and mentalities, the ambitions and divisions of its high-energy partisans. Although drawing direct inspiration (and later funding) from the Cuban Revolution, the Tupamaros seem more like a reincarnation of 19th century anarchists in promoting "propaganda by the deed," Russian narodniks who "went to the people," or their offshoot the Social Revolutionary terrorists in "expropriating" the ill-gotten gains of the ruling classes. The Tupamaros' romantic methods captured the soul of a time and place; while putting them at odds with the sclerotic bureaucratic machinery of official Communist parties and their squeamish Leninist prudence against "spontaneity." Blum's presentation is somewhat rambling, although he tries hard to subject his wealth of data to a coherent timeline. The high principles of their struggle descended into the moral compromises universal to men at war. The Uruguayan establishment, long priding itself as the purest democracy of South America, followed their downward path in first authorizing police torture; followed by the military's direct intervention to "save" Uruguay's democratic tradition. There was no direct overthrow of the constitutional government as such, as in its neighbors. But in a way preserving this facade was even more insidious. The military and Interior Ministry got its way regardless, a lesson for the future of US democracy under the doctrine of the national security state.

Despite the unfortunately-chosen title, this is the most comprehensive account of the rise and fall of the Tupamaros available in English. It is not a scholarly work, nor is it a literary tour de force. It is a workmanlike chronology based mainly on secondary sources (many available only in Spanish) and the author's interviews with a handful of key participants. Nevertheless, it is a must-read for anyone interested in Uruguay's history during this period. It is also accessible to those with no background in Uruguay but an interest in comparative revolutionary movements. The title leads one to expect a sympathetic portrayal of the Tupamaros. Brum, however, does an admirable job sifting through the facts and presenting a balanced picture; he leaves it to the reader to separate the good guys from

the bad. The same can be said of Brum's treatment of the Uruguayan security forces. What we might now call "advanced interrogation techniques" (aka, torture) were integral to gathering the intelligence that allowed the army to defeat the guerillas. Brum points out that the leadership of the Uruguayan security forces was heavily influenced by the French experience in the Battle of Algiers, where torture was widely credited for France's tactical success (as well, one should add, as its ultimate strategic failure). On the other hand, the Uruguayan government never conducted the kind of full-scale "dirty war" seen in Argentina and Chile. Many of the Tupamaros -- founder Raul Sendic being a prime example -- come across as naive, middle-class Marxists swept up in the euphoria of the Cuban revolution and trying to bring down one of the more egalitarian states in Latin America without giving much real thought to the matter.

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