“Latin American Solidarity with the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party in the 1950s”

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Introduction

The life of Carlos Padilla Rodríguez, a member of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party (PNPR), sounds like a fantastic adventure story, tailor made for a Hollywood film. That is, of course, if Hollywood were interested in making movies about Puerto Rican Nationalists, which so far it has not seemed inclined to do. (Walter Salles, are you looking for a new subject?)\(^1\) Beyond the drama, however, the story of Carlos Padilla Rodríguez reveals much about Latin American solidarity with Puerto Rican nationalism in the 1950s, as does the life and work of Laura Meneses.

Laura Meneses was married to Pedro Albizu Campos, who was the leader of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party from 1930 until his death in 1965. She, too, was a member of the Nationalist Party. Like Padilla, she was a transnational figure who built support for the pro-independence party and revolutionary causes throughout the Américas.

In this paper I explore the lives, activities, and writings of these two Nationalists to highlight two points. The first is that the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party prioritized Latin American solidarity with its efforts to obtain the release of Nationalist political prisoners and end U.S. colonial rule of the island. It did so in large part because it realized that in order to defeat U.S. colonial rule it needed the backing of Latin America. To this end Meneses, Padilla, and other exiled Nationalists helped form or extend trans Latin American anti-imperialist networks, which worked together to further their respective national struggles as well as those of other Latin Americans. The Nationalists also sought the backing of Latin American governments from a wide political spectrum for their anti-colonial agenda.

\(^1\) Walter Salles is the director of *Motorcycle Diaries*. 


Second, this paper illustrates the generally unrecognized extent to which Latin American governments, organizations, and individuals supported Puerto Rican independence, the Nationalist Party, and freedom for Nationalist prisoners. Puerto Rico was a blatant symbol of U.S. imperialism in the region to many Latin Americans. And the Nationalist Party embodied the struggle of all Latin America attempting to free itself from the Colossus of the North and establish a truly free, independent nation.²

This paper both builds on and diverges from the increased academic attention paid to South-South relations.³ In conjunction with this literature, I explore the relationships that developed among and between nations, groups, and people across Latin America. I discuss how these connections affected the parties involved and the political goals they pursued. However, my work parts ways with this approach by incorporating the U.S. role into the conversation.⁴ Instead of approaching these connections as if they operated largely outside the sphere of U.S. influence, I analyze them in the context of Washington’s impact on and power in the region. Much of trans Latin American

² Popular support in Puerto Rico for the Nationalist Party was on the decline by the 1950s. Despite the party’s waning strength, a large number of varied forces throughout Latin America responded positively to the Nationalist Party’s calls for solidarity.
⁴ For a previous example of this see Margaret Power, “Who but A Woman? The Transnational Diffusion of Anti-Communism among Conservative Women in Brazil, Chile, and the United States during the Cold War,” Journal of Latin American Studies, Vol. 71, Issue 1, February 2015.
solidarity emerged in opposition to U.S. imperialism. The U. S. government effected, but did not control, the degree to which solidarity flourished or floundered.

This paper also contributes to the conversation about nationalism. Many in the United States today conflate nationalism with exclusionary politics, “us” vs. “them,” hatred, xenophobia, and racism. However, the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party interpreted nationalism very differently. Their understanding of nationalism was exclusionary only in the sense that the achievement of national sovereignty inevitably entailed the termination of U.S. colonialism. But, to a much larger degree, the party’s perspective was inclusionary. For the Nationalists, independence signified Puerto Rico’s reincorporation with its sister Republics throughout the Américas and ending the separation from the region that Washington had imposed on the island.

U.S. Colonialism, the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, and the 1950 Uprising

By 1950 Puerto Rico had been a U.S. colony for fifty-two years, ever since the United States invaded and acquired it in the so-called Spanish American War of 1898. The Nationalist Party, founded in 1922, had advocated an end to U.S. colonialism for thirty-eight of those years. Following the end of World War Two, four significant and interrelated changes occurred that directly affected the United States’ relationship with...

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6 Of course the fact that Puerto Rico was (and still is) a U. S. colony, not an independent nation, means that any political discussion of the island inevitably references the United States.

7 This is especially true with the advent of the Trump administration.

8 For the early years of the PNPR see Paulino Castro, Historia Sinóptica del Partido Nacionalista de Puerto Rico, n.p.: San Juan, 1947.
Puerto Rico --- and prompted the Nationalist Party to rise up in the unsuccessful attempt to prevent them from taking place.

During the late 1940s the Popular Democratic Party (PPD) achieved political preeminence and Luis Muñoz Marín emerged as the most popular politician on the island.\(^9\) In 1948 Puerto Ricans elected Muñoz Marín as governor, the first time the U.S. government allowed them to vote in gubernatorial elections. And in 1952 voters in Puerto Rico approved a new constitution that converted Puerto Rico from an outright U.S. colony to the ill defined and constitutionally anomalous Free Associated State (which it remains today). These changes, which the U. S. government carefully engineered in conjunction with the PPD, projected Muñoz Marín and the PPD as the politician and party that ended U.S. colonial rule in Puerto Rico. But U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico was not over; the status change was primarily nominal, not substantial. But, for the United States, it provided a needed smoke screen. At a time when anti-colonial movements dominated much of what was then called the Third World, the United States could hardly possess Puerto Rico as an outright colony and simultaneously project itself as the leader of the Free World and the friend of national liberation struggles.

The Nationalist Party concluded that, if successful, these changes would deal a severe, perhaps fatal, blow to its efforts to obtain sovereignty for the island. In an attempt

to prevent their realization and to alert the world that Puerto Ricans rejected the plan, the Nationalists launched an uprising on October 30, 1950. They attacked colonial institutions in nine small towns in the interior and the governor’s mansion in San Juan, but only managed to hold one site, Jayuya, for any length of time (forty-eight hours). The U.S. government sent planes to bomb Jayuya and Utuado, another small town in the mountainous interior, and the Insular Police arrested some 1,106 people across the island.\textsuperscript{10}

**Carlos Padilla, Laura Meneses, and the Nationalists in Cuba**

Carlos Padilla was one of the 1,106 people arrested in connection with the 1950 uprising. In October 1950 Carlos Padilla was a Nationalist, a university student, and president of the Circulo de Estudios Sociales at the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras.\textsuperscript{11} On the day of the insurrection Padilla and four other Nationalists piled into a car and set off to attack a police station in San Juan. En route they realized the police were following them so they switched targets. Before they could attack, the police fired on them and arrested them. Padilla was charged with assault with intent to kill, possession of unregistered firearms, and carrying weapons.\textsuperscript{12} Like many of the Nationalists, he was incarcerated in the infamous La Princesa prison in San Juan. His


\textsuperscript{12} FBI Report, “Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico,” SJ 100-3, Volume 19, 22.
cellmate was Pedro Albizu Campos. The first two charges against him were dropped and he was sentenced to eighteen months incarceration on the third. Since he had already served more than eighteen months, he was released in May 1952 and went to Cuba in June of that year.  

A number of Nationalist exiles were already in Cuba when he arrived, including Laura Meneses. Laura Meneses, a Peruvian, met Pedro Albizu Campos in the 1920s when she was studying Natural Sciences at Radcliffe and he was studying law at Harvard. They married in Puerto Rico in 1922 and, as a result, she lost her Peruvian citizenship and became a U.S. citizen. For the next six decades, until her death in 1973, Laura Meneses dedicated her life to the struggle for Puerto Rican independence.  

Exiled Puerto Rican Nationalists had sought refuge in Cuba since the 1930s. The 1930s were a turbulent decade in Puerto Rico, as they were in much of the world. As the ravages wreaked by the Depression intensified the immiseration of Puerto Ricans, nationalist sentiment, and worker discontent increased. The U.S. government responded to Puerto Ricans’ growing nationalist sentiments and the Nationalist Party’s increasingly militant rejection of U.S. rule with repression and violence.

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15 Ayala and Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century*, Chapters Five and Six.
In 1936 Puerto Rican police killed four young men who were members of the Nationalist Party in Rio Piedras, near San Juan. Two members of the Nationalist Party retaliated by assassinating Chief of Police Colonel Riggs. The Puerto Rican police arrested the two assailants and summarily shot and killed them.\textsuperscript{16} Governor Blanton Winship, a U.S. army general, blamed the deaths of Colonel Riggs and the two police officers on the leadership of the Nationalist Party and arrested ten of the organization’s top leaders.\textsuperscript{17} Of the ten, eight, including Pedro Albizu Campos, were sentenced to six to ten years in Atlanta Federal Penitentiary. Charges were dropped against one of the ten, Juan Juarbe Juarbe, and Rafael Ortiz Pachecho, the tenth, escaped to the Dominican Republic.\textsuperscript{18}

Following the 1936 arrest of much of the PNPR leadership and the imprisonment of Albizu Campos, the Nationalist Party named Laura Meneses “Delegada Plenipotenciaria en mission especial” (Plenipotentiary Delegate on a special mission) and assigned her the task of internationalizing the cases of colonial Puerto Rico and the imprisoned Nationalists.\textsuperscript{19} From that time forward she spent most of her life in Peru,

\textsuperscript{16} The police claim they shot the two Nationalists when they attempted to grab a rifle as the police escorted them to their cells. For diverging versions of what happened, see José E. Martínez Valentín, La Presencia de la Policía en la Historia de Puerto Rico: 1898-1995, San Juan: published by author, 1995, 112; “Coronel de la Policía muerto a balazo,” El Mundo, February 24, 1936; “La Imprenta Puerto Rico Asaltada,” La Palabra, February 24, 1936. The fact that the top two U.S. officials in Puerto Rico in the 1930s were both U.S. army officers indicates that the United States understood its rule in the island was based in large part on repression.

\textsuperscript{17} “Libertades Civiles Pide al Supremo Revise el Caso de Albizu Campos,” El Imparcial, May 28, 1937.

\textsuperscript{18} Paralitici, Sentencia Impuesta, p. 67.

\textsuperscript{19} “PAC released from Atlanta 1943,” FBI files, reel 19, Pedro Albizu Campos and Nationalist Party, 13.
Mexico, and Cuba, or traveling in the Américas, Europe, and Asia.\textsuperscript{20} In October 1950, she and Juan Juarbe Juarbe, Nationalist Party Secretary of Exterior Relations, were in Cuba, where she had been since May 1950. According to FBI files, Meneses was “at liberty in Havana, Cuba.” She was “not known to have participated actively in [the] Nationalist Revolt,” but she was “conducting NPPR [Nationalist Party Puerto Rico, which was how the FBI referred to the party] propaganda” and “maintaining ties with other Nationalists in Cuba.”\textsuperscript{21} Juarbe Juarbe had been in Cuba since charges against him had been dropped in 1936. He had spent those years working with Cuban nationalists and revolutionaries and Puerto Rican Nationalist exiles.\textsuperscript{22}

The Puerto Rican Nationalist Party had long-standing ties of friendship and solidarity with Cuban nationalists and revolutionaries that stretched back to the nineteenth century based, in large part, on both nations’ joint struggles against Spanish colonialism. These bonds continued into the twentieth century as Cuba and Puerto Rico both experienced U.S. occupation and/or neocolonialism. Pedro Albizu Campos traveled to Cuba in 1927 and 1928 as a representative of the Nationalist Party to reinforce and

\textsuperscript{20} Albizu was released from prison in 1943 due to serious illness. He spent the next four years in New York City, most of them in Columbus Hospital. He returned to Puerto Rico in 1947.

\textsuperscript{21} FBI Files, Subject: Pedro Albizu Campos; File number 105-105-11898, Section XV, 57. During World War Two the FBI carried out intelligence gathering activities throughout Latin America. Although the stated purpose of their mission was to learn about Axis infiltration, organizing, and spying in the Américas in order to oppose it, the FBI also paid great attention to the activities of Communist parties, the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, and other groups it deemed subversive throughout the hemisphere. The FBI records have been microfilmed and released. See Dan Pinchas, “FBI Reports of the Franklin D. Roosevelt White House,” LexisNexis.

\textsuperscript{22} FBI Files, Subject: Pedro Albizu Campos, File number 105-105-11898, Section XV, 14. According to this FBI report, other Puerto Rico exiles in Cuba at the time included Nationalists who had opposed the draft and refused to fight in Korea as well as participants in the 1950 revolt. ADD IN ABOUT RAFAEL CANCEL MIRANDA AND USE THE DOCS HE SENT ME.
concretize these links. Important figures in Cuban political and intellectual life welcomed him to their homeland and pledged their support for Puerto Rican independence. They organized the Junta Nacional Cubana Pro Independencia de Puerto Rico and named Enrique José Varona president, Emilio Roig de Leuchsinring Vice-President, Enrique Gay Calbó Secretary, and Juan Marinello Treasurer.

The Junta Nacional Cubana Pro Independencia de Puerto Rico continued to exist in 1950 and Emilio Roig de Leuchsinring was president of the organization. Cuban president Carlos Prío Socarrás was friendly to Puerto Rican Nationalists. Not only did his government allow the solidarity committee to operate freely, it also welcomed Nationalist exiles and expressed solidarity with Puerto Ricans fighting for independence.

In response to the repression unleashed against the Nationalists following the 1950 insurrection, the Cuban House of Representatives sent a delegation of politicians from across the political spectrum in Cuba to San Juan “to intervene in the Nationalist conflict.” But the U. S. government refused to let the flight proceed from Miami to Puerto Rico, so the plane returned to Cuba.

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25 According to the *New York Times*, the flight returned after “Governor Muñoz Marín of Puerto Rico [] refused to receive the group.” *New York Times*, “Cuban Relations Chilled,” November 3, 1950, 21. The Cuban delegation included Enrique Henríquez,
In response, Carlos Prío Socarrás dashed off a cable to Puerto Rican governor Luis Muñoz Marín. I quote it at length because it offers insight into what Prío Socarrás and presumably other Cuban politicians and intellectuals were thinking about the Nationalists and the Puerto Rican government. It is, in addition, an excellent example of diplomatic communication.

Gobierno cubano inspirándose de tradicional generosidad nuestros pueblos y principios derechos humanos, ruégale interponga sus buenos oficios para garantizar las vidas a Albizu Campos y sus compañeros evitando así causar sentimiento continental. Agradeciéndole su humana medición expréséole testimonio de mi más distinguida consideración, Carlos Prío Socarrás, presidente República Cuba.26

Prío Socarrás’s missive first establishes the long-standing connection between Cubans and Puerto Ricans, thus the appropriateness of his message, by extolling the generosity and respect for human rights that characterize both peoples. He then calls on Governor Muñoz Marín to safeguard the lives of Albizu Campos and the other Nationalist prisoners, simultaneously implying that they are in danger and that Muñoz Marín has, or should have, the power and the good will to help them. However, even as he appeals to Muñoz Marín’s sense of fair play, he notes that should the Nationalists be harmed the entire Latin American continent would be disturbed.27

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27 An editorial in El Gráfico, described as the “social Christian” newspaper in Caracas, Venezuela, noted it was best “not to hazard a definitive opinion on the events [in Puerto Rico] if you lacked sufficient criteria to form an opinions.” Even this more moderate voice considered Puerto Rico part of Latin America, not the United States. “Porque para los países de la América HispaLatina, el puertorriqueño es un pueblo hermano, por religion, sangre, idioma, tradición y cultura; el conjunto de sus habitantes forma, pues, un pueblo claramente definido y en consecuencias existe allí una nación, no puede discutirse
Enrique Roig Leuchsinring, noted Cuban historian, scholar, and president of the Junta Nacional Cubana Pro Independencia de Puerto Rico, eschewed any attempt to be tactful in his angry message to Muñoz Marín. “Seguro de interpretar los sentimientos del pueblo cubano, hago llegar a usted y su pandilla de cómplices de la barbarie yanqui, la enérgica protesta por el asesinato de los patriotas nacionalistas y la persecución al doctor Pedro Albizu Campos, hermanos en ideales de libertad de democracia, de Martí y Hostos.”

Roughly ten Puerto Rican Nationalists were in Cuba in the early 1950s. Members of the Nationalist Party in Cuba worked with Fidel Castro and the revolutionary student movement. Laura Meneses recounted that following the October 30 revolt in Puerto Rico, “Fidel Castro approached [her] and Juan Juarbe to ask them what could they [the students] do, and they organized a program in the University of Havana.” Carlos Padilla recalls that “Fidel had become a lawyer by then [1950] and he led a demonstration in front of the U.S. Embassy [in Havana] in support of us [the Nationalists].

Two days after the Nationalist uprising began in Puerto Rico, two New York City members of the Nationalist Party, Oscar Collazo and Griselio Torresola traveled to Washington, D.C. to protest what was happening in Puerto Rico. They were angry that the U.S. media portrayed the fighting as an intra-Puerto Rican struggle, not an anti-

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el derecho de los puertorriqueños a tener un ideal de la patria.” “Diario Caracas Comenta Caso De Puerto Rico,” El Mundo, November 2, 1950, 3.


29 Carlos Padilla, interview with Margaret Power, May 29, 2015.

30 Meneses Albizu Campos and Lora Gamarra, Una Vida, 29;

31 Carlos Padilla, interview with Margaret Power, San Juan, May 29, 2015.
colonial fight, and were outraged at the world’s ignorance of the repression the U.S. and Muñoz Marín governments had unleashed against the Nationalists. They went to Blair House, the temporary residence of President Truman, and attempted to enter the house hoping to kill him and thus attract global attention to the situation in Puerto Rico. In the ensuing gun battle Lesley Coffet, a Washington D.C. police officer, and Griselio Torresola were killed and Oscar Collazo was severely wounded. President Truman emerged unscathed.  

The U.S. government responded to the events in Puerto Rico and New York City by mobilizing “a strong Army and police guard [] around the American Embassy [in Cuba] and Ambassador Robert Butler’s private residence to forestall possible terrorist acts by exiled Puerto Rican Nationalists or hostile Cuban student demonstrations.” It apparently viewed the presence of Nationalists in Puerto Rico and Cuban solidarity with them and the party so disfavorably that, according to “[un]confirmed reports [] the American Federal Bureau of Investigation’s search for accomplice in the Washington Presidential assassination plot might be extended to the Puerto Rican Nationalist ‘headquarters’ in Havana.”

The treatment the Cuban government extended to Puerto Rican Nationalists changed radically after Fulgencio Batista staged a coup and seized power in March 1952, three months before scheduled elections. Cuban revolutionary forces moved into armed

opposition to the Batista government when, in July 1953, they attacked La Moncada military barracks. The failed assault led to the death of over one hundred, the imprisonment of roughly thirty Cuban revolutionaries, and the imprisonment and subsequent exile of Fidel Castro. During this time, the Nationalist Party maintained its ties with the revolutionary movement, a bond that soon helped save the life of Carlos Padilla.

On March 1, 1954, a Nationalist Party unit, led by Lolita Lebrón, opened fire in the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington. The group timed the action to coincide with the meeting of the Inter American Conference in Caracas so as to call world, and particularly hemispheric, attention to the ongoing struggle for Puerto Rican independence. Washington D.C. police arrested the four Nationalists and the FBI and the Insular Police rounded up dozens of other Nationalists in Puerto Rico, Chicago, and New York City. Acting under U.S. directives (I assume), Cuban military officers picked up Juan Juarbe and Carlos Padilla in Havana, “presumably in connection with investigations into the shooting of five U.S. congressmen Monday.” They arrested them in the Nationalist Party headquarters, “where Mrs. Laura Meneses, wife of the party leader Pedro Albizu Campos, lives.”

The Cuban intelligence services tortured Carlos Padilla, trying “to connect him with Lolita Lebrón” and the assault in Washington D.C. But, as Padilla recounted to me, this was absurd since “they knew I wasn’t there, I had not moved [from Havana] and they

knew it. The U.S. Embassy had people following me.” They also picked up another Puerto Rican Nationalist, Fernando Trilla Martínez.  

Padilla was accused of “gangsterismo” and of possessing weapons. Three Batista-appointed judges presided over his trial. He was held in “El Principe” jail for two months, where he was subjected to beatings, interrogations, constant noise that prevented him from sleeping, indigestible food, and unbearable living conditions. Cuban police interrogated him and “the FBI were outside, in the corridor. They never came in, but they were there listening and they spoke perfect Spanish.”

Thanks to the efforts of Padilla’s Cuban lawyer and the testimony of several Cuban friends and acquaintances, the judges found him not guilty. However, Padilla confided, this verdict reflected the wishes of the United States, which wanted him released so he could be detained as an illegal immigrant, turned over to the FBI, and taken back to the United States. Padilla recounted this scenario to his cellmates, who were all Cuban students and trade union leaders. They helped him escape from jail. Once outside, he contacted his friends among the Cuban students. They, in turn, got in touch with the Guatemalan Embassy, which arranged for him to be smuggled onto a Guatemalan plane that had flown to Haiti to pick up Guatemalan Embassay personal and was stopping in Cuba to refuel and pick up supplies. With their aid, he boarded the plane and made his clandestine escape from Cuba to Guatemala in April 1954.  

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35 Trilla Martínez never returned to Puerto Rico and is buried in Havana, as is Juan Juarbe. Carlos Padilla, interview with Margaret Power, May 9, 2015.  
37 Padilla, interview with Margaret Power, May 29, 1954. Carlos Padilla, phone interview with Margaret Power, San Juan, April 5, 2016.
of the Guatemalan newspaper *El Imparcial*. Padilla had met Vale and a number of important Latin American writers at the 1953 *Congreso de Escritores Martianos* in Cuba, contacts that would serve him in his subsequent travels through the Américas.\(^{38}\)

**Carlos Padilla in Guatemala and Argentina**

The Jacobo Arbenz government maintained a progressive foreign policy.\(^{39}\) Under Arbenz, Guatemala became a refuge for exiles and leftists from across Latin America.\(^{40}\) The Arbenz government’s willingness to work with Cuban revolutionary forces to spirit Carlos Padilla out of Cuba and offer him safety in Guatemala reflected both these policies. The U. S. engineered coup in June 1954 overthrew the Arbenz government and, consequently, ended Guatemala’s progressive foreign policy. Guatemala not only ceased to be a safe haven for political exiles from Latin America, supporters of Arbenz were forced to flee the country in fear for their lives.\(^{41}\)

Before the coup, Carlos Padilla had been an active member of the Latin American exile community in Guatemala. One of the exiles he became friends with was Ernesto

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\(^{38}\) For information on this Congress see Comisión Nacional Organizadora de los Actos y Ediciones del Centenario del Monumento de Martí, *Memoria del Congreso de Escritores Martianos*, La Habana, 1953.


Guevara, “at that time everyone called him Guevara [not Che].” After the military overthrew Arbenz, Padilla sought refuge in the Argentine embassy, as did Guevara and about four hundred other asylum seekers. He stayed there for two or three months until President Juan Perón sent planes to evacuate the refugees and take them to Argentina.42

During much of the time Padilla was in the Embassy, Guevara was able to enter and exit the building. ADD IN HERE FROM CHE’S BOOK. When Guevara knew that Padilla was about to fly to Argentina he said to him, “‘I don’t have anything to do with the government of Perón. I have no faith in or relation with it. But when you arrive in Argentina you are going to need help, so I will give you the names of people who will help you.’” Then, according to Padilla, Guevara gave him a list of people and when Padilla arrived in Buenos Aires he visited them. One of the people on the list was Enrique B. Corominas, who was the Argentine ambassador to the Organization of American States in Washington, D.C. and a strong supporter of Puerto Rican independence.43 Padilla also knew Gaspar Mortillaro, a professor at the Universidad de la Plata and an opponent of U.S. colonial control of Puerto Rico. They had met at the 1953 Congreso de Escritores Martianos in Cuba.44 Padilla also got some help from the Perón government

42 Carlos Padilla, interview with Margaret Power, May 29, 2015; Carlos Padilla, phone interview with Margaret Power, May 5, 2016. For a list of the refugees in the Argentine embassy see La Hora, July 11, 1954 and Prensa Libre, September 9, 1954. I thank Ernesto Seman for sending me this information
44 Mortillaro’s presentation at the Congress was, “Marti, Poeta del Aula.” Congreso de Martianos, 781-800.
through the Eva Perón Foundation, which gave him a *chomba* (sweater) and some money.\textsuperscript{45}

As a member of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, Padilla’s mission was to educate Latin Americans about the colonial reality of Puerto Rico and mobilize them to be in solidarity with the independence struggle and the Nationalist prisoners. To generate awareness about Puerto Rico, Padilla wrote articles (anonymously) in the Argentine newspaper *Clarín* about Puerto Rico. \textbf{SEE IF I CAN FIND ARTICLES IN CLARIN OR ANYTHING THAT MENTIONS THE ASOCIACION.} He worked with a young Argentine, Rito D. Luna, to set up the Asociación de Amigos Pro Libertad de Puerto Rico on August 4, 1956.\textsuperscript{46} Argentina was fertile ground for his efforts because progressives and Socialists had a long history of anti-imperialism and support for Puerto Rican independence.\textsuperscript{47}

**Laura Meneses in Mexico**

Laura Meneses was not arrested following the Nationalists’ 1954 attack on the U.S. Congress, but the Servicio de Inteligencia Militar Cubano did interrogate her. Faced with increased repression and told by the Cuban government she had to leave, Meneses obtained a tourist visa from the Mexican consulate in Havana. She lived in Mexico with

\textsuperscript{45} Carlos Padilla, phone interview with Margaret Power, May 5, 2016. For a description on one Guatemalan trade union leader’s exile in Argentina, including his imprisonment by the Perón government, see Antonio Obando Sánchez, *Memorias. La historia del movimiento obrero en Guatemala en este siglo*, Guatemala City: Editorial Universitaria, 1978, 136-154.

\textsuperscript{46} “Estatutos,” Buenos Aires, August 4, 1956, box 19, folder 8, Ruth Reynolds papers, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños. For a fuller discussion on what the organization did, see Power, “The Puerto Rican Nationalist Party,” 35-36.

Juan Juarbe Juarbe, both of whom were deeply involved with the increasingly radical group of Latin American revolutionary exiles there. They worked particularly closely with anti-Batista Cuban exiles.\(^{48}\)

Laura Meneses and Hilda Gadea, the first wife of Che Guevara, were friends. Not only were they both Peruvian, they also shared politics beliefs.\(^{49}\) According to Gadea’s memoirs, at some point in 1954 she introduced Meneses, whom she refers to as Doña Laura, to Che Guevara and “Doña Laura, Juarbe, and Ernesto hit it off so well that from then on we went there [to Meneses and Juarbe’s home] once a week, and on these occasions we would go over the problems and events in Latin America.”\(^{50}\) At Ernesto’s suggestion, the couple invited Doña Laura and Juarbe to meet Fidel Castro and together they discussed the situation of Puerto Rico.\(^{51}\)

From that point on, Laura Meneses and Juan Juarbe became part of the Cuban revolutionaries’ inner circle of confidantes. As training and planning for the expedition to Cuba intensified, Guevara curtailed his social life so as “to avoid security leaks.” Gadea and Guevara “saw only our most intimate friends: the Torres family, Doña Laura, Juan Juarbe y Juarbe, and Doña Laura’s daughter, Rosita; and from time to time” other revolutionary exiles living in Mexico.\(^{52}\) The level of trust between them was so high that

\(^{48}\) Meneses Albizu-Campos and Lora Gamarra, 31-32.
\(^{49}\) Gadea had been a militant of APRA until she broke with them in 1959 due to her support for armed struggle. Gadea, *My Life with Che*, 9. Although APRA and the Nationalist Party had supportive relations, it is not clear what Meneses’ relationship to the party way. I thank Ashley Black for referring me to Gadea’s book.
\(^{51}\) Ibid, 145.
\(^{52}\) Gadea, *My Life with Che*, 174-175.
when Guevara left Mexico on the Granma to initiate the revolution, Gadea went to live
with Doña Laura.  

In addition to their work with Cuban revolutionaries, Meneses and Juarbe sought
to generate support for Puerto Rican independence and the Nationalist prisoners among
Mexicans, the exile community, and across Latin America. They formed the Comité
Mexicano Pro Independencia de Puerto Rico. They wrote about the colonial situation of
Puerto Rico. In 1954 the Comité Mexicano Pro Independencia de Puerto Rico published
two PNPR documents, one given at the IX Conferencia Internacional Americana held in
Bogotá in 1948 and the other in the Comisión Americana de Territorios Dependientes,
which took place in Havana in 1949. In both presentations he spoke “in favor of our sister
nation’s right to freedom and independence.”

The Comité Mexicano Pro Independencia de Puerto Rico **DID THIS COMMITTEE REALLY EXIST? WHO WAS IN IT? CHECK FBI FILES.**

concluded its short Introduction to the book by asserting its members solidarity with
Puerto Rico. The organization explained why it considered the struggle for Puerto Rican
independence critical to all of Latin America. “Based on the above [the preceding pages
of the Introduction], and because it is our blood, we are on the side of Puerto Rico in its
amazing fight. There is no such thing as a small enemy. The power of force can only be

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53 Ibid, 208.
54 Juan Juarbe Juarbe, *El derecho de Puerto Rico a su independencia*, Mexico City:
Talleres de Impresiones Modernas, 1954. I have not yet found out more information on
the Comité Mexicano.
transitory. ‘Whether force or the law will triumph in América will be determined in Puerto Rico,’ as Albizu Campos so clearly stated.”

Juarbe and Meneses also wrote for the Mexican publication *Humanismo, Revista Mensual de Cultura*. The editorial committee of this remarkable publication included representatives from Mexico, Central America, the Antilles, South America, and Spain in exile. In the lengthy article (twenty-six pages) “Puerto Rico lucha por su Independencia,” Juarbe justified the Nationalists’ attacks on the U.S. Congress, which had taken place shortly before the issue was published, and the 1950 attempt to assassinate President Truman by explaining the history and reality of U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico.

Laura Meneses also wrote in the journal. She began one article with an emotional appeal to the reader. She noted that she and Pedro Albizu Campos had been married for thirty-three years and he had spent fifteen of those years in jail. Meneses further commented that Olga Viscal, a young Puerto Rican Nationalist student, had developed tuberculosis as a result of the horrendous prison conditions she had been held in since the 1950 revolt. Francisco Matos Paoli was the premier poet and essayist of Puerto Rico, a Nationalist, and a prisoner since the 1950 uprising. Like Viscal, prison conditions were so

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55 Ibid., vii.
56 In the article, “Puerto Rico Irredento,” the editors state that because the journal is “the house of culture and the ideals of Indoamérica, unswerving in its ethical and humane position, always at the service of the dignity of people, it is honored to incorporate . . . the tireless apostle of Puerto Rico redemption [Juarbe],” *Humanismo*, January-February 1954, p. 82.
debilitating “they broke his health to the point where he can no longer write.” IS THIS TRUE? CHECK TO FIND OUT WHAT THEIR HEALTH WAS.

Meneses’s article contains a powerful indictment of U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico and its imprisonment of the Nationalist prisoners. She ended with a ringing endorsement of Puerto Rico’s right to fight and reminded the reader that Latin America is one. “Luchar por la independencia patria no es delito, es deber. Y para los hispanoamericanos la patria es todo nuestro continente.”

Conclusion

Carlos Padilla was not able to stay long in Argentina. After Perón was overthrown in 1955 Padilla went to Uruguay, where he stayed with Argentine socialist Alfredo Palacios. Palacios, like many progressive Argentines, had long supported and written about Puerto Rican independence. From Uruguay Padilla continued his peripatetic mission throughout South America to generate solidarity with the Nationalists and independence for Puerto Rico. In Ecuador he worked with members of Congress who passed a Solidarity Agreement with the Peoples of Algeria and Puerto Rico in 1957. After the triumph of the Cuban revolution, he, like Laura Meneses, moved to Cuba, but he didn’t stay there. When the Cuban government organized Prensa Latina (formerly known as the Agencia Informativa Latinoamericana Prensa Latina) Carlos Padilla

60 Carlos Padilla, phone interview with Margaret Power, San Juan, May 5, 2016.
became the bureau chief in Ecuador, one of the first countries to open a branch. FBI files included a translated 1961 cable Padilla sent to Muñoz Marín from Ecuador that said, “You accumulate more ignominy keeping Pedro Albizu Campos and other patriots prisoners. I assure you that the peoples and brothers of America are calling for the freedom of the Puerto Rican homeland. Libertad o Muerte." He subsequently returned to Puerto Rico and worked with the left-wing Movimiento Pro Independencia (MPI). From 1969-1970 he was interim editor of Claridad, the pro-independence newspaper of the left and later worked for twenty-five years at the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueño.

Laura Meneses also moved to Cuba after the revolution. She became a Cuban citizen in 1961 and worked in Cuba’s Permanent Mission at the United Nation until 1966. She traveled extensively throughout Latin America and attended various international conferences, speaking on behalf of the Nationalists. The United States only let her return to Puerto Rico on April 8, 1965, when it was clear that Pedro Albizu Campos was close to death. He died April 21. Laura Meneses died in Cuba in 1973.

In this paper I explore the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party’s transnational connections by telling the stories of two important members of the party, Carlos Padilla and Laura Meneses. In some ways, their lives are exceptional. She was not just any party...
member; she was the wife of Pedro Albizu Campos, the leader of the party for three and a half decades. Padilla is a resourceful man of many talents, who was particularly adept at establishing relationships and building solidarity with Puerto Rico throughout the hemisphere.

The stories of these two amazing people tell us much about the extent of solidarity that existed among and between Latin Americans in the 1950s. For many, perhaps especially for those who formed part of exile communities, Latin America faced a common enemy and shared a similar fate. The oppression of one Latin American nation was the oppression of all just as a victory against U.S. imperialism by one weakened the enemy for all.

Far from being a xenophobic, exclusionary movement, Puerto Rican nationalism shared and valued a common history, culture, and politics with much of Latin America. Its goal was not to achieve independence in order to shut its doors to its neighbors. Rather, it sought sovereignty in order to rejoin the region from which U.S. colonialism had forcibly wrenched it. Anti-imperialism and a shared sense of being part of Hispano América infused Puerto Rican nationalism, just as it shaped the politics of many across Latin America.

The role of the United States is inevitably interwoven into the history of Puerto Rican Nationalists and Latin Americans. The United States forced Laura Meneses, a Peruvian, into exile, which is why she lived in Cuba and came to work with Cuban revolutionaries. A few years later, U.S. pressure forced her to leave Cuba and find refuge in Mexico, where she found her Cuban friends and developed new comrades among the Latin American exile community.
The FBI sought Padilla’s extradition to the United States, which led to his fleeing Cuba with the help of Cuban and Guatemalan friends and comrades. After the United States engineered the ouster of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala, Padilla once again sought refuge in another Latin America, first in Argentina, then others.

Even at the height of its power, the United States did not rule supreme. South-South political partners had a significant impact on national, regional, and in some cases, global politics. At the same time, and most certainly during the 1950s, the United States exerted an inordinate amount of power, which limited the ability of political forces in Latin America to act autonomously, independently, and against the agenda and interests of the Colossus to the North. Nonetheless, the extent to which anti-imperialist activists and organizations and progressive and nationalist governments across Latin America supported Puerto Rican independence and the release of the Nationalist prisoners is remarkable. The stories of Laura Meneses and Carlos Padilla shed light on this generally unknown support and contribute to our understanding of anti-imperialism, solidarity, and transnationalist politics in Latin America during the 1950s.