

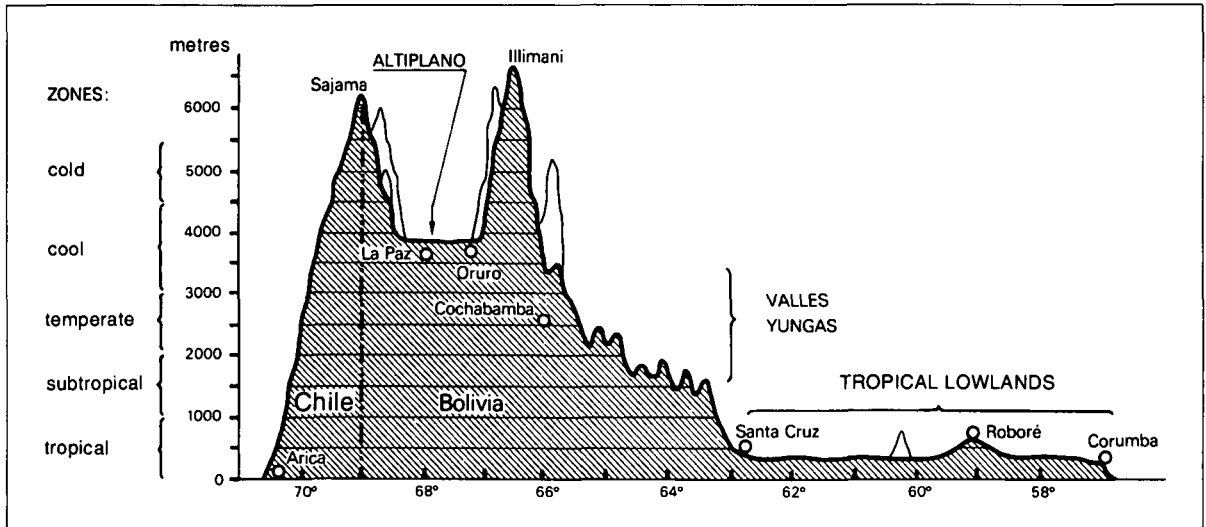
The top of the world

Bolivia takes the breath away – with its beauty, its geographic and cultural diversity, and its lack of oxygen. From the air, the city of La Paz is first glimpsed between two snowy Andean mountain ranges on either side of a plain; the spread of the joined-up cities of El Alto and La Paz, cradled in a huge canyon, is an unforgettable sight. For passengers landing at the airport, the thinness of the air induces a mixture of dizziness and euphoria. The city's altitude affects newcomers in strange ways, from a mild headache to an inability to get up from bed; everybody, however, finds walking up stairs a serious challenge. The city's airport, in the heart of El Alto (literally 'the high place'), stands at 4000 metres, not far off the height of the highest peak in Europe, Mont Blanc. The peaks towering in the distance are mostly higher than 5000m, and some exceed 6000m in their eternally white glory.

Slicing north–south across Bolivia is a series of climatic zones which range from tropical lowlands to tundra and eternal snows. These ecological niches were exploited for thousands of years, until the Spanish invasion in the early sixteenth century, by indigenous communities whose social structure still prevails in a few ethnic groups today: a single community, linked by marriage and customs, might live in two or more separate climes, often several days' journey away from each other on foot, one in the arid high plateau, the other in a temperate valley. The highland section of the community grows potatoes and herds llamas for wool and meat, while the lowland members produce maize, peanuts, chilies, and other crops which cannot grow in cold climates.

Until the 1960s, most of the population lived in the *altiplano*, the high plain which spans the length of Bolivia, accounting for one-fifth of its surface area, and containing the cities of La Paz, El Alto, and Oruro. In the north, the plain holds the highest sweet-water lake in the world: Lake Titicaca, shared with Peru; in the south, it borders on Argentina and Chile. The *altiplano* is the space between two mountain ranges of the vast Andes, a mountain system which extends throughout the whole length of the South American continent and reaches its widest point in Bolivia. At an average height of 4000 metres the plain is a harsh environment, where the sun beats down through thin air during the day, and night-time temperatures plunge below zero all the year round.

< Eternal snow on the sacred peak of Mount Illimani (6550 metres), a backdrop to many views in the city of La Paz.



▲ A cross-section of western and central Bolivia (drawn by J. ter Haar, previously published in *Bolivia in Focus*, LAB, 1994 and *Bolivia*, Royal Tropical Institute/Novib, 1994)

The backbone and beyond

Bolivians speak of the ‘spine’ of the country: a central axis spanning the main cities, La Paz, Cochabamba, and Santa Cruz. The omission of El Alto from this list is significant, because in most minds the city remains part of the sprawl of La Paz. On the collective mental map, the rest of the country is out-lying. East of the high Andes, harsh mountain peaks give way to more temperate valleys, where the main city is Cochabamba, mostly inhabited by Quechua people. Farther east, there is a vast expanse of tropical forest and plains. The relief map on page 6 shows how the Andes form a backbone to the whole continent, a phenomenon which is most dramatically evident in Bolivia. Connected to the backbone is the road network which links the major cities; but beyond these mainline routes, access to towns and villages is fraught with difficulty. Bolivia’s road infrastructure is the least developed on the entire continent.

The cultural and historical significance of the *altiplano* makes it hard to grasp the fact that Bolivia is a mostly tropical country. In the north-east is the southern edge of the Amazon basin, and more than half the country consists of tropical or sub-tropical lowlands. The landscape can be fully appreciated only from the air, from where it appears that from horizon to horizon the solid green of the forests is interrupted only by caramel-coloured rivers. The lowland plains east of the Andean range are increasing in national prominence: the population of the largest city of the region, Santa Cruz de la Sierra, grew from 15,000 inhabitants in 1900 to more than one million in 2000. While La Paz remains the centre of political power, Santa Cruz has taken the economic lead.

THE PEACE

In Spanish, La Paz means literally ‘the peace’, and the almost tangible tranquillity of Bolivia is one of its most notable features. There are not many places left on Earth where anyone walking at any hour of day or night, in the countryside or in the city, feels so safe. Violence is rare in comparison with most other cities in Latin America (or indeed Europe). La Paz is the administrative capital of Bolivia, but Sucre, with one of the oldest universities in the Americas, remains the official capital and home to the Supreme Court.

The development of the 'new frontier' to the east has depleted natural resources – timber, oil, and gas – for the sake of the export markets, with scant regard for the impact on the environment, or for the rights of the indigenous people who are most affected by the onslaught.

Santa Cruz

Palm trees sway in the busiest airport in the country, a disconcerting sight for any visitor expecting the soaring peaks featured on postcards of Bolivia. For most people, Santa Cruz will be their first sight of Bolivia, as international flights begin and end here, in the largest of all the country's nine departments. The entire British Isles would fit within the borders of the Santa Cruz Department. More than a million and a half Bolivians make their home in an area where the average temperature is a balmy 25 centigrade.

The departmental capital is the economic powerhouse of the country. Although the tropical zone of the country east of the Andes includes two other departments, Beni and Pando, 70 per cent of the population and most of the economic activity of the east are concentrated in and around the city of Santa Cruz. Oil and gas are extracted and exported; extensive crops of sugar cane, soy, cotton, and rice are grown for export; cattle ranching occupies great expanses of cleared lowland; and timber – great swathes of it illegally felled – is the most valuable commodity of all.

∨ *Forty-eight per cent of Bolivia is covered in dense forest, much of it tropical or sub-tropical.*



A country made and lost

When the Spanish invaders arrived in search of silver and gold at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the country now called Bolivia was known to the colonists as merely the 'provinces of Charcas'. It was a territory subject to the Spanish vice-royalties based in Lima (Peru), and later in Buenos Aires (Argentina). Often referred to as 'Upper Peru', the area was geared to mining, mostly the extraction of silver in Potosí. All political decisions were made in Lima and Buenos Aires, which regarded Charcas as a provincial backwater.

Bolivians take credit for instigating the first revolt against the Spanish in the Americas in 1809. Yet the struggle for independence was subdued by force, and another twenty years of war were to pass before the rebels achieved their objective. In the event, this was the last Spanish territory in South America to achieve independence: Charcas remained after Peru, Argentina, and the rest of South America had formed themselves into sovereign countries.

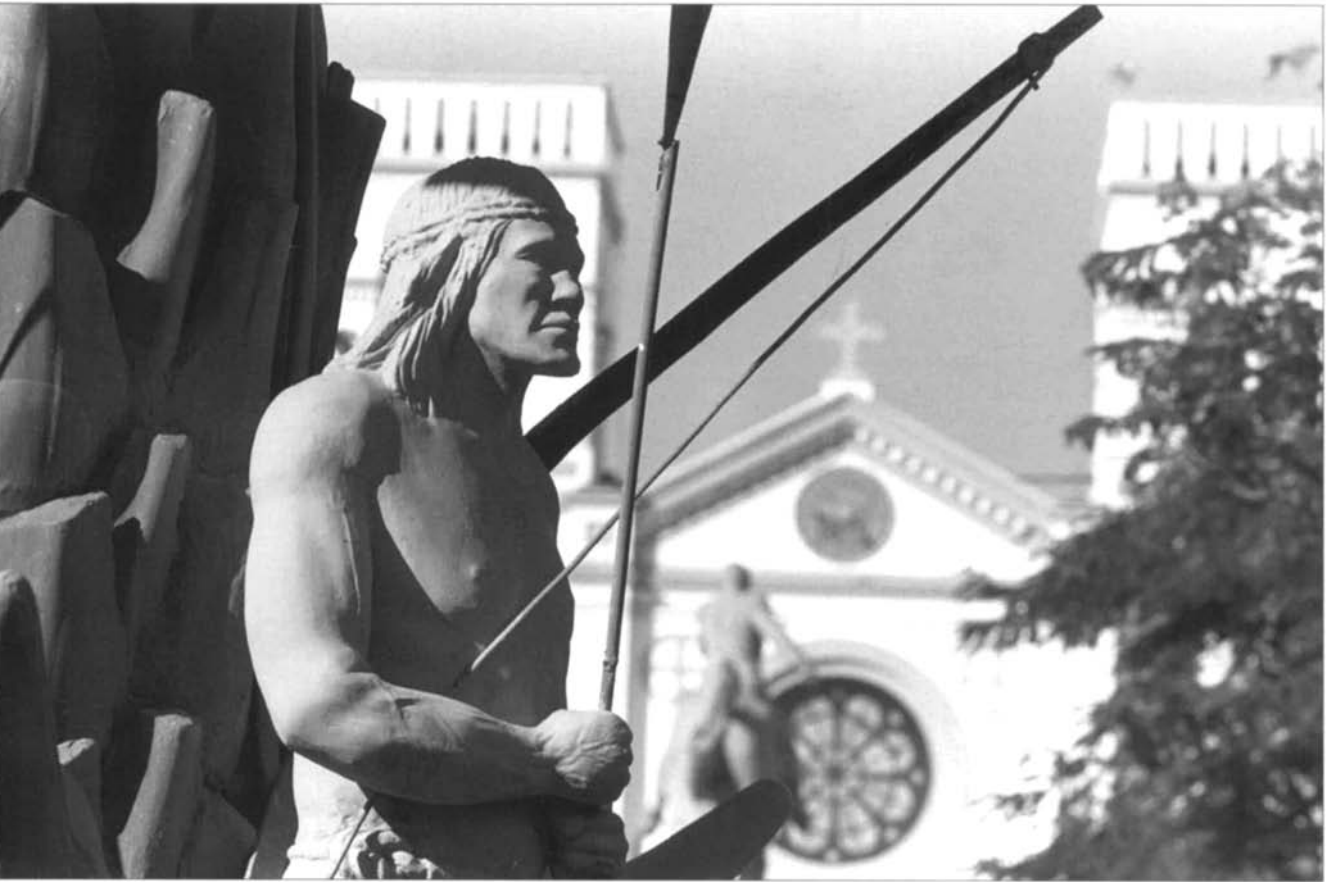
In 1825, after the final battle against the Spanish royalists was won, an assembly of illustrious *criollos* (American-born Spaniards) gathered to decide the future of the liberated territories. Their desire for personal power motivated their unanimous decision not to submit to external rule, but to establish a sovereign nation.

The unilateral decision in Upper Peru suited Peru and Argentina at the time, but left Bolivia in a weaker position than her neighbours. Just how weak is illustrated by the fact that Bolivia's territorial extent in the twenty-first century is less than the territory it has lost since Independence. Upper Peru was more than twice as large as modern Bolivia, with a long Pacific coastline. Today, Bolivia is landlocked.



CONDOR

The national symbol of Bolivia is the condor, an enormous carrion-eating vulture. The largest flying bird in the world, when full-grown it has a wingspan measuring more than three metres. The condor has featured in the political and cultural fabric of highland society for thousands of years. Today, the title of the most powerful leader in an indigenous community is *mallku*, which means 'condor' in the Aymara language.



A Two cultures converge in the streets of Trinidad: in the foreground, a statue of an indigenous man using a traditional bow and arrow; in the background, a Catholic church.

The War of the Pacific

By war was Bolivia made, and by war it was to live for another hundred years. There were constant skirmishes with neighbouring nations, countless internal uprisings, and, in 1879, the first truly devastating international conflict. Its cause lay in the fact that by the early nineteenth century much of northern Europe was suffering from deforestation, and erosion had made agricultural land unproductive. The region was in danger of being unable to feed its fast-growing population. In 1840, British chemists discovered the fertilising qualities of *guano*, nitrate-rich bird-droppings which had accumulated on the coasts of Peru and Bolivia. It was bonanza time for Peru, exporting vast quantities of the stuff and mortgaging itself to British financiers, to borrow money for conspicuous consumption. Along with the Chileans, Peru leased territory in Bolivia and exploited the riches found there. In 1880, five per cent of the revenue of the Chilean State came from nitrates exports; by 1890 this proportion had risen to half. When Bolivia attempted to tax the wildly successful exports, the Chilean army moved into the Bolivian province of Antofagasta, never to leave again.

'BOLIVIA DOES NOT EXIST'

A story is told of Mariano Melgarejo, a dictator of a century ago, who forced the British ambassador to drink a barrelful of chocolate as punishment for sneering at a glass of local *chicha* beer. The ambassador was paraded down La Paz's main street sitting backwards on a donkey, and then shipped back to London. An infuriated Queen Victoria supposedly called for a map of South America, chalked an X over Bolivia, and pronounced sentence: 'Bolivia does not exist'. For the world, in effect, Bolivia did not exist, either then or later: the looting of its silver, and later of its tin, was no more than an exercise of the rich countries' natural rights.

(Eduardo Galeano: *Open Veins of Latin America*, Latin America Bureau, 1997; quoted with permission)

The War of the Pacific was sparked in 1879 and lasted until 1883, after the Chilean army had captured Peru's capital, Lima, and all of Bolivia's coastal provinces. Among other Bolivian losses was the largest copper mine in the world, Chuquibambilla. Argentina exploited the strife between her neighbours to take the desert of Atacama, and then a strip of the Chaco (a scrub desert in the south-east). In 1899 the Brazilians were quietly annexing Acre, in the north-west, part of the Amazon basin. By 1903 they had consolidated their hold over a huge segment of Bolivia's northern territories, as well as a smaller corner farther south in the Matto Grosso region. In the early twentieth century, Peru managed to wrest for itself another portion of the north known as Purus. Finally, in 1935, after a disastrous war against Paraguay, almost all of the Chaco was lost.

Since 1935 Bolivia has remained about the size of Spain and France together, while supporting only 8 million inhabitants (compared with Spain's and France's combined total of 98 million). Bolivia's losses are counted not only in extent, but in strategic access to the sea and resources; moreover, the country that is left has some of the most steeply jagged terrains in the Americas, and that is the reason, as well as the poor state of the economy, why internal communications are so difficult. The loss of access to the sea continues to haunt Bolivia and poison its relationship with Chile. Many Bolivians blame their country's underdevelopment on this factor. Since 1992, however, Bolivia has had duty-free access to the Peruvian port of Ilo, thus in effect overcoming the problem of its landlocked status.

◀ A relief map of Bolivia, showing places mentioned in this book.

The desired nation

Coming together in the promised land

The Spanish *conquistadores* braved the marshy jungle and the teeming rivers in the east of Bolivia in search of El Dorado, the fabled land of riches. They had failed to find it in Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil, Paraguay, and Peru; but hope springs eternal, and the Spanish persisted in this remote corner of the Amazon, which to this day has not been fully explored. The invaders never found El Dorado, but instead they discovered that they could harness slave labour to produce wealth for them – although it took 400 years for the sparsely populated backwater in the east to become the new economic frontier of Bolivia. To generate riches, however, people were needed. In the beginning, the local indigenous groups were captured and forcibly settled, with the help of the church missions; some were enslaved to work deeper in the forests of the modern departments of Pando and Beni, collecting rubber and brazil nuts. But it was not until mass migration began in the 1950s that Santa Cruz had the labour that it needed in order to expand.

The region is the main magnet for migration from all over the country: Quechuas and Aymaras have come from the valleys and highlands of all other departments; neighbouring countries, especially Brazil, provide many new inhabitants; from farther afield come Germans (who now number about 160,000) and Central Europeans, Mennonites from Canada, and, from farther still, several thousand Japanese and other Asians who arrived during the twentieth century. Whatever their provenance, they are all known as *cambas* to Bolivians, the generic name for their compatriots from the tropical lowlands. The ease with which so many disparate peoples

AFRO-BOLIVIANS

The present-day African-Bolivian community numbers only some 30,000 members. They are the remnant of the much larger number of slaves who were imported during colonial times. Their influence permeates contemporary indigenous culture, including some of the most popular traditional dances, the *saya* and *morenadas* (*moreno* is a common word for black people across Latin America). The rhythmic percussion of the dances suggests the heavy clink of the chains which the slaves were forced to wear on their way to the mines.

become *cambas* in their attitudes shows the potential for combining unity of purpose with cultural diversity, an achievement to which Bolivia as a whole still aspires.

The many and the few

The social structure that emerged from the Spanish conquest of the Andean territories in the sixteenth century prescribed a well-defined hierarchy in which the 'republic of Spaniards' was superior to the 'republic of Indians'. In practice, not only did the Spanish conquerors marry Inca princesses, but intermingling was common at all levels of society. Thus the majority of Bolivians who do not claim indigenous identity are of mixed blood, *mestizos*, although they may not identify themselves as such.

The legal enslavement of indigenous people may be history, but racism certainly is not. Serfdom was abolished in 1952, but the expectation that indigenous people will provide cheap labour in the service of the small middle and upper classes has not disappeared. Skin colour and facial features determine social interaction and operate as markers of rank in society: in a nation whose population is at least 60 per cent indigenous, the powerful minority is distinguished by predominantly European surnames and features. The indigenous majority still struggles for equal status.

▼ *Macaria Mamani, an Aymara woman, making cheese to sell at the local Thursday market near her home in the Department of La Paz*



Speaking in tongues

It is estimated that 39 languages are currently used in Bolivia, and that at least five more have died out. An additional language, *pukina*, is used by indigenous medicine men known as *callawayas*. The two largest ethnic groups share histories, social forms, and rites: both Quechuas and Aymaras converted to Catholicism in the main, while retaining many of their religious and cultural customs. For both highland peoples, the Earth is Mother, the mountains are deities, and offerings play a necessary part in placating the forces of the natural world. Quechua is spoken by almost three million people, or around 36 per cent of the total population. It is the most widely spoken

indigenous language of the Americas, with ten million speakers living in Ecuador, Peru, and Argentina. Quechuas live throughout Bolivia, although they traditionally inhabited the *altiplano* and high valleys east of the Andes. The second largest group is the Aymaras, mostly concentrated in the departments of La Paz and Oruro, although dispersed Aymara communities exist all the way south to Argentina and Chile.



Ignacio Quasase, a leather worker, at his bench in an Ayoreo village in Chiquitania, Department of Santa Cruz

There are almost two million speakers of the Aymara language: around 25 per cent of the population. Many have migrated from rural areas to the cities, especially El Alto. Neither of these ethnic groups is homogeneous, as they share gradations of closeness with other much smaller groups.

In addition, there are distinct ethnic communities in the highlands, such as the Urus, Qaraqaras, and Yamparas, who were part of the Inca empire and have adopted some Quechua characteristics, but retain their own customs and language. The largest lowland ethnic group is the Guaraní, whose 75,000 members live in the south-east of Bolivia. Guaraní people also live in Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay.

There are many diverse groups of indigenous people in the lowlands of Bolivia. Many ethnic groups were suppressed when in 1665 the Jesuits rounded them up and held them in *reducciones*, large estates (*haciendas*) run by the Church, in the belief that converting them to Christianity was the way to 'civilise' them and save their souls. It is thought that as many as forty distinct groups were amalgamated; Chiquitano, one of the indigenous languages, was imposed on them

by the Jesuits as the *lingua franca*. Today Chiquitanos are in the majority among lowland indigenous peoples. Other groups retained their separate identities by isolating themselves ever deeper in the rainforest, including Moxeños, Sirionós, Chimanés, Paiconecos, Ayoreos, and Mosestenes. As none of these groups is more than a few thousand strong, in the 1990s they decided to offset their small numbers by uniting and working in regional coalitions.

Quechwa world

Native speakers say *Quechwa*, but in Spanish and English the word is most commonly spelled and pronounced less phonetically, as 'Quechua'. Even though Quechua speakers constitute the largest ethnic group in Bolivia, they have not formulated a single shared identity. Their traditions have either been maintained in small rural communities, or they have permeated the Bolivian national culture and are not claimed exclusively. In the collective memory, the Inca past, although Quechua, belongs to all Bolivians. It is a testament to the historical success of the Incas, who



▲ Virginia Chambi, a trainee announcer for 'Radio Chiwalaki', a Quechua-language radio station founded in 1990

invaded from Cuzco in today's Peru, about 100 years before the Spanish arrived, and subdued a diverse population, imposing their own language and customs on the local communities. A handful of publications now use the language (but they are mainly bilingual with Spanish). The radio stations which broadcast in Quechua are local initiatives, often not reaching beyond one particular valley at a time.

Quechuas are known for their readiness to migrate in search of new opportunities, and they comprise a large proportion of the Bolivians who live abroad. Within the country, most urban Quechuas live in Cochabamba, Sucre, and Tarija, although they have migrated to every department.

Aymara pride

At the coldest time of day, just before dawn breaks over the *altiplano*, a number of radio stations begin their transmissions in Aymara. The most famous is Radio San Gabriel, which broadcasts solely in that language. On 21 June 2000 it announced the new Aymara year 5008. Three thousand people observed the winter solstice at the Tiawanaku

ruins, 70km from La Paz. The ruins are the remains of the centre of power of the Collasuyo, the Aymara kingdom which disappeared before the area became part of the Inca empire.

The Tiawanaku culture had developed sophisticated construction skills and agricultural techniques, and it is not clear why the city was abandoned, although extended drought is the most accepted cause. Lake Titicaca is the heartland of the Aymara, as evidenced by the fact that the name has meaning in their language only: *titi* is their word for puma or large cat, and *qaqa* is their word for grey. It is curious that 'aymara' does not mean anything in the language of that name: the word seems to have been invented by the Spanish.

The Aymara language is fascinating. Among the first to study it was Italian Jesuit Ludovico Bertonio (1555–1628), who compiled a dictionary. Since then, linguists and mathematicians have studied Aymara closely. It shows a logical consistency in construction which is not found in most natural languages, leading to various exotic theories about its invention, or its artificial nature. What seems certain is that Aymara is based on a

different logic from that of Indo-European languages. Spanish, English, and other European languages rely on *true* and *false* being mutually exclusive logical outcomes. Dichotomies abound, and the world is easily divided into opposing pairs (good and evil, real and imaginary, etc.); computers operate on the premise that everything can be broken down into noughts and ones. In the Aymara language, however, the underlying logic is three-way. A statement may be true, it may be false, or it may contain its own proportions of truth and falsity. These partly true, partly false statements can be specifically named and communicated in a way that Spanish and English cannot convey – except by using many more words. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the Aymara language is that it has survived for hundreds of years with hardly any written records: a testimony to the strength of the oral culture associated with it.

Life under the Spanish was hard, and indigenous uprisings and power struggles were frequent. The most notable was the siege of La Paz by the Aymara in 1781, when they nearly defeated the Spanish, who after ten months were decimated. The leaders of the revolt were Julián Apaza, also known as Tupaj Katari (literally ‘standing serpent’), his wife Bartolina Sisa, and his sister Gregoria Apaza. Since the 1970s, Aymara political and cultural revivals have used the title *Katarismo* to name their struggle.

The historic contribution of Aymaras spreads beyond the borders of Bolivia, for they were the first people to cultivate potatoes from the hundreds of wild species found on their territory. They also claim the invention of the freeze/dry technique to produce *chuño*, their staple food: potatoes are put out at night to freeze and are then dried in the sun – a treatment which ensures that they will keep for months. The idea was taken up by space scientists designing food for astronauts.

BRINGING OUR SOULS HOME

The senior authority of the community of Coroma, Zacarias Camata Chambi, speaks quietly. The younger leader who accompanies him translates his words into Spanish. He is telling the story of the stolen souls of his ancestors: the grandfathers and grandmothers who protect the community, their power embodied in the ancient sacred textiles which their descendants guard faithfully. But although the community has kept a detailed inventory and maintained a close watch over the textiles, some have been stolen by ‘art dealers’ from abroad. One culture thief from San Francisco in the USA managed to take dozens of antique textiles from Coroma and from other indigenous communities in rural Bolivia. Zacarias explains that when the elders of the community wear the ancient weavings, they become the ancestors. The people of Coroma are special because of the antiquity of their preserved textiles, some dating back beyond the Inca conquest nearly seven hundred years ago; but they are more remarkable for their success in bringing home the souls of their ancestors, after years of international lawsuits and campaigning. Using legislation promoted by UNESCO for the protection of the cultural patrimony of indigenous people, the people of Coroma managed to wrest their communal heritage from the unscrupulous dealers who profit from the traffic in indigenous antiquities.

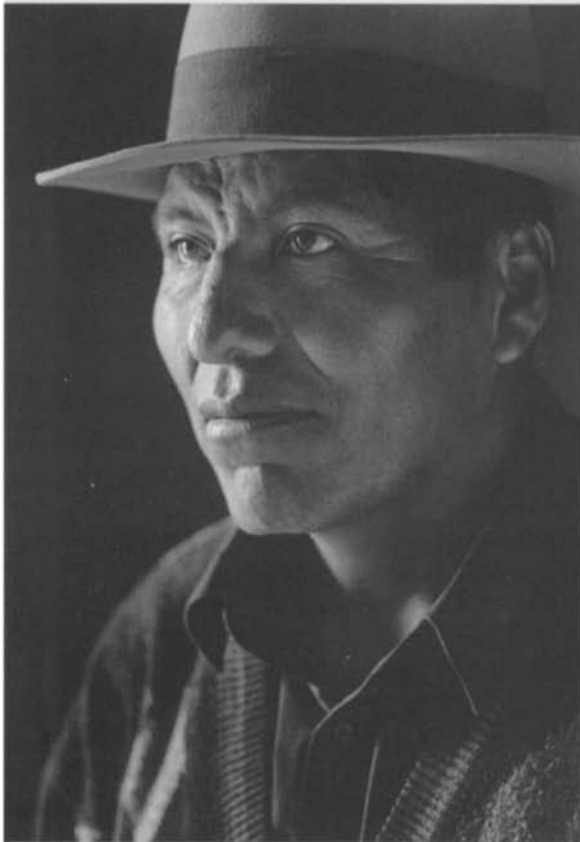
Rescate cultural

A uniquely Bolivian expression, *rescate cultural* means 'cultural salvage', a process which takes many surprising forms in Bolivia. Indigenous communities have not lost their cultural heritage: they continue to develop it, retaining their values and absorbing new elements with the passage of time. The process of *rescate* takes place among the urban *mestizos*, who 'rescue' indigenous values but create new traditions to honour them. Elements are drawn from various ethnic groups and historical moments, blended to create 'national' customs. A good example is provided by the festival of *El Gran Poder* (literally 'the great power'), which takes place in La Paz and is now the city's major cultural event. Its roots lie in one

FAITH IN THE MOUNTAINS

Mountains play a central role in the religious beliefs and rituals of the highlands. Individual peaks are worshipped as protectors, and their brooding beauty easily persuades foreigners of their magic. For rural communities in the highlands, rites relating to the mountains are part of life. Their customs have been adopted by urban mixed-race Bolivians – *mestizos* – and even by those without any direct indigenous ancestry. Such were the political activists who gathered – accompanied by the author – at 3am one

winter's night in the year 2000 on a sacred mountain to give thanks for the electoral success of their new political party.



The road out of La Paz to the Yungas, the sub-tropical steep valleys 70km away, is 3000m closer to sea level than the city is. The road slopes at a vertiginous angle; the surface is rough in many places, and the collapse of large chunks of mountainside is an everyday event. Its reputation among foreign travellers as 'the most dangerous road in the world' is perhaps exaggerated, but it gives a measure of the thrills involved. The *cumbre* (summit) is the high point of the pass to the Yungas out of La Paz, 15km beyond the city. It is the setting for Aymara religious events. Freezing gale-force winds accompanied us as we stood at the makeshift altar, upon which trays of offerings were placed, ready to *ch'allar*: to thank and honour Mother Earth. The freezing wind made it difficult to light the ceremonial fire, but soon the offerings were being consumed in the flames. The holy man, known as a *yatiri*, dispensed blessings and fried chicken in equal measures. Religious rites in the majority indigenous cultures require chewing coca leaves and, when the chill is intense, passing around what they like to call 'tea with tea', which is in fact green tea generously laced with *singani*, the local white spirit.

ILO 169



Indigenous people's rights around the world are enshrined in the UN's International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 169, which came into force in 1991. According to Jorge Cortes of CEADES, an NGO which has provided legal and advocacy support for campaigners challenging oil companies, 'Convention 169 is the key to

claiming the rights due to indigenous people'. Bolivia is a signatory to the Convention, which sets out in detail the specific human rights due to indigenous and tribal peoples under international law.

neighbourhood church and the members of its urban indigenous congregation, who, as they became successful merchants, paid for ever more lavish parades, capturing the imagination of the rest of the city's inhabitants. The festival dances became popular as their indigenous originators grew in economic power; university students adopted the style and introduced it into wider *mestizo* circles, in recognition of the cultural diversity of the city.

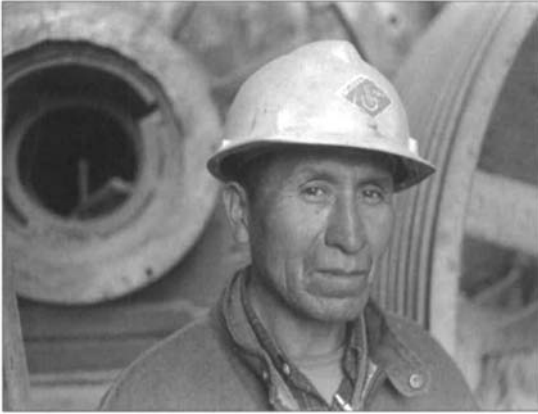
Native cultures find unexpected new manifestations. A popular nightclub in La Paz plays Latin music such as salsa (although the sounds of the Caribbean are as exotic in the highlands of Bolivia as they are in

London) and pop, but the dance floor really gets going when a *tinku* is heard over the amplifiers. *Tinkus* are ritual fighting dances still performed in *altiplano* village fiestas, when old scores are settled within and between communities. The sometimes bloody results of real-life *tinkus* bear no relation to the pop/techno version which has the young people of La Paz hopping on a Saturday night, but the dancers know the source.

∨ Schoolgirls dance in traditional costume in the town of Trinidad.



The curse of wealth



△ *Pedro Paca Mamani, an engineer employed by Empresa Somil, in Potosí*

In English, past events are ‘behind us’ and we ‘look forward’ to the future: the language reflects the way in which its native speakers view reality, advancing from today into tomorrow. In the Aymara language, however, the future is behind the speaker and the past in front. Given the importance of language for structuring thoughts, it is not surprising that the past seems so ‘present’ in everyday conversations in Bolivia. People refer to the Inca invasion and to the

loss of the sea as though these events had happened to them personally. Sometimes they speak of mining in the past tense, although extracting minerals continues to play an important part in the economy.

The history of Bolivia is inseparable from its mines and mineral wealth. Until 1985, when the price of tin collapsed, mining was the only economic activity that Bolivia was known for. Now, however, it has changed from being a labour-intensive business to a technology-reliant sector, and so it has declined in social importance. In the twenty-first century, hard minerals such as silver and tin have given way to other sources of wealth to be extracted from the earth: oil and gas. Not only is the past ahead, but in indigenous conceptions of time and history the past is below, inside the sacred mountains, where the future also awaits its moment to emerge.

The curse of wealth

‘It’s worth a Potosí’, says Cervantes’ character Don Quixote to his man Sancho Panza, using the phrase to suggest wealth beyond compare. Potosí was a teeming city, the same size as London in 1573, the centre of silver mining in South America. The mine consisted of miles of underground caverns under a conical mountain known as the *Cerro Rico*, ‘the rich peak’. The perfect conical shape of the mountain and the beautiful red and yellow hues of its slopes brought it to the attention of the Inca rulers before the Spanish arrived. Local legend maintains that Inca scouts, sent to investigate its mining potential, were stopped in their

• The bleak landscape
around the silver mine at
Cerro Rico, Potosí



tracks by a terrifying booming sound, after which the mountain spoke to them, saying: 'This wealth is not for you, but for those who will come after'. *Potojsí* is the local word for thunder. Today the mountain continues to reverberate with thunderous explosions of dynamite, used to uncover veins of minerals. But so many miners have been made redundant by privatisation that even co-operatives can hardly make ends meet and have turned to tourism. As part of a guided tour of the mine, the miners detonate dynamite to give tourists a thrill – and Potosí booms on.

The sounds may be the same, but the city which surrounds the mine has changed dramatically. From being the richest city in South America, with ornate churches filled with gold and precious wooden carvings and superb baroque art, it has become the capital of one of the poorest regions of the continent. The city and its churches have been ransacked of their wealth on numerous occasions, although enough remains for UNESCO to have designated it a world heritage site.

By the mid-1600s, silver constituted more than 90 per cent of the exports of the Americas. There are many who think that European development would never have happened without the silver that was expropriated from America, mined by forced labour. The Spanish Crown, borrowing money to fund European wars and the conquest of South America, repaid the bankers of Venice, Hamburg, London, and Amsterdam in silver coin. Piracy was a thriving trade, encouraged in the case of Britain by the Crown, which made heroes of men like Sir Francis Drake, who attacked Spanish galleons to plunder their booty. The colonial mining system was based on slavery, exploiting both indigenous people and imported African labour. The Spanish system of conquest consisted of giving adventurers *encomiendas*, that is, 'Crown' land taken by force, along with 'rights' over the indigenous people living in the territory.

The original inhabitants were commended to the conquerors by the King in Spain to be converted to Christianity and were forced to provide free labour along the feudal lines practised in Europe. Colonial patterns set the structures for modern practices. The 'curse of wealth' is an expression coined by Eduardo Galeano, the Uruguayan writer, who finds in Bolivia a perfect case-study of a country endowed with abundant natural resources and scarred by rampant poverty. A bias towards get-rich-quick exploitation rather than sustainable human development is the defining problem of Bolivia, past and present.

From silver to tin

A significant motive behind Bolivia's campaign for independence from Spain was the desire of the local *criollos* to control the silver trade. A guerrilla campaign was fought between 1809 and 1825 by local warlords, who organised militias to harass the Spanish troops. They also co-operated with, and eventually proved invaluable for, the liberating armies sent from Argentina and Peru. The traditional importance of local strongmen, known as *caudillos*, was to haunt Bolivian history for the entire nineteenth century and still has echoes in the present. Many guerrilla leaders are still remembered, but one in particular is exalted, although she died in poverty and neglect. María Azurduy de Padilla was the partner-in-arms of a renowned freedom fighter; he died in battle, covering her retreat. All her four sons perished in the war. Her remains are kept in a casket in *La Casa de la Libertad* (literally 'Freedom House') in the constitutional capital, Sucre.

The value of silver exports fell during an international depression at the end of the nineteenth century. Up until 1895, silver accounted for 68 per cent of Bolivian mining output, but by 1905 this figure was down



▽ Miners hauling rocks out of the Cerro Rico mine

to 21 per cent. Then international markets again shaped Bolivia's destiny. The era of mass production and large urban populations was beginning, and one result was the need to preserve and transport foodstuffs on an industrial scale. The tin can, invented at the beginning of the nineteenth century, eventually to become an icon of the twentieth, became ubiquitous. Tin increased in importance as tin cans came to dominate the food market of developed nations, and particularly the USA. Tin is also used in the manufacture of arms, another buoyant industry in rich countries. Bolivia woke up to find that it possessed some of the richest tin reserves in the world. The country already had extensive mining infrastructure, including custom-built railways, and this allowed it to increase production faster than other tin-rich countries such as Malaysia. In 1900 Bolivia accounted for 11 per cent of world tin production; by 1921 it was 26 per cent. In 1945, partly as an effect of the war in the Pacific, Bolivia reached an all-time high level of production, supplying 30 per cent of the world's output of tin.

For a country already given over to mining from its first contacts with Europe, the importance of tin was overwhelming. In the first three decades of the twentieth century, exports grew dramatically, generating wealth as well as a dangerous dependency on a single commodity. Reliance on one export meant that when the international market decreed lower prices, the impact on Bolivia was severe. For example, the collapse of trade in 1914 due to World War I and the closure of the metal market in London meant a sudden 37 per cent reduction in exports, with ramifications throughout the economy.

The 1920s, however, saw an expansion which coincided with access to international credit on a grand scale, leading to a debt crisis not dissimilar to the current one. By the 1920s the main players in the tin industry were Simon Patiño, Carlos Victor Aramayo, and Mauricio Hirschchild. Their companies worked with foreign capital, and Patiño was by far the most successful, eventually owning the means of controlling the entire chain of tin processing, with his own smelting plant in Liverpool, England. Yet the most powerful of the tin barons could not overcome Bolivia's rigid distinctions of class and race. Born a poor *mestizo* with Indian features, Patiño became one of the ten richest people in the world, yet was never accepted by the Bolivian upper class and chose to make his home in Paris.

Nationalisation of the mining industry

Mining had been the mainstay of the country's economy for 400 years, and the fabulous wealth which it generated had always gone overseas or into the hands of a small elite in Bolivia. For a new party in the 1940s, the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (*Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario*, MNR), mining was the key to a different vision of developing the country, in a more inclusive manner. The MNR came to



▲ *Breaking rocks in the search for traces of minerals outside the Cerro Rico mine: unrelenting hardship is the lot of redundant miners and their families.*

power as part of the national revolution in 1952 (considered in more detail in the next chapter) and quickly nationalised most of the country's mines. It created COMIBOL (*Corporación Minera de Bolivia*), a State company with worker representatives on the board, in recognition of the militant miners' contribution to the success of the revolution. The nationalist tenor of the revolution was in tune with economic developments taking place all over the region, based on the strategy of subsidised industrialisation.

Large sums of public money were paid in compensation to the private owners of mines, even though the industry was suffering from lack of investment. Under State control, obsolete technology led to falling profits over the years. Ironically, it was another MNR government that was the undoing of nationalisation and the miners. Economic instability in the early 1980s was compounded by a spectacular crash in tin prices on the international market in 1985. In the aftermath, COMIBOL was privatised, and thousands of miners lost their jobs.

From tin to hydrocarbons

The mining industry remains crucial to Bolivia, although its output is small in comparison with that of other countries. With new sources of capital, it employs modern technology and is no longer labour-intensive. In 1997, 94 per cent of all mining was in the hands of a few private enterprises. Ex-President Sánchez de Lozada of the MNR entered the new century as the single largest mine-owner in the country. Mining now accounts for around 11 per cent of Bolivia's gross national product, and around 40 per cent of external earnings. Hydrocarbons (natural gas and petroleum) have replaced tin as the country's main export. The main metals now mined are zinc, tungsten, antimony, lead, and iron. Tin is still extracted from historic sites such as Huanuni, Llallagua, and Chorolque. Amazingly, after 500 years of exploitation, Potosí continues to yield silver. Privatisation has generated capital for the exploitation of large deposits of gold in Korikollo and Oruro which were never found by the Spaniards.

LEFT ON THE SLAG HEAP

Saul and Fausto run over to us, despite the 4000-metre altitude which makes our heads spin. They show us their samples of minerals for sale: little chunks of silver and other minerals, bright yellow and turquoise pebbles; they offer to accompany us to meet their brothers and uncles, who are miners and will take us inside the mountain. Saul and Fausto would have become miners themselves, they say, but there isn't enough work. Most of their siblings have left Potosí in search of work. They will leave too, when they are old enough. For now they go to school in the evening and work among the slag heaps during the day.



The decline in State-run mining production means that miners have ceased to be the social and political force that they were before 1985, although there are still more than 52,000 of them. In 2000 the State employed only 1400, while private industry employed around 6000. The rest have formed themselves into co-operatives, exploiting the poorest mines with minimum investment and technology, in precarious conditions where accidents abound. On the very edges of subsistence, they are flanked by desperately poor women, *palliris*, who work the slag heaps with a hammer for any remnant of metal. According to Juan Choque, a Potosí co-operative miner, the largest mining company doesn't even need to enter the maze of tunnels under the mountain: simply by applying newer technology, it can extract minerals from the exposed rock which has been brought to the surface by years of ant-like work and left lying there by poor miners who are unable to process it.

On the road to revolution

Bolivia is infamous for its history of political turbulence. *The Guinness Book of Records* has awarded it the dubious distinction of the world's highest number of *coups d'état*: 188 between 1825 and 1982. Political control has been continuously disputed by competing economic elites, with recurrent eruptions of popular power and a decisive role for the armed forces at many crucial points. During the nineteenth century, high political office was characteristically taken by force, which explains why military costs have at times reached between 40 and 70 per cent of government expenditure.

When the twentieth century began, nothing much had changed in Bolivia since colonial times, when a 'republic of whites' prevailed alongside a separate 'republic of Indians'. For the indigenous majority, the reality was a life of continuing serfdom. For the ruling Spanish and *mestizo* elite, the tradition of State clientelism – 'jobs for the boys' – worked well (as it still does today). Popular discontent erupted periodically in the first half of the century. The triggers included land clearances, which dispossessed many small farmers, and poor working conditions in the mines. But it was not until the Chaco war broke out that the people's demands were adopted by any political party.

The Chaco War (1932–1935)

The border skirmishes which characterised Bolivia's relations with most of its neighbours for many years became something more ominous in 1932, when the country went to war with Paraguay. On the face of it, the conflict arose from a decades-old border dispute in the arid and inhospitable Chaco region in the south-east. Behind the scenes, however, the pressure to fight came from transnational commercial interests: the Standard Oil Company (US), which controlled oil production in Bolivia, and Royal Dutch Shell (Netherlands/UK), which did likewise in Paraguay: both believed there were vast petroleum reserves in the Chaco region, and each wanted exclusive access to them. The Chaco War (1932–35) was in effect a war between the two oil companies, using the governments of Bolivia and Paraguay as proxies. The outcome was disastrous for ordinary Bolivians. The country

lost most of the Chaco region, and 65,000 young men died (of a total population of two million Bolivians). Paraguay lost too, in that no oil has ever been found in the region, although in the twenty-first century the same companies are prospecting in the same area once again – thus perpetuating the historic domination of Bolivia by foreign economic interests.

The social effects of the war were marked. Indigenous men from the highlands were forcibly recruited to the front, which lacked food and water, let alone adequate leadership. The country's deep social divisions were intensified on the battlefield. Many rural communities in the valleys and highlands rose in revolt against the war, resisting conscription and supporting deserters. Other rural communities took advantage of the government's preoccupation elsewhere to reclaim land and jurisdiction, and to conduct small-scale civil strife. Among *mestizos*, the war produced a critical generation of middle-class radicals and a range of new political movements, which would change the country dramatically. Bolivia's gains from the war were the widespread impetus to change the destiny of the country, and the recognition that the distinct cultures of the highlands and lowlands belonged to a single national entity.

The intervention of the oil multinationals reinforced the nationalist feeling which had been growing earlier. In search of sovereignty, after the end of the Chaco War in 1936 Bolivia rescinded its contract with Standard Oil and nationalised the company. Thus was born *Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales Bolivianos* (National Bolivian Oil Company, YPF), the State company which survives (in altered form) today.

The revolution of 1952

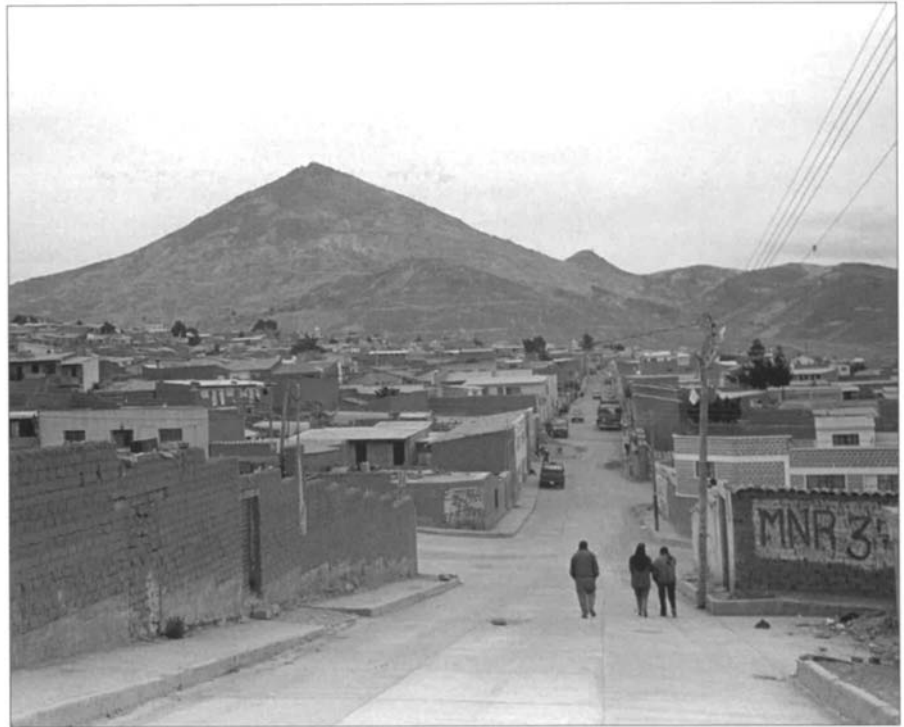
The Cuban revolution was still a gleam in Fidel Castro's eye when in 1952 a little-known revolution took place in Bolivia. In common with subsequent Latin American revolutions, it was achieved by a collaboration between radicalised middle-class political activists and grassroots social movements, particularly those campaigning for rural land rights and for better conditions in the mining sector.

The political movement which brought these sectors of society together long enough for the revolution to succeed was the *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario* (MNR). The party was founded by sectors of the middle class who resented Bolivia's dependency on foreign capital and international markets, as mediated by the national mine-owning and land-owning oligarchy. In its nationalist vision, Bolivia would be less subservient to the interests of the rich, at home and overseas, and would concentrate on the development of the nation. It was a time when across the world the model for development was State-led investment, with protection for national resources and endeavours.

The achievements of the revolution included the full enfranchisement of the illiterate population and the abolition of all forms of servitude for indigenous people. In effect, the indigenous majority were included in the

'The revolution failed in the end because the Party had 200,000 militants and only 100,000 jobs to offer.'

► Graffiti on a wall in Potosí proclaims support for the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (MNR).



nation as citizens for the first time, with full rights and fewer obligations than previously. The mines were nationalised; land tenure was reformed, and peasants were promised access to land; the education system was reformed too. Like other nationalist movements in the region, such as Peronism in Argentina, the MNR represented and co-opted multi-class interests, embracing a range of ideological positions – which their enemies took to extremes by variously accusing them of being both communists and fascists.

Although the MNR had a modernising project and sought to transform the economic base of the country, it was replacing one ruling class with another, and not therefore fully empowering the working and rural classes. The oligarchy was pushed out of power; but, when the middle class took over, the State in many ways assumed the same position that had been occupied by the oligarchy: it dispensed favours; it became the main conduit for international aid and investment; and it held a monopoly of the sectors of the economy that it controlled. The overall effect was to stifle the creation of institutions which could deal justly and transparently with all citizens. One Party leader cynically concluded that the revolution failed in the end because the Party had 200,000 militants and only 100,000 jobs to offer.

The political changes wrought by the revolution transformed Bolivia profoundly. The agrarian reform distributed land to many poor peasants in the valleys and the highlands, thus guaranteeing support for the MNR in the countryside for decades to come. The policy of colonisation of the lowland plains, by both peasants and large landholders, was to become

crucial to the development of the country. The enfranchisement of the indigenous, illiterate majority opened up political spaces to the poor. The expansion of the State offered opportunities for social mobility. The nationalisation of the mines was the fulfilment of the dream of creating economic independence and was to give Bolivia an historic opportunity to distribute the wealth generated by its minerals.

Yet the revolution did not overcome the distance between the political class in La Paz and the tough daily reality of life for the poor majority in the countryside and down the mines. The revolution could not have happened without the popular organisations which in the years leading up to 1952 gave their support to the MNR as the most progressive proposition from the centre of power. Many of them participated in the hope that the nationalist and reformist revolution of the MNR could be transformed into a more radical tool for social change. In spite of all their efforts, those aspirations remain unfulfilled to this day, and the politicians in La Paz are seen as obstacles rather than allies in the struggle to create a more just Bolivia.

The people's revolution

The revolution that took place in 1952 and is celebrated on 9 April every year was not won by the MNR alone, but also by the ordinary people who took up arms. The party had won the 1951 elections, but power was snatched from them by a military coup. To counter the coup, Hernan Siles Zuazo and Juan Lechín Oquendo, and other MNR leaders, tried to recruit the police and the military to their cause. Meanwhile, workers' militias organised themselves and, in the popular uprising which followed, they took La Paz in two days. In many other places, the grassroots protagonists of social struggles, such as farm workers in the Cochabamba valleys, were the key to the success of the social revolt which became the revolution of April 1952.

The popular support garnered by the MNR was founded in great part on its promise to reduce the power of the *Rosca*, as the economic élite of land-owners and mine-owners was known. It could be argued that the most radical measures taken by the MNR were responses to already existing popular demands and struggles. In return, the reforms that were instituted in the first few years of the MNR government provided the basis for increased participation of ordinary people in politics and the economy. The nationalisation of the mines, land reform (both rural and urban), education reform, literacy programmes, and universal suffrage brought into the nation whole sectors of society which had for hundreds of years been actively excluded; after 1952, 650,000 people joined *sindicatos* (unions of rural workers) and 60,000 organised themselves into militias. At the higher echelons of power, three ministries were jointly run with workers' unions, and there was workers' control of the mines, at least in principle.



The piercing siren which marked the changes of shift remains imprinted in the memory of all who lived in the miners' compounds. The men, underdressed for the biting cold of the *altiplano*, entered the mouth of the mine with their *guardatojos* (headlamps) and their coca leaves to chew. In their pockets they carried small offerings of coca, alcohol, and tobacco to salute the *Tio* (literally 'uncle'), the fearsome god of the depths of the earth, whose figure was kept near the entrance of the mineshaft.

Rebellion in the veins

Rebellion in the Veins (by James Dunkerley, published by Verso in 1984) is the title of an historical study of Bolivia from 1952, which describes the centrality of miners and their importance to politics through to 1985. The men who worked the veins of silver and tin deep under the mountains in dangerous conditions became the backbone of popular activism.

Allied need for tin during World War II had seen production double in Bolivia, with a concomitant increase in the size of the workforce, which numbered some 50,000 in 1952. Even in a country with a population as small as Bolivia's then – approximately 2.7 million – the miners were numerically puny. Their power was proportional not to their numbers, but to their political radicalism, their tight-knit organisation, and their combativeness. Historically miners had been drawn from the indigenous rural population. The first miners' union was organised in 1923, reaping repression, most famously in a massacre at Uncía Mine, and inaugurating seven decades of intense political struggle. Miners became central to Bolivian politics from 1944, when they founded a national organisation, the *Federación*

Sindical de Trabajadores Mineros de Bolivia (National Federation of Bolivian Miners, FSTMB), and they remained so until most were made redundant by the State in 1985.

The manifesto of the FSTMB, produced in 1946, was to have great influence on the struggles of other workers. For themselves, the miners' demands ranged from basic to revolutionary: a minimum wage, a 40-hour week, union independence, workers' control of mines, and arms for miners. By 1952 miners were comparatively better off, in terms of income, than the rest of the small waged working class; the majority of Bolivians were still subsistence farmers. However, the miners worked 12-hour shifts, and their average life expectancy was only 35, reflecting their exposure to the perils of mining such as silicosis. They lived in company-controlled encampments next to the mines, in cold, bleak conditions. Families lived in basic one-room accommodation, sharing toilets and sometimes kitchens with others.

The miners' political activity was dominated by men, but women too made a great contribution. Their role was made world-famous by Domitila Barrios de Chungara, a miner's wife who became a leader in

her local mine. Her testimony was published in English, under the title *Let Me Speak!* The Spanish title, directly translated as *If You Allow Me to Speak ...* was more true to the spirit in which language is used in Bolivia: gently spoken words can carry a powerful punch. A charismatic leader, Domitila was active in the women's organisations in the mining district where she lived with her husband and seven children. Her testimony, and the work that she did to represent her people with passion and verve locally, nationally, and abroad, brought her international renown. In her story were involved many other women who fought fiercely alongside their menfolk for a livelihood and for political representation.

Sindicatos

Sindicatos (literally 'unions', sometimes translated as 'syndicates', to differentiate rural power structures from urban, industry-based trade unions) have been the basic unit of political power for Bolivia's poor majority since the 1950s. The rise of rural syndicates was associated with the MNR, although some pre-dated the revolution and emerged from traditional local authorities. After the MNR's fall from power in 1964, the *campesino* (peasant) syndicates maintained connections with the military governments of the day, formalised in the Campesino–Military Pact. The pact lasted for a decade, before breaking down with the massacre of *campesinos* in 1974 during the *de facto* government of General Banzer. In 1978 the *campesino* movement made a national stand for independence, with the creation of a coalition of indigenous rural peoples. The founding declaration rejects the decades of political manipulation by the MNR and the military governments with the words: 'Aymara, Quechuas, Cambas,

Chapacos, Chiquitanos, Moxos, Tupiguaraníes and other *campesinos*, we are the legitimate owners of this land; we are the seed from which Bolivia has grown and we have been cast out of these, our lands.' In 1979 the same impetus created the Single Confederation of Peasant Workers of Bolivia (*Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia*, CSUTCB),

✓ New Year's Day 2000 in the Department of La Paz: the end of Dionicio Mamani's unpaid term of office as Vice-President of the local *syndicato*. The community has shown its appreciation of Dionicio and his wife Emma by pinning money to their clothes, and presenting them with hats and necklaces made of bread.



VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

Members of religious orders who went to work in mining encampments found it hard not to be radicalised, as they witnessed the hardship endured by miners. Many contributed enthusiastically to the miners' struggle for justice and social change. One way was through the church-owned radio stations which operated from the mines. *Radio Pio XII* of Siglo XX mine, next to Llalagua, became emblematic of the risks run by priests and miners as governments resorted to repression and violence. The radio began broadcasting on 1 May 1959 with the words 'Today we hand over this radio to the people'. In the beginning the miners lobbed dynamite at the radio station, and the priests called the army to protect themselves. Over time, when the army arrived to close down the radio, the miners would defend it with their dynamite and their lives.

a *campesino* political vehicle which was to have a great impact on national politics, born of the emerging movement to promote indigenous people's rights and support pro-democracy actions.

The mother of all unions

Only a week after the triumph of the revolution, on 17 April 1952, the Bolivian Workers' Union (*Central Obrera Boliviana*, COB) was formed. It elected as its leader the head of the miners' union, Juan Lechín Oquendo, a central player in the politics of the following four decades. Although the COB proclaimed its political neutrality, it was closely associated with the MNR government. The end of the honeymoon between the MNR and popular sectors began as early as 1956, when IMF directives, prescribing public-spending cuts and favouring foreign investors, were implemented by the government and brought hardship to the poorest.

During the military dictatorships which dominated Bolivian politics from 1964 to 1982, the COB was at the forefront of popular resistance and protest. Throughout the chaotic political and economic events of the early 1980s, it was the most cohesive social force in the country, although the aftermath of neo-liberal restructuring left it weakened and in disarray. But ten years after most miners had been laid off in 1985, the COB was on the sidelines of national politics. The miners' leadership ceased to make sense, and no alternative strong leaders arose from other sectors. The decline in power led also to internal conflicts over political affiliation and undue influence from the traditional political parties. The internal structures of the COB remain unchanged, even though the relative strengths of workers' organisations have changed considerably: miners still have the lion's share of representation, while numerically they constitute a minority of workers.

People and power

For many observers of Bolivia in the Latin American context, it is the strength and vigour of its popular organisations, campaigning for justice in the political, economic, and social arenas, that is the salient characteristic of Bolivian society. Bolivia may lack many things, but of social organisations it has no shortage. It is hard to meet a Bolivian who does not belong to a club, *juntas vecinales* (neighbourhood associations), a *sindicato* (union), or a *gremio* (guild). Anybody who is anybody is a member of a political party, or alternatively of the social organisations which exist in the workplace or community. Everyone belongs, everyone is organised. Order is often apparent, as in the designated markets, where stall-holders elect representatives to defend their interests; but it also exists less overtly on the streets, among what seems to be a random assortment of vendors taking over the pavements. Such a degree of organisation permits the force of numbers to be brought to bear on the civil authorities.

But not only by weight of numbers do ordinary Bolivians manifest their dissatisfaction with the status quo. They also have a range of



⇒ June 2000: Day 21 of a hunger strike staged by students in El Alto, campaigning for the establishment of their own university

SPEAKING UP

Oratoria – rhetoric, debating, holding the floor – is a social skill which is highly valued in Bolivia. The fathers of the independence struggle practised it, and today poorly educated women in El Alto take part in workshops to learn it, although everyone exhibits a natural flair for it. Bolivians' facility for engaging an audience may be explained by the preponderance of oral forms of social communication over written forms in all indigenous cultures until recently.

eye-catching and heart-stopping ways of protesting, which might to outsiders appear extreme. Resorting to hunger strikes, mock-crucifixions, and a revived tradition of being walled in to the limits of human endurance, Bolivian protest has always been creative and often truly sacrificial.

Katarismo

Katarismo is the name given to a political tendency inspired by Aymara history which arose in the mid-1970s. Until 1990, when the indigenous people of the tropical lowlands

emerged on the national scene, *kataristas* provided many of the ideas and much of the leadership for the wide range of indigenous groups who were organising to claim their rights. The name is derived from Tupaj Katari, the Aymara historical hero, who laid siege to La Paz in 1781.

Recognising the *sindicato* as the legitimate base for popular indigenous representation, *Katarismo* initially focused mainly on rural issues. For some years in the 1980s, *kataristas* led the main *campesino* union, the Single Confederation of Peasant Workers of Bolivia (*Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia*, CSUTCB), before moving on to engage in party politics. Many very small parties have stood for election since then, among them the Revolutionary Movement for Liberation Tupaj Katari (*Movimiento Revolucionario Tupaj Katari de Liberación*, MRTKL) of Vice-President Víctor Hugo Cárdenas (1993–97). He was the first indigenous man to reach high public office in the Americas. Yet the contact with real political power created distance between the leaders and the social bases, where many marginalised people felt that their interests were not represented, while their presence was co-opted. What should have been the maturation of indigenous politics (representation in Parliament was first achieved in the 1979 elections) instead forced a rethink.

In spite of their involvement in politics, both at the grassroots and national levels, indigenous *campesinos* tend to vote for the main parties, rather than supporting these fragmented groups. The strength of the movement is exerted instead in the wider cultural and political repercussions of its demands. Its influence was noted in the inclusive language which has been incorporated into the Constitution, recognising Bolivia as 'pluri-cultural and multi-lingual'.

A figure who is new on the national scene, but yet evokes the memory of past Aymara leaders, came to prominence in the 1990s. At the beginning of the decade Felipe Quispé led a short-lived guerrilla force: the Tupaj Katari Guerrilla Army (*Ejército Guerrillero Tupaj Katari*, EGTK). Arrested and imprisoned between 1992 and 1997, he is known as the *Mallku*,

ERNESTO 'CHE' GUEVARA



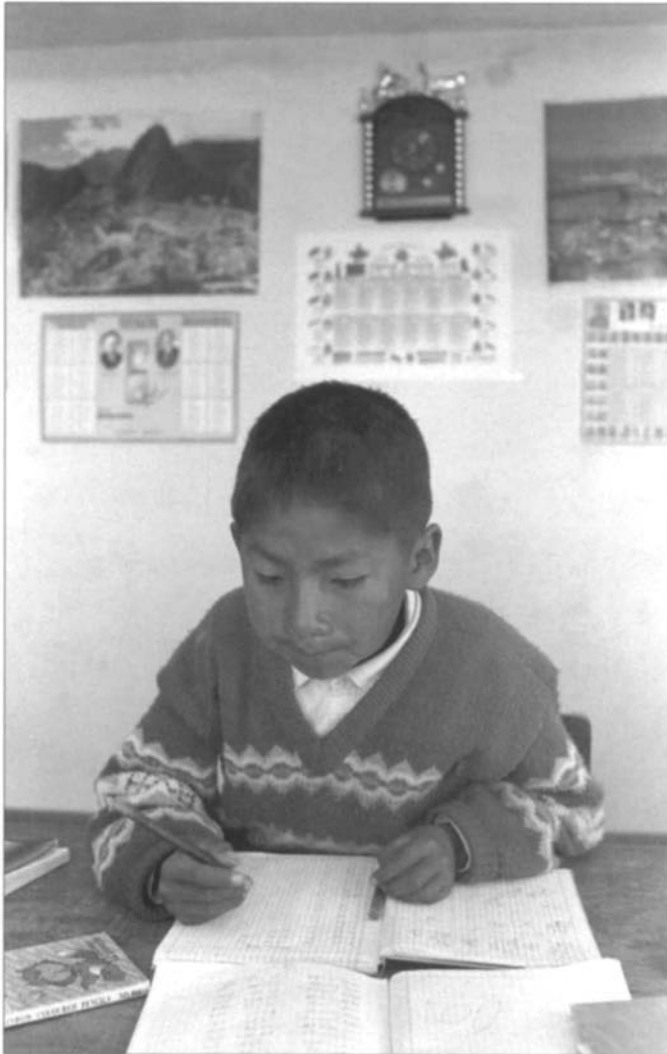
Bolivia has many home-grown revolutionaries, but some have come from farther afield, such as Che Guevara, the Argentinian who became an honorary Cuban. The myth of Che gets bigger as time passes. The image of the man and his beret appears on millions of T-shirts and posters.

In 1967 Bolivia was considered to be ripe for radical social change – the national revolution of 1952 having disappointed the aspirations of the poorest, but having provided enough freedom for people to organise protest and demand reform. Che's guerrilla tactics relied on a small vanguard to mobilise into revolt the workers and the *campesinos*, who were thought to have been radicalised by the failure of the agrarian reform measures in 1953. History shows

that his attempt failed. He met his end in the semi-tropical wilderness of south-eastern Bolivia: after a lifetime of adventure he died in the hills of Ñancahuazú, abandoned by Bolivian communists, misunderstood and betrayed by the *campesinos* whom he had hoped to liberate.

Almost exactly thirty years after his death in October 1967, his remains were unearthed, having provoked as much controversy as his life. He and his few remaining men had been hunted down by the Bolivian army, aided by the CIA. He was executed in a village school and his body laid out in a washroom, but photographs of his corpse went around the world and kept him alive in the collective imagination. He was buried at night in unmarked grave, in a futile attempt to leave no trace for posterity. Ironically, the Bolivian popular organisations whose imaginations were not fired by Che in 1967 today hang his picture on their walls.

a traditional title given to Aymara community leaders. Quispé embodies an uncompromising stand against what he sees as continued colonialism. He is feared, not only for his power to mobilise blockades as head of the CSUTCB (1999–2001), but also for his separatist discourse. When he talks of re-conquering the country for the true owners, the indigenous *campesinos*, it is not clear what place there would be for *mestizos*, or even for urban indigenous people, in the Bolivia that he aspires to create.



^ Jesus Quispé tries to keep up with his studies at home during a strike by teachers at his school.

Classroom war

With the COB (Bolivian Workers' Union) embroiled in internal disagreements, one union has retained a dogged adherence to revolutionary politics: teachers have proved to be a solid obstacle to government policy, mostly due to a strongly politicised leadership based in parties of the extreme left. More than 100,000 people work as teachers or educational administrators in Bolivia; most are concentrated in urban areas, with about one-third in rural areas. The teachers' union is feared for its enormous power to mobilise and protest, a strength based on obligatory membership, with contributions deducted before pay. In common with other social movements in Bolivia, the *raison d'être* of the teachers' union seems to be to protest against the State; what distinguishes it from other social movements is its commitment to revolutionary politics and its objective of overthrowing the State. The teachers are locked in constant struggles for improved conditions and pay (the State is the main employer), as salaries are very low. The ensuing strikes leave children without schooling for significant portions of the year.

The teachers' union demands to be allowed to decide what is best in the classroom, ignoring claims that the provision of State education should concern all citizens. Given the condition of education in Bolivia, change is certainly over-due. Teachers claim with justification that more resources are needed, but there also needs to be a different approach to education, one which is not based on rote-learning and obedience to authority. A reform package was approved in the mid-1990s, with the aim of promoting a more learner-centred approach to education. The proposals, resisted tenaciously by teachers, are broad in scope; the most important elements are perhaps the involvement of parents in the running of schools, and the introduction of bilingual education in primary schools, using the four main indigenous languages. But the attempts at reform proceed slowly, while the most important factor in human development is held hostage to the political interests of teachers.



The church of St Francis,
La Paz

The Church

The Catholic Church in Bolivia is intimately related to all aspects of social life. From the development of music and the traditions of festivals to the Jesuits' involvement in the 'reduction' of the indigenous majority in colonial times, the influence of the Church has been pervasive. Today it fulfils a range of social functions, including the provision of education and ownership of communications media. The Church's strength lies in radio broadcasts, with which it reaches most isolated rural areas. It also founded the second most

widely read serious daily newspaper, *La Presencia* of La Paz.

The Church in the twenty-first century is held in high esteem, and is constantly at the forefront of national events. It has been prominent in organising debate and protests about the burden of external debt, and has conducted national consultations to explore alternative uses for money saved by debt relief and contributed by international donors. Individual religious figures are prominent in many areas of society, notably teaching, the mass media, research, and non-government organisations (NGOs). As in neighbouring countries, the Church has found it hard to overcome its conservative, colonialist past, but the 'preferential option for the poor', adopted across Latin America after the second Vatican Council in 1968, was enthusiastically taken up in Bolivia by the many foreign-born clergy, the majority of whom are committed for life to their adopted country.

RELIGIOUS ICON

The face of a man with hollow cheeks and laughing eyes stares down from posters in students' rooms, in run-down bars, in the offices of social organisations, and in church buildings. His name is Lucho Espinal, a Jesuit priest killed in 1980 by the brutal dictator General García Meza, and thereafter a martyr of the struggle for democracy. He had helped to plan the hunger strike of women in mining communities which brought down the dictatorship of General Hugo Banzer in 1978. The strike took place on church property, in the offices of the daily newspaper *La Presencia*. When the women's 14 children had to be withdrawn from the hunger strike, Lucho, along with a handful of others, took their place. Such are the popular religious figures whom Bolivians admire and remember.