



Extract of International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine

<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article4243>

Chile

Fifty Years Since Its Founding:  A History of the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR)

- Features -

Publication date: Monday 5 October 2015

Description:

Fifty years ago, the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR) was born, a political force that marked the history of the Chilean and Latin American left. Franck Gaudichaud provides a brief introduction to this story - still under construction - and discusses it with University of Santiago (USACH) historian Igor Goicovic Donoso, specialist on the subject of political violence and an ex-militant of the MIR during the 1980s. [2]

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Introduction

On October 5, 1974, Miguel Enríquez, Secretary General of the MIR, was assassinated during an unequal fight, on Santa Fe Street in Santiago, Chile that put him up against the secret service of General Pinochet's dictatorship. In 2014, forty years later, in the Chilean capital as in the rest of the country, commemorations, book events and meetings were organized by diverse political collectives, organizations and magazines (like the bimonthly [Punto Final](#)), not only to remember the political leader that Miguel was, but also in the name of all of those resisters that fought against the junta and died for having tried to transform Chile's socialist prospects. Today, fifty years from the founding of this revolutionary political organization, various political activities also took place in Santiago, as in several regions, especially Concepción. [3]2 Of course, this was not without provoking indignant reactions in the conservative media and among several representatives of the right (and former supporters of Pinochet's dictatorship) against what they consider an apologia of "a group that promoted armed subversive struggle in Chile's history" and that, for that reason, should not be, according to them, the subject of fora, debates and seminars in public spaces of the capital. [4]

The MIR was born on August 15, 1965, out of the confluence of several small currents of the critical left (Trotskyist, Guevarist, radical Christians, ex Socialists or communists) that at that time opposed parliamentarianism and the legalism of the majority of the left (particularly the Chilean Communist Party) and aspired to construct a Marxist revolutionary organization, rupturing with electoral strategies and the state. The period was marked by the Cold War, anti-imperialist struggles in the Third World and, especially in Latin America, by the continental impact of the Cuban Revolution as well as by the debates around armed struggle (versus institutional struggle). In its foundational texts, the MIR analysis differed from the traditional Chilean Marxist left. The organization emphasized the country's uneven and combined dependent capitalist development character, rejecting the illusion supposed by allying - as the Community Party proposed - with a non-existent "national" bourgeoisie or even in following a peaceful and legalistic tactic of "revolution in stages." The Miristas believed that the revolutionary process must be uninterrupted, permitting a working class alliance of the workers with the "poor of the city and country" and that it was essential to violently destroy the bourgeois state apparatus, defending it in parallel from the onslaught of imperialism. The MIR constructed itself according to Leninist criteria, in terms of "democratic centralism" and considered itself a "revolutionary vanguard" in the service of the Chilean people, as well as the Latin America revolution, cultivating a clearly internationalist and nuestraamericanista vision. The first congress approved a document titled "Towards the Conquest of Power via the Insurrectionary Road" that claimed armed struggle and prolonged popular war as legitimate means of revolutionary movement, "political military theses" that were validated during the subsequent national debates.

Starting with the Third Congress (1967), a new generation, coming partially from the student milieu in the city of Concepción, took control of the leadership, headed by the brilliant medical student (and former Socialist party militant) Miguel Enríquez but also by his brother Edgar and Bautista van Schouwen, Sergio Pérez and Ricardo Ruz (among others). These militant youth finished in these years sidelining (and even expelling in 1969) the majority of the old union leaders and the Trotskyist opposition (including the historian Luis Vitale, the union leader Humberto

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Valenzuela and Oscar Weiss, who returned to the Socialist Party), considered a liability for the development of the party. The MIR reoriented the organization towards a Castro-Guevarist strategic outlook: dramatic actions and "expropriations" of bank funds, forcing the militants to go underground. With the election of Salvador Allende in 1970 and the return to legality (thanks to a presidential amnesty), the MIR - despite constituting an organization of only a few thousand militants - converted itself into one of the principal organizations of the extraparliamentary revolutionary left, with a not insignificant impact within the popular movement, or at least among its most politicized fringes. The era of the Popular Unity government, a left coalition articulated around the Communist Party and the Socialist Party, was evaluated by the MIR leadership as a "prerevolutionary" period, but the Allendista bet on a "Chilean Road to Socialism," institutional, without arms, respectful of the Constitution and armed forces, was severely denounced as illusory. The government was analyzed as democratic, popular, and anti-imperialist but dominated by "worker and petit bourgeois reformism." Nevertheless, the MIR "gave material and critical support" to all of the most advanced measures of the government, measures that appear in today's light as radical: nationalization of the copper mines that were in the hands of the United States, nationalization of 90% of the banking system and of several "monopolistic" companies, deepening of the agrarian reform, substantial increases to the base salary, an unaligned anti-imperialist foreign policy, etc.

The organization sought to radicalize the most "rupturist" fractions of Popular Unity in this way (the left wing of the Socialist Party and the Christian Left, in particular), suspended its armed operations and even put part of its apparatus at the service of President Allende's security (with the creation of GAP, the "group of friends of the president," a personal security service). During those one thousand days that forever marked the collective memory of the Chilean people and the global left, [5] the organization of the MIR, highly vertical, "compartmentalized and centralized" around political-military groups (GPM), entered more and more into tension with the real dynamic of class struggle and the more horizontal forms of popular power being born, such as the *cordones industriales* (above all starting in 1972). Many of the militants and sympathizers that experienced this contradiction between the rigid party organ and their daily militancy in a popular movement at full boil lived this contradiction as a clear obstacle to the development of the party and the creation of "communal commands" of workers, students and peasants, a position argued with force by the MIR since 1972. [6] Nevertheless, the movement, which comprised between ten and fifteen thousand militants in 1972, influenced dozens of thousands of active members of the popular movement through "intermediate fronts" and the "masses." This in spite of the difficulty of inserting themselves in more structured and centralized sectors of the workers' movement, widely organized by the Socialist Party, the communists, and Christian Democracy. They achieved a notable development in the poor urban sectors (among the *pobladores*), students and even peasants (as in [Cautín](#)), favoring organization "from below" and in a "revolutionary key," and rejecting institutional compromises.

After the coup d'etat on September 11, 1973, the MIR was one of the first organizations that entered the resistance and announced with courage, audacity and moral strength: the MIR "does not seek asylum." Facing a fierce and ruthless civil-military dictatorship, these militants attempted to deploy, in very difficult conditions, their strategy of "prolonged people's war" and the legitimate right to armed insurrection in the face of tyranny. [7] After the assassination of Miguel Enríquez (October, 1974), and of several cadres of the underground leadership in Malloco (October 1975), the repression, the dispersion of militants, exile and reorganization were very painful and weakened the movement still further. Andrés Pascal Allende, the new Secretary General, would be one of the initiators of "Operation Return" (starting in 1977-78), intended to bring back militants from abroad to the national territory, many of them young revolutionaries trained in Cuba, to organize political-military resistance missions and even guerrilla attempts, like in Netume in the south (1981). But the leadership abroad had difficulty gauging the reality of the balance of forces, and they tended to underestimate the power of the junta and overestimate their own forces, without really consulting with the cadre milieu working on the ground and also without understanding the dynamics of reorganization underway within the popular classes. The human cost of those dark years was terrible and the political results of this orientation continue to be a subject of controversy between the old militants that survived, as well as among contemporary historians.

The years 1985-87 were the period of final fragmentation and decline, the result of the difficulties of adapting the

organization in the face of the changes of the era, as much at the national level (negotiation between elites and pacted transition to democracy) as at the international level (defeat of "real socialisms," end of the Sandinista experience, global hegemony of neoliberalism). The multiple internal conflicts and human dimensions, the lack of internal democracy and participation in decision making, as well as, obviously, the traumatic dimension of state terrorism (more than 600 militants were disappeared in the torture centers of the dictatorship or were executed in the street) accentuated and deepened this gap and the organic crisis. The situation divided the movement among various tendencies ("Historic MIR," of A. Pascal Allende, "Political MIR" with N. Gutiérrez and "Military MIR" with "Nacho" Aguilo): dissolution had taken place by 1987, from above and without having organized a national congress.

These days, a broad "Mirista culture" exists, diffuse and motley, with several small collectives and anticapitalist organizations who identify themselves with the Mirista revolutionary legacy and its red and black flag (such as the Guevarist left). Some even claim a direct continuity with the organization, especially the MIR led by Demetrio Hernández and Mónica Quilodrán. [8]but in general, in spaces with little influence in the real popular movement. On the other hand, some organs of the "new" left of today recognize a certain kinship - though distant and critical - with part of this revolutionary heritage (as is the case with the Autonomous Left or the Libertarian Left). And this is without counting the media use that can be made of the figure of his father by ex (future?) presidential candidate Marco Enríquez-Ominami, from the center-left.

After four decades of unchecked neoliberal capitalism and more than twenty years of partial democratization administered with enthusiasm by the social liberals (governments of the Concertación, 1990-2010), social struggles have begun to erode the myth of the "developed," modern and "stable" Chile. The great student mobilizations of 2011 that sought to end Pinochet's legacy in education, the demands in favor of a Constituent Assembly to end the authoritarian constitution of 1980, the return of the spectre of struggles of workers and the precarious non-salaried (in ports, mines, call centers, the forestry sector, etc.), or the idea of a renationalization of copper, show that a new period has arisen. The current crisis of legitimacy of the second government of socialist Michelle Bachelet and the integration of the Communist Party to the new executive of the "Nueva Mayoría" coalition on the basis of a program of reforms that, in the end, continue the functioning of the neoliberal system, open as well a space of independent reorganization of the left and the possible reinvention of an anti-capitalist perspective in Chile.

This is what Carmen Castillo, partner of Miguel Enríquez who was at his side during his last fight on Santa Fe Street highlighted in 2014. [9] For the Chilean filmmaker, the struggles of those that fell beneath the blows of the dictatorship in the name of their revolutionary commitment still live in the present and constitute an essential red thread with which to think our futures: "faithfulness to Miguel Enríquez is at play in the present in our political lives. With the lessons of Miguel and the MIR in mind, lucidly and with much humor, revolutionaries brimming with doubts, without faith or certainties, wagering from the uncertainties of the century, raising up courage as a non-negotiable value, putting absolute energy at the service of relative certainties, let's invent new forms of anticapitalist struggles."9

Interview

Franck Gaudichaud: In order to return to this militant history, to think about the emancipations of the twenty-first century which have been influenced in a notable manner by the debates and struggles of the revolutionary left of the twentieth century, we speak with Igor Goicovic Donoso, University of Santiago (USACH) historian specializing in the subject of political violence and an ex-militant of the MIR from 1980-90. [10]

Could you tell us briefly about your personal experience in the MIR and about the manner in which you became a militant in this organization during the dictatorship?

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Igor Goicovic Donoso: My initial formation, more cultural than political, was in the Socialist Party (Almeyda). I was from a Socialist family and a region (the Province of Choapa) in which the Socialist Party had historically been the principal political force. With this formation, I arrived in 1980 at the Catholic University in Valparaíso. But starting in 1982, my participation as a member in the Socialist Party began to weaken. I questioned the inconsistency between the party's words and actions, among other things, in terms of preparing the organization for the development of popular mass insurrection. From that moment, I began to support the actions that the MIR comrades were developing through the Militias of Popular Resistance, fundamentally in the area of propaganda and agitation. But in 1984, I was detained by the CNI and I spent two years in the Public Prison of Valparaíso. In prison, I participated in the collective of Mirista prisoners and for a time it fell to me to assume the representation of the Organization of Political Prisoners (OPP). Upon leaving prison, I returned to the university and they assigned me tasks of publicly representing the MIR. I was a student leader until 1988.

During this period, I witnessed the division of the party. Though I was very critical of what was happening (I considered it a crisis of leadership), I stayed loyal to the formal party organization and followed the party line led by Andrés Pascal. It also fell to me to witness the subsequent fragmentation of the organization. I was a militant in one of the microfractions of the MIR until 1992. At that time, a repressive situation in the south of Chile ended up disbanding the group I was in.

FG: As a historian, what are the principal stages and events in the trajectory of this party that you would highlight?

IGD: I maintain that there were four basic periods in the history of the MIR, and that those periods suggest the existence of four distinct parties. The first step, from 1965 to 1967, coincides with the stage of party formation in which the Trotskyist influence predominated.

A second stage began with the Third Congress (1969) and extended up until the confrontation in Malloco (October, 1975). In this stage the influence of the Castro-Guevarist tendency was settled, following the line of the collective leadership headed by Miguel, and the MIR contested the handling of the revolutionary process (1970-1973) and later took up the organization of resistance to the dictatorship (1973-1975). But this party, in my opinion, began to disappear with the fall of Miguel in combat (1974) and with the leadership subsequently leaving the country (1975). This resulted in an exodus of militants (as much within Chile as into exile), and many of these cadres did not return as militants in the organization again.

The third stage was initiated at the end of 1975, with the different nuclei of party reconstruction, strengthened with Operation Return (1978) and extended with the recruitment of new cadre; especially among youth, the urban poor, and underemployed or unemployed workers. And this, in my opinion, was a new party. This was the party of the Vergara Toleda brothers, of Mauricio Margret and of Aracely Romo. This party was until 1984 the one that would endure the weight of the struggle against the dictatorship.

The final stage, initiated by the internal crisis of 1986, surprised the MIR in a situation of extreme weakness. The repressive blows had eroded its party structure and cut off the relationship of the party with the mass movement. The organization became fragmented, but in that same situation, the bases of what until today are known as "Mirista culture" were installed, permeating broad political and social movements.

FG: After its founding, in which various revolutionary currents participated (libertarian, Christian, Trotskyist, Socialist), the MIR seemed to center itself on a political-military strategy influenced by the Cuban experience. What were the central ideas and theoretical-ideological axes of this organization?

IGD: It's obvious that in the tendency led by Miguel, there existed a clear ideological, political and ethical influence from the Cuban Revolution. What's more, it can be maintained that for this generation of revolutionaries, the Cuban Revolution was an appeal that demanded commitment. But Miguel and that generation of revolutionaries always knew that the historical conditions of the revolutionary process in Chile, and, especially, the conditions of building the left, possessed particular conditions. From there they rejected Regis Debray's foco theory.

The political-military thesis of the MIR, until 1973, contemplated the accumulation of social, political and military forces for the deployment of an insurrectionary war of the masses. That is to say, the fundamental component of the strategic design was the workers and the people. For that reason, the emphasis of the MIR's politics in the most significant cycle of class struggle (1970-1973), was on constructing itself as a revolutionary vanguard to win the direction of the mass struggle without renouncing direct action. This was understood as the deployment of forms of legal, semi-legal and illegal struggle in a context of open class conflict. The land takeovers, indigenous land recoveries, occupations of manufacturing centers, confrontations with the shock troops of the right and the Christian Democrats, and self-defense in the face of state violence are the greatest expression of the advances reached in this process advances that, in any case, were not sufficient. It's necessary to say it, the MIR did not mature as a revolutionary vanguard and, as a consequence, was not able to win the direction of the whole of the popular movement, only the most radicalized fringe of it.

FG: What kind of revolutionary party did the MIR represent? Very often it's called a cadre party or a party of "professional revolutionaries," also emphasizing the internal verticalism and the low levels of internal democracy. What do you think about this? Viewed from today, what were its principal difficulties or organic weaknesses during the Popular Unity and the dictatorship?

IGD: I said it before: there is no MIR. At least three MIRs exist, as well as a cultural continuity. From those three MIRs, two can be identified with the Mirista trajectory and legacy. One of these is the MIR led by Miguel, between 1967 and living on a couple of years more after his death. This party can be named a "cadre party," articulated below the leadership of a widely recognized collective direction, valid and with important mass work stemming from the creation of what were called "intermediary fronts." After this was the MIR that directed the anti-dictatorial struggles, especially in the 1978-1984 cycle. This second MIR, also calling itself a "cadre party," was obligated to build itself underground and to confront harsh repressive attacks. In that situation, the process of training professional cadres was more complex and the deficits when compared with the previous generations are more obvious. But, against the odds, the commitment and the revolutionary will measured up in situations significantly more harsh than those of the 1970-1973 cycle.

In both circumstances, the requirements of contingent politics and ideological legacy of "democratic centralism" favored the construction of a strongly centralized party in which internal democracy was reduced. Probably today, in the current situation of political and social struggle, this model of organization and political leadership seems inappropriate. But the Leninist model of the party was the one available to the revolutionaries of the 60s, 70s and 80s. And to that party model we chose to enter: no one forced us. . . To claim to evaluate (and even reproach) those political practices with the parameters of the current context seems to me a disloyalty.

FG: At forty years since the fall of Miguel Enríquez in combat, there are many young people that reclaim this revolutionary figure: What does it mean to be Mirista in today's Chile and what are the principal lessons that that generation of anti-capitalist militants of the 70's handed down to us?

IGD: The legacy is very wide and can be observed in multiple dimensions: political, social, cultural, aesthetic and ethical. I'm going to restrict myself to the political dimension. In that, there are several aspects that we can emphasize. On the hand is the programmatic content of the MIR's proposal: this organization put forth, and fought materially in that sense, for the construction of socialism in Chili. Today, when the alternatives to capitalism are

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configured in a diffuse manner, many young people and many revolutionary organizations are returning to argue for the necessity of constructing socialism. What kind of socialism? We don't know; but the debate about its contents and orientations is a fundamental demand of our era. And with regards to that, the Miristas and the Mirista program have a lot to say.

On the other hand, the first generation of the Miristas and the one formed after that, in the struggle against the dictatorship, put forward a political example and an ethical challenge. It concerns generations of revolutionaries whose generosity and commitment led them to give their lives for their ideals, without asking anything in return. So far from the contemporary political class (old or young), that makes of their career in public office a strategy of enrichment and power. The moral stature of those revolutionaries influences, without a doubt, in an important way the political attitude of anti-capitalist militants today.

Finally, it's necessary to emphasize the requirement of organization. Many today, after moving along the roads of a sterile movement, accept that political organization, the political vanguard, constitute an irreplaceable element of every revolutionary process. The successful historical experiences demonstrate it (Russia, China, Vietnam, Cuba, Nicaragua). That revolutionary organization, provided by a revolutionary strategy, that takes into account the particularities of a region (Latin America) and a country (Chile), must construct itself from within the workers and the people. It must adjust itself to the new situation and historical context. That lesson of the dialectic of history, the MIR constructed with commitment, courage and self-sacrifice.

Translated by Katy Fox-Hodess

Source [Viewpoint Mag.](#)

[1] A first version of this text was published in French by the magazine [ContreTemps](#). The translation of the introduction to that version was made by Rocio Gajardo Fica.

[2] A first version of this text was published in French by the magazine [ContreTemps](#). The translation of the introduction to that version was made by Rocio Gajardo Fica.

[3] Cf. in Santiago, the seminar organized by the Miguel Enríquez Foundation and the forum organized by the Guevarist Left; Cf. as well the public activity at the University of Concepción, in the south of the country, designed by the newspaper Resumen, by the student federation of that university (FEC) and by the Bautista Van Schouwen Mutualist Corporation.

[4] "UDI Asks the Controller's Office to Review the Dibam's Permission for a MIR Seminar in the Fine Arts Museum," *El Mercurio*, August 12, 2015.

[5] Franck Gaudichaud, [Chile: 1970-1973. A Thousand Days that Shook the World](#) (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2013; Peter Winn, *The Chilean Revolution*. (Santiago: LOM Ediciones, 2013).

[6] Franck Gaudichaud, *Popular Power and Cordones Industriales: Testimonies from the Chilean Urban Popular Movement (1970-1973)* (Santiago: LOM Ediciones, 2013); also see Jan Malewski's interview with Gaudichaud, ["1970-1973: Dialectic of Chilean Popular Power."](#)

[7] " Julio Pinto, "And History Makes Them Right? The MIR in the Dictatorship, 1973-1981," in *Their Revolution Against Our Revolution: Lefts and Rights in the Chile of Pinochet (1973-1981)*, eds. Verónica Valdivia O. de Z., Rolando Álvarez and Julio Pinto (Santiago: LOM Ediciones, 2006).

[8] See www.mir-chile.cl.

[9] See the film: *Calle Santa Fé*, Chile-France; Les Films d'Ici / Les Films de la Passerelle / INA / Parox et Love Stream productions, 2007 (distributed in Chile by Le Monde Diplomatique / "Aun creemos en los sueños" Publishing House).

[10] See his brief history of the MIR: Igor Goicovic Donoso, *Movement of the Revolutionary Left* (Concepción: Ediciones Escaparate, 2012).