



FOREIGN INFLUENCE ON THE COLOMBIAN POLICE



Diplomatic relations between Colombia and other countries have gone through different stages. In his research, Juan Carlos Ruiz, professor at the Faculty of Political Science, Government, and International Relations of the Universidad del Rosario, explains first European, then US influence on Colombian policing, highlighting Colombian aspirations to emulate the institutions of other countries.

The 1928 letter was revealing. Every word of the head of the French mission to the Colombian Minister of Foreign Relations laid bare his pejorative and negative view of our country. “The French representative reports that the people of Colombia are unable to think properly because they suffer from sleeping sickness, their muscles are numbed by mountain altitudes, and they spend more time sleeping than working. The negative and colonialist views of that time help us understand how foreign diplomatic missions saw us.”

Professor Juan Carlos Ruiz Vásquez was the person who found this letter. He discovered it in the archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, one of the many ministries he visited in different countries looking for information to help him understand Colombia’s 19th and 20th century foreign policy.

“The study provides a good description of Colombian foreign policy through the eyes of Europeans, and a good snapshot of what Colombians and their institutions were like at that time, especially the police, a superb mirror of national policy and interest in improving its institutions. The country was not able to make the desired improvements due to the tumultuous situation and the conflict that it experienced in those years,” explains Ruiz Vásquez, who is a professor at the Faculty of Political Science, Government, and International Relations of the Universidad del Rosario, with a Ph.D. in Politics from the University of Oxford in England.



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→ Historically, Colombia's police have received training in Spain, the United States, France, and Canada.



The task Ruiz set himself to learn about Colombia's relations with other countries of the time, mostly European ones, led him to consult the Administrative Archives in Alcalá de Henares, where Spain maintains documents that were not lost in the Civil War; he went to the national archives at Kew in England, those of France and its archives at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and also the National Archives in Chile.

"People such as former president Alfonso López Michelson have said that Colombia was the Tibet of South America, a country lost to the outside world," says Ruiz, "But after examining these archives, my impression is the polar opposite. Colombia had very close relations with the world. Colombians especially admired Europe in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, and wanted to mimic the institutions and customs of what they considered to be 'the civilized world.'"

"At the same time, some European countries wanted to maintain a powerful influence on Colombia, to some extent to restrain the ambitions of the United States," says the professor.

One type of institution from "the old continent" that Colombia wished to imitate was the national police of different countries, and the first mission that arrived in Colombia to reform its own force came from France. Jean-Marie Marcelin Gilbert (Juan María Marcelino Gilibert) arrived on that mission, and he is now recognized in Colombian history as the organizer and founder of the modern

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police, which was set up by Decree 1000 of 1891. He was the first head of the national police, serving until 1898, and held the same post a second time during the presidency of Rafael Reyes, dying in 1923.

MORE MISSIONS

Professor Ruiz researched additional foreign delegations, which were called missions even if they had no more than three people, or even just one as in the case of the French mission discussed above. Subsequent missions were sent by Argentina, Spain, Chile, the United States, and England, each of them making largely unsuccessful attempts to train and reform the Colombian police.

"The situation in Colombia was so tumultuous that the national police actually fell apart several times. The institution was founded in 1891 but did not survive the War of a Thousand Days (1899-1902). Subsequently there was an attempt to



← Another attempt was made to establish a national police force during the time of Laureano Gómez. This body became the fourth branch of the Armed Forces during the dictatorship of Rojas Pinilla. When Rojas Pinilla fell in 1958, the police force as we know it today came into being.

establish a gendarmerie, which was dissolved during the presidency of Reyes. The entire police force was dismissed after it rebelled against the government of Mariano Ospina Pérez in the context of the popular uprising known as the Bogotazo (April 9, 1948). Another attempt was made to establish a national police force during the time of Laureano Gómez. This body became the fourth branch of the Armed Forces during the dictatorship of Rojas Pinilla. When Rojas Pinilla fell in 1958, the police force as we know it today came into being,” explains Ruiz.

Due to all this turmoil, the missions were unable to fully accomplish their goals of re-organizing the police, improving training, increasing recruitment, and attending to other important technical matters. Nevertheless, Ruiz’s research indicates that a 1936 Chilean mission imparted a Prussian aspect to the police that is notable even today in their parades and formal ceremonies.

A British mission arrived in 1948 after the Bogotazo, and advised the Colombian institution for three years, restructuring it into separate divisions for traffic, transit, and fire-fighting. “Twelve police came from Bombay but did not speak Spanish and had difficulty communicating. They arrived at the height of the Colombian violence. President Ospina Pérez gave way to Laureano Gómez, who needed a completely politicized and ultraconservative police force to fulfill his ambitions, which was very much in conflict with the British view

THE HISTORY OF THE COLOMBIAN POLICE REFLECTS THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF FOREIGN POLICY AND PARTICULARLY THE INFLUENCE OF DIFFERENT COUNTRIES IN OUR HISTORY

of what a police force should be in a civilized country,” says Ruiz.

After the British, a Chilean mission arrived in the 1960s, and a group of FBI agents came from the United States to train the police in counterinsurgency. This was a time of rural lawlessness and banditry that led to the rise of communist guerrillas, and the United States became an influential and guiding factor in Colombia’s foreign policy.

“Since that period, these groups have not been called missions, but “advisors”. Colombian police also travel to different countries for training. We have had police trained in community policing in Spain, in counter-terrorism in Miami, and they have made regular trips for training in France and Canada,” he adds.

In Ruiz’s view, the history of the Colombian police reflects the transformations of foreign policy and particularly the influence of different countries in our history. Europe had a strong influence in the 19th century, which gradually diminished in the 20th century. The United States, which had previously played a very insignificant role in the minds of Colombian leaders, came to exert a great deal of influence in the 20th century.

“It is interesting to see this because in Colombia there isn’t any authoritative accounting of the country’s foreign policy, and what little we have is based on the point of view of international law. In addition, researchers should examine what is said about Colombia outside the country,” he adds.

Ruiz now plans to visit the national archives in Washington to research declassified documents and learn what the CIA, the FBI, and other government bodies in the United States had to say about Colombian politics and institutions. ■