

PANAMA IN WORLD WAR 2 – THE NATIONAL POLICE BEHIND THE SCENES

INTRODUCTION

Panama had had no army since 1904 (and thus, in effect, relied on the US to provide defence of both Canal and the Republic) and, during World War 2, the US Army had a continuing low opinion of the quality and dependability of its only “defence”, the National Police (or *Policia Nacional* – I will use both titles in the following), which numbered around 1,500 men by 1942 – and the equipment allocated to it reflected this estimation.¹

The *Policia Nacional*, as it existed during World War 2, was established (or re-established) as an independent organisation by Law No 79 of 1941. It had originally been created as an institution after the disbanding of the army in 1904. It would be renamed the National Guard in 1953.²

The *Policia Nacional* did undertake joint patrols in the terminal cities, Panama City and Colón, alongside US Army military police and the US Navy Shore Patrol, as illustrated in the photograph below, published in *The Baltimore Sun* of 1 August 1943.³ The accompanying article referred to an increase in crime triggered by the economic boom the country had seen with the expansion of defences, and to incidents caused by “momentary friction” involving the massive influx of US servicemen. It also referred to a “gentlemen’s agreement” between the chiefs of the *Policia Nacional*, military police and the shore patrol allowing them to join forces to enforce the law in the cities.

¹ <http://raytodd.blog/2023/07/14/panama-in-world-war-2-some-notes-on-the-army-in-the-canal-zone/>

² Law 44 of 23 December 1953 refers.

³ Inside the Canal Zone there was the Canal Zone Police (all male until 1943, when the first Zonian women were hired as clerks by the Canal Zone Police, due to the shortage of male clerks due to the war). In addition, there were Military Police units and the Navy’s Shore Patrol, as well as the Army’s Corps of Intelligence Police (which became the Counter Intelligence Corps on 1 January 1942 – due to concerns over espionage and sabotage, by February, 59 of its total strength of 513 officers were based in the Canal Zone).



Inevitably, the question of jurisdiction over members of the US armed forces while they are in the Republic often arose. Under the terms of an informal arrangement (the aforementioned "gentlemen's agreement") of 1942 between the US Provost Marshall and the Commandant of the National Police, provision was made for joint patrols of certain areas frequented by US troops, for the delivery of arrested personnel to the US Provost Marshall under certain conditions, for the presence of US observers at trials and for various other arrangements intended to minimise the friction involved in such matters and to provide maximum protection to US personnel.⁴

During the war, Panama became famous for "marinades", a term describing when hundreds of US servicemen landed in Panama City and/or Colón, looking for alcohol, sex etc after weeks or months at sea.⁵ One description said that "*Drunken soldiers routinely attacked taxi drivers, police, bartenders, waitresses, and even ordinary Panamanian shoppers*".⁶ The more unsavoury (and sometimes off-limits) establishments would be raided, something said to be complicated by their ownership by powerful local businessmen and National Police officers.⁷

So, if the *Policia Nacional* played no real part in the defence of the country what, apart from helping to curb any over-enthusiasm of the US servicemen, and helping to round up Axis civilians to be interned in the Canal Zone, did it get up to during the war?

⁴ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v07/d169>

⁵ http://www.panamayestadosunidos.com/prueba_la-segunda-guerra-mundial.html

⁶ <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/nacional/211218/antigua-zona-canal-region-frontera>

⁷ *Decentering America* by Jessica C E Gienow-Hecht (Berghahn Books, 2007).

To replace the disbanded army, the Corps of National Police was formed in December 1904⁸ and, until 1953, functioned as the country's only armed force.⁹ It replaced the small provincial (and formerly Colombian) police force that had been operating since independence, with that being incorporated into the new organisation. For many years strength fluctuated, but until the 1930s it generally remained close to 1,000, depending on budgetary allowances. Until World War 2, as was usual at the time (and some might say even now) each incoming political regimes coming to power used positions in the police corps to reward its supporters.¹⁰ In this way, and perhaps inevitably, the police were politicised from the start.

During its early existence the force was lightly armed. After a confrontation with the Canal Zone Police in 1916, the Panamanian Government agreed to a partial disarming of the *Policia Nacional*, leaving it only with handguns. Not until the 1930s did it again receive rifles, and was then supplied with much more weaponry by the US during World War 2 – although only to the extent the US felt necessary for a local police force, with no heavy weapons, as it was not intended to be involved in the defence of the country.

Until the coup of 1931 (and then again after the removal of President Arias Madrid in 1941) it was the ruling elite that monopolised the Presidency, retaining influence and power and relying on the National Police to maintain order (with the threat of US military intervention should matters get too far out of hand¹¹).

Following the introduction of the “Good Neighbor” policy for relations with Latin America by the Roosevelt administration in the 1930s the Panamanian authorities could no longer rely on the threat of US military intervention to quell dissent. However, the 1930s also saw the growth in private militias of rival politicians and parties following the 1931 coup (as the

⁸ The original Police Corps of the Department of Panama was created, by Decree 665 of the Congress of New Granada (as Colombia was then called, Panama then being a province).

⁹ In 1953, the National Guard (*Guardia Nacional*) was established, a more paramilitary organisation.

¹⁰ https://arsof-history.org/arsof_in_panama/pdf/gen/panama_country_study_area_handbook.pdf

¹¹ As happened in 1925, when US Marines were deployed after a rent strike led to violent confrontations between police and strikers.

formerly united opposition inevitably splintered), and the use of these, and the police (into which Presidents would merge their armed supporters), to threaten and intimidate.

While it had had no part in the coup (and proved unable to prevent it), the fact that the *Policia Nacional* became a vital tool of subsequent governments in the 1930s, with them relying more and more upon it, its power behind the scenes began to grow. This would reach a point where, in 1941¹², it was able to depose the sitting President and, as the war ended, its leader became the “kingmaker”, deciding who should become President.

Having to rely on the police saw the Panamanian Government in the 1930s improving the facilities and conditions for the force, to ensure its loyalty. It provided new buildings, including accommodation, and commissaries to supply necessities at reduced cost. As mentioned, the Presidents of the 1930s also began incorporating their own armed supporters into the police, this being to neutralise any potential opposition. There were also moves to develop a professional officer corps, so that the force changed considerably from the small, poorly equipped body it had begun as in 1904, to a more ambitious and able organisation. As would be the case in many Latin American states in the 20th Century, a government attempting to create a powerful police or military for its protection saw the country end up something that would eventually supplant the political leaders in power.

THE 1931 COUP AND AFTERWARDS

As the 1930s began, the ruling elite, in maintaining its grip on the government of the country, had come to increasingly rely on the police, on political chicanery, and the threat of foreign intervention (that is to say, military intervention by the US) to stifle opposition and contain unrest. Then the country was rocked by the onset of the Great Depression, with Panama, as essentially a service economy, being badly affected, and Canal traffic falling. The image and reputation of the Government at the time was also affected by corruption

¹² The National Police were also behind the appointment of Arias Madrid’s successor, Ricardo Adolfo de la Guardia in 1941, and then Enrique A Jimenez Brin in 1945. Neither of these had their own tenable bases of support, or popular support, which became crucial when opposition to them grew. Hence, they needed to support of the National Police to continue. Its leader also manipulated matters to remove the rightful President and appoint Arnulfo Arias Madrid President in 1949.

(though this was not unique to this administration), and allowing the practice of permitting non-Panamanians to gain control of many businesses and public institutions.¹³

The President since 1928 had been Harmodio Florencio Arosemena, another member of the several powerful families that dominated Panamanian politics. However, it was said that the real power and control remained with the preceding President, Rodolfo Chiari Robles of the Liberal Party. The latter had both put down an uprising by the Guna indigenous people in 1921, and invited the US military to suppress a rent strike in 1925.¹⁴

Chiari had intended to run for President again in 1932¹⁵, an intention thwarted by the coup the 1931 coup. However, his son, Roberto Francisco Chiari Rémon (and a cousin of Remón Cantera, future head of the National Police – of which much more later), also a liberal, would become President in 1960.

In the early morning of 2 January 1931 (and apparently to take advantage of police and guards being drunk following New Year parties), the *Accion Communal* nationalist group mounted the country's first armed coup.

Accion Communal had been formed in 1923, largely due to the effects of the post-World War 1 recession, with its appeal to, and support from, the growing middle class was opposed to the ruling elite. It called for a “regeneration” of Panamanian nationality, with a culture based on “patriotism, action, equity and discipline”, and it helped organise the 1925 rent strike. Its membership increased as the Great Depression took effect, growing from being measured in dozens to several hundred, with most of this growth occurring in 1930. One of those that joined, in late 1930, were future Presidents in the 1940s, Arnulfo Arias Madrid, and Enrique A Jiménez Brin.

¹³ <https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/primer-golpe-de-estado-panama>

¹⁴ Despite having denounced US intervention in Panamanian politics and having moved to have Article 136 of the Constitution (which permitted such interference) deleted:
https://www.biografiasyvidas.com/biografia/c/chiari_rodolfo.htm

¹⁵ Then, as now, Presidents are forbidden to serve consecutive terms.

The coup involved use of only a dozen or so shotguns and around 20 pistols, but the police headquarters in Panama City was overrun, while one group, led by Arnulfo Arias Madrid, attacked the Presidential Palace. After a gunfight lasting several hours, he personally arrested President Arosemena. The total death toll was only around 10 people.

The US authorities, then under the Hoover administration (which had a general policy of non-intervention in foreign conflicts¹⁶), stood aside. In a markedly different reaction to what might have been expected hitherto, the US authorities merely waited for assurances that the revolt would not affect the Canal and its security and, having received said assurances, kept its troops in the Canal Zone. Interestingly, the coup leaders were nevertheless later to use the threat of a US armed intervention as a tool to reduce the risk of a countercoup although, like successor regimes, it also had its armed supporters available.

The Panamanian Supreme Court then appointed one of Arosemena's Vice-Presidents as the new President, the former foreign minister, Ricardo Joaquín Alfaro Jované,¹⁸ and one of the first things that he did was to take control of the police and appointed a number of new officers, to replace those who had fought against the coup.¹⁹

One of the new officers appointed by the Alfaro administration was Remón Cantera, a man later to become prominent in the *Policia Nacional* and in Panamanian politics, who would go on to lead the National Police, become the country's *de facto* "kingmaker", and President himself in the 1950s.²⁰ As its deputy commander he was influential and important, becoming the chief himself in February 1947.

¹⁶ He would later, until 1941, campaign to keep the US out of World War 2.

¹⁷ <https://millercenter.org/president/hover/foreign-affairs>

¹⁸ This was in accordance with the line of succession in the Constitution. However, as he was the Minister to the US at the time, Harmodio Arias Madrid stood in for him between 3 and 16 January:

<https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/primer-golpe-de-estado-panama>

¹⁹ Known as "*Chiaristas*", as they were regarded as supporters of former President Chiari.

²⁰ Born in 1908, he had obtained a scholarship to the Mexican Military Academy in 1928. He joined the *Policia Nacional* in 1931 as a captain.

In 1932, Alfaro also did something that would become common practice during the 1930s,²¹ he issued a Decree incorporating his own armed supporters into the *Policia Nacional*.²² Indeed, the 1930s became known for the paramilitary groups formed by the Presidents, used to subdue opponents, and which would be merged into the police by their patrons.

As is often the case with rebellions, their united front soon splintered into competing factions, even fighting one another.

As the 1930s went on, successive Governments began to increasingly rely on the police, as a substitute for popular support. To ensure its loyalty, money and facilities were provided, and an officers corps created, to provide greater professionalism. The result was to make the *Policia Nacional* a force in Panamanian politics, and lay the foundations for a situation that would last until the downfall of Manuel Noriega at the hands of an invading US force in 1989.

The 1930s also saw two attempted counter coups, with members of the police involved in the first, and prominent members rumoured as being involved in the second in 1935. One of these was Remón Cantera, who was dismissed.

A fresh election was held on schedule in 1932, in which Harmodio Aria Madrid (brother of Arnulfo), leader of *Accion Communal*, won by a significant margin.

THE 1930s

When faced with opposition, and unable to call on US military support, Harmodio Aria Madrid was compelled to increasingly rely on the *Policia Nacional*. As with other administrations (before and after), he appointed family and friends to key positions

²¹ In 1936, President Harmodio Arias Madrid incorporated his 300-man *Guardia Civica* in to the National Police and, in 1940, Alfaro reorganised his armed supporters into *La Guardia Civica Nacionalista* to challenge Arnulfo Arias Madrid in the run-up to the election.

²² Alfaro organised *La Reserva Nacionalista* in 1932, and this was what he merged into the National Police. Shortly before the election, with rising tensions and violence, and distrusting the police, Alfaro issued a Decree formally transferring control of the *Policia Nacional* to him as President:
<https://www.laestrella.com.pa/nacional/publicando-historia/230625/tres-elecciones-limpas-republicana>

(including, of course, his brother, Arnulfo), and used his position to award lucrative contracts to family and friends. He also sought to politicise the youth of the country, founding the National University in 1935, thereby establishing what would become a source of nationalist fervour, and a significant factor in the unrest of the late 1940s.

To strengthen control over the National Police, he appointed his brother-in-law as National Police Chief (to 1935) and then its Inspector General (to 1939). Colonel Manuel Pino also undertook a programme of modernisation of the force, restructuring it and making it more effective. This made it able to fill the void left by the Government not being able to call on US military intervention. The new President also equipped the force once more with high-power rifles, and built a new central police headquarters in the Chorillo district of Panama City,²³ as well as new centres elsewhere in the country. He began hiring Panamanian graduates of foreign military schools to fill key posts police (many of which had remained vacant since the coup) – starting with Remón Cantera (although, as we have seen, this appointment did not last long).²⁴ It has been said that a result of the changes he made was that the *Policia Nacional* began to be seen as an alternative route to wealth and power.

In 1932, the government was faced by a second rent strike, with the collapse of the banana sector (caused by disease), as well as falling demand and prices for other commodities, plus reduced income from the Canal due to the decline in international trade caused by the Great Depression. Despite having been a supporter of the earlier strike, and after an attempt at arbitration, the President suspended strikers' constitutional rights when the strike began, sent in the *Policia Nacional*²⁵, and had the leaders arrested. In this way, successive governments used the police to both quell working class frustration and in keeping subdued the; using "*the police to substitute for their own inability to form a united front capable of governing the nation*".²⁶

²³ Used until 1989, when it was destroyed in the US invasion.

²⁴ Initially appointed as a captain at the new police headquarters in Panama City, he soon moved up the ranks. He made himself popular as he successfully lobbied for better pay and conditions for his men, established a police commissary to supply necessities at reduced prices, and made a point of hiring new officers from the working class, including the black community.

²⁵ Backed up by men from interim President Alfaro's former *Reserva Nacionalista* armed group.

²⁶ *We Answer Only to God. Politics and the Military in Panama 1903-1947* by Thomas L Pearcy (University of New Mexico Press, 1998).

In the run-up to the 1936 election, President Harmodio Arias Madrid sought to make use of the National Police to ensure success for his chosen successor, Juan Demóstenes Arosemena, who was his Minister of Foreign Affairs and a wealthy landowner, but who was not even a member of Arias Madrid's political party, the *Partido Liberal Doctrinario*.²⁷

The election itself saw "rampant abuse" with duplicate ID cards, ballot boxes destroyed, opposition members detained and "ghost votes" from at least one province.²⁸ Demóstenes Arosemena was duly, if wrongly, elected.

In January 1937, the new President instituted "National Police Officer Day" (*Día del Policía*) as being 14 April, as a tribute (and in thanks for its assistance)²⁹ and, the following year, the National Assembly voted an additional \$1 million for the force to "*acquire goods relating to national defense*", allowing further modernisation.

President Demóstenes Arosemena died in December 1939, and was succeeded by one of his Vice-Presidents (and former conservative candidate), Augusto Boyd. Hence it was that the decade ended, despite the coup, with a pro-American member of the elite at the head of the country.

THE LEAD-UP TO WAR AND PRESIDENT ARNULFO ARIAS MADRID³⁰

By the end of the 1930s, the *Policía Nacional*, through the patronage and support from and for successive Presidents, was the best-trained and most heavily armed "paramilitary" group in the country³¹ and during the 1940 Presidential campaign it emerged as the decisive factor

²⁷ He was technically ineligible to run for President, as the law prohibited anyone from doing so if they had held public office within six months of an election (and, in fact, he had continued in office throughout the campaign). Despite the country's electoral board twice voting to block his candidacy it nevertheless continued.

²⁸ Referred to as *el paquetazo de Veraguas*.

²⁹ Law No. 28 of 1937.

³⁰ For more on Arnulfo Arias Madrid, and the other wartime President, see <http://raytodd.blog/2022/10/31/panama-the-wartime-president/>

³¹ There remained rival political factions in the country which had their own armed supporters, which sometimes fought one another in the streets.

in the political process, in a campaign which underlined the role that violence had become as part of politics in Panama.

In the election, Arnulfo Arias Madrid ran as the candidate of the *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* (the “National Revolution Party”), aka the *Panameñista* party. He was opposed by Ricardo J Alfaro, as candidate for a coalition known as the *Frente Popular* (“Popular Front”).³²

Each candidate had his own armed supporters – Arias Madrid had his brother’s *Guardia Cívica*, plus (because of the support of the acting President Augusto Boyd) the backing of the National Police. Alfaro had his own armed supporters, originally formed during his own interim Presidency of 1931-32, the *Reserva Nacalista*, now refashioned as the *Guardia Cívica Nacionalista*.

During the Boyd Presidency, the National Police had fought gunfights with Alfaro supporters, arrested and jailed them. In 1941, a US State Department official reflected on the election and stated that –

Boyd virtually assured the election of Arnulfo Arias in the most recent presidential election by permitting the National Police and other government agencies to overawe and intimidate the electorate in favour of Arias.

In protest, Alfaro’s *Frente Popular* boycotted the election day allowing Arias Madrid to win unopposed. As a result, the Arnulfo Arias Madrid Administration came to office in 1940, using the nationalist motto “*solo Dios sobre nosotros*” (“We answer only to God”).

As explained elsewhere, Arnulfo Arias Madrid was viewed with suspicion by the US, had campaigned on a nationalist (and racist) and anti-American platform, and was thought to have been imbued with admiration of the nationalism of the fascist governments in Germany and Italy during his time in Europe 1934-38.³³ By the time of his inauguration in

³² This temporary election-time multi-party coalition is a model that continues to this day in Panamanian politics.

³³ Again, for more see: <http://raytodd.blog/2022/10/31/panama-the-wartime-president/>

October 1940 considerable opposition to him had developed in the Roosevelt administration, which viewed him as a distinct threat; and he also faced considerable opposition at home, particularly from the *Chiaristas*.

Even the National Police began to have doubts, but he needed its support and he rehired the popular Remón Cantera in November 1940.³⁴ However, dissension grew, so that in June 1941, a US State Department memo said that “*it is very probably that a large part of the police force would revolt against the present government if promised American backing*”.

In what would prove to be a futile attempt to counter opposition in the police, Arias Madrid created a secret police force, the *Policia Secreta Nacional* (of PSN)³⁵, in June 1941.³⁶ Its charter made it independent of the *Policia Nacional*, answerable only to the President and the Minister of Government (the future President, Ricardo Adolfo de la Guardia, who would succeed Arias Madrid when he was deposed). This only added to distrust and resentment in the *National Police*, by now a powerful organisation, with better-trained officers resentful of civilian interference in their affairs, and soon to prove itself capable of wielding power in its own right, calling the tune for the politicians.

Prior to the PSN being formed the only security and investigative service was within the National Police, and there was no formal investigative unit defined as such. The roles of the PSN were said to be the pursuit and investigation of violations of the laws and crimes against institutions of the Government and of national security, though it also has the responsibility for providing security for the President and other important officials. Its separation from the

³⁴ But sent him to a military school in the US for training.

³⁵ The PSN was created under Law No 20 of 1941. In 1960, President Roberto Chiari disbanded the *Policia Secreta Nacional* and instead established the Department of Investigations (DENI), under the Public Ministry. In 1961, a further Law (Law No 61) separated DENI from the Public Ministry, once more bringing under the Presidency, responsible for investigating threats to national security etc. After the 1968 military coup by the National Guard, DENI became an investigative body and intelligence and counterintelligence arm of the National Guard, until the US invasion of 1989 overthrew the Noriega regime. After the invasion, the new government passed a Law (Law No.16 of 9 July 1991) which created the Judicial Technical Police (PTJ), under the control of the Attorney General's Office and hence the Public Ministry and the judiciary. The PTJ was, in turn, replaced by the Directorate of Judicial Investigation (DIJ) as a directorate of the (new) National Police in 2007 (Law No.69 of 2007): <https://www.cnics.org.pa/resena-historica/>

³⁶ Law No 72 of 30 June 1941: <https://docs.panama.justia.com/federales/leyes/72-de-1941-jun-30-1941.pdf>

National Police was said to be because such responsibilities were too great for the existing force, and that the National Police were not trained or equipped to do the job.³⁷

The new President's policies and attitudes alarmed the US, particularly once war had broken out in Europe, and it became concerned over possible risks to the security of the Canal, with relations with Arias Madrid proving difficult, such as in the delays in negotiating rights to vital new bases outside the Canal Zone. The US Government concluded that Arnulfo Arias Madrid would have to go. In May 1941, the US Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) said that –

“the present conditions are considered dangerous to the security of the canal and it is believed that they should be corrected as soon as possible. A local revolution to throw out the crooked pro-Axis officialdom would be preferable to intervention by US forces”.

On 7 October 1941, Arias Madrid had left the country on a Pan American flight to Cuba³⁸, allowing his opponents (including Remón Cantera) to involve Article III of the Constitution³⁹ to depose him. Remón Cantera and his fellow officers then saw to it that the pro-American businessman, and Minister for Government, de la Guardia became President, with this appointment receiving rapid approval from the US. It has been said that *"never before had the police acted so publicly as the nation's power broker"*.⁴⁰

The removal of Arias Madrid saw the former merchant and landowning elite regain power. However, the removal fuelled resentment amongst his supporters, including politicised high school and college students, known as *Anulfistas*, and creating the basis of the unrest and chaos the country would see later in the decade.⁴¹

³⁷ *Report on the Police Forces of the Republic of Panama* (International Cooperation Administration, Washington DC, September 1941): https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pnadw902.pdf

³⁸ Although travelling incognito, the airport was at Albrook Field in the Canal Zone and US officials recognised him and notified others in the Panamanian administration.

³⁹ Re abandonment of office, he had not sought permission to leave.

⁴⁰ *We Answer Only to God. Politics and the Military in Panama 1903-1947* by Thomas L Percy (University of New Mexico Press, 1998).

⁴¹ Arias Madrid himself would stay in exile in Argentina until 1945.

In addition to policing duties, another role performed by the *Policia Nacional* until 1940 was running jails in the Republic. However, a Department of Corrections was established in that year to administer the country's penal system for the Ministry of Government and Justice. The intention was to end the inherent abuses in the system, but the new department was never properly staffed, and police had still to be used as jailers.⁴²

THE WARTIME PERIOD

Before considering the political machinations that the *Policia Nacional* would be involved in during the war, it is worth bearing in mind that what developed was not a struggle between corrupt politicians and an upright police force representing the common people. A fair proportion of the large profits made from the boom in bars, canteens, night clubs and other businesses catering for the surge in civil and military (largely male) personnel that came to Panama and sought entertainment and more flowed into the pockets of the high command.

The abrupt end of the Arias Madrid government in 1941 underlined the influence of the *Policia Nacional*. The new President, Ricardo Adolfo de la Guardia, had been Minister of Government and hence the supervisor of the force, and he had formed a secret alliance with Remón Cantera, to carry out what was, in effect, Panama's first successful (and bloodless) "military" coup.⁴³

It is said that Remón Cantera harboured a dislike of the Arias Madrids, having been dismissed by one brother in 1936, then brought back by the other in 1940, only to be sent into what he regarded as semi-exile in the US. After Arnulfo Arias Madrid was deposed, Remón Cantera was appointed second-in-command of the *National Police* on 9 October 1941. As mentioned, he was a popular leader in the force, in part because he had taken

⁴² <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a210486.pdf>

⁴³ They would also be partners in a valuable slaughterhouse business set up during the war to cater for the demand for fresh meat from the Canal Zone and the Republic.

pains to hire from the working classes, including blacks, and this gave him considerable kudos and influence with the poor and West Indian communities.⁴⁴

A 1943 State Department memo entitled “Nepotism in Panama” noted that “*most Panamanians believe that too many Government positions are being given to members of the favored de la Guardia and Estripeaut families*”.⁴⁵ The most visible example of this was in the *Policia Nacional*, where not only was its second-in-command the President’s friend and collaborator, Remón Cantera, the *Comandante Primer Jefe del Cuerpo de Policia Nacional* (overall commander) was another personal friend, Rogelio Fábrega (who was also a member of one of the country’s elite families), and the new Minister of Government, who was responsible for the force, was the President’s brother, Camilo.

Not having his own group of armed supporters, and lacking a popular mandate from the masses, de la Guardia relied even more than his predecessors on the support of the *Policia Nacional*. The force also benefited when he sought US help in bolstering his position. This saw the supply of weapons and military advisers, with hundreds of automatic weapons and pistols, Jeeps, boats and other war materials being provided. A US military mission was established to train police officers.

With the new equipment and status - while not taking any active part in the defence of the country against possible or actual foreign aggressor⁴⁶ - the *Policia Nacional* was able to quell any domestic unrest. This was demonstrated in September 1943, when there was an attempted coup led by José Pezet, an outspoken critic of the administration, and involving several police officers. With the tacit approval of the US Embassy (which Remón Cantera informed in advance), the National Police used their new equipment to pre-empt the coup

⁴⁴ The latter had suffered considerable discrimination from the administration of Arnulfo Arias Madrid, which sought to deny them citizenship, see <http://raytodd.blog/2022/11/17/panama-war-discrimination-and-segregation/>

⁴⁵ Estripeaut was the family name of the President’s wife.

⁴⁶ The US military had a low opinion of the National Police as a fighting force. A US Army assessment in 1942 judged that the men of the National Police had little confidence in their officers and that “*if a battle were to turn against them, the majority would run...*”. Recommendations for their equipment showed that the US Army still saw them only as an internal security force, and there was no suggestion that they should be trained to participate in Canal defence alongside US troops: *Wasting Asset: The U.S. Re-Assessment of the Panama Canal, 1945-1949* by John Major (Journal of Strategic Studies), 2008.

and arrest the plotters. The action of the force is said to have reassured US officials of the stability of Panama (and hence the security of the Canal), with one State Department official noting in 1943 that –

“no revolution is apt to succeed in Panama so long as the heads of the National Police are loyal to the Government. President de la Guardia has had nothing to worry about on this score”.

Nevertheless, there was opposition to the Government, with students being particularly vocal⁴⁷, including over the 134 additional defence sites outside the Canal Zone granted to the US for use during the war. The Government came to increasingly rely on the National Police.

Gradually opposition grew and spread and several key members of the administration resigned, including the finance minister, the Presidential financial adviser and the Comptroller General. One of the things the students opposed was de la Guardia’s plan to extend his time in office (known as *continuismo*), and the President provoked a constitutional crisis in December 1944 by abrogating the 1941 Constitution introduced by Arias Madrid and calling for a new one that would permit him to remain for longer. In the end, in 1945, he was removed by a National Assembly which contained a substantial number of supporters of Arias Madrid⁴⁸, but the elite still wielded influence and saw to it that the new interim President would be a proven ally of the *Chiaristas*, Enrique A Jiménez Brin, who was intended to serve until a new President could be elected in 1948.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ The Federation of Students of Panama was formed in 1944, with a First Youth Congress in that December. Leaders denounced the “corrupt and undemocratic” Government, and the secret police being sent to arrest those seen as the ringleaders but withdrew after a scuffle. The students then took to the streets, assembling in the Plaza de la Cathedral in Casco Viejo, calling for the overthrow of the Government. The Patriotic Youth Front (*Frente Patriótico de la Juventud*) was also formed, and would have a leading role in political life in the postwar years. Shortly after, the Women’s Patriotic League (*Liga Patriótica Femenina*) was also formed.

⁴⁸ And which met in secret to avoid the Secret Police.

⁴⁹ Jiménez Brin had been appointed Ambassador to the US in 1943 and had been a close ally of de la Guardia. In the US, he was regarded as pro-American, and hence favourable. The Roosevelt Administration looked on him as an ideal future President.

However, as the second President to take office by virtue of behind-the-scenes politicking involving the elite, this appointment caused continued unrest among middle class activists and other opposition groups.

TOWARDS THE END OF THE WAR AND POSTWAR

There was also the looming problem that it became clear that the US military would want to keep at least some of the additional defence sites outside the Canal Zone even after the war.⁵⁰ Adding to the unrest, paramilitary groups, particularly the *Panameñista*, launched attacks to challenge the *continuismo* of the ruling elite. Arnulfo Arias Madrid had returned from exile in October 1945, and his *Arnulfistas* began to bomb properties of his political opponents, and the businesses of de la Guardia.

Shortly after becoming President in late 1945, Jiménez Brin had set out to make the National Police “an expanded military unit”, with a military battalion, a military police company and horse cavalry company. He also requested equipment from the US to establish “a modest air force”, 50 police patrol cars and an expansion of the US military mission by then training officers in Panama City. The National Police would later put the cavalry training it received to use in dispersing a large student gathering in June 1946.

The *Arnulfistas* attempted a takeover on 21 December 1945, with supporters rallying in Panama City and Colón, with plans to take hostages and call for Jiménez Brin to stand down. However, the National Police foiled the attempt, although the police headquarters in Colón was partially destroyed. Arias Madrid was arrested – spending several months in jail until pardoned by the President he had sought to depose, as Jiménez Brin attempted to placate the opposition.

⁵⁰ A complicating factor was that the President, along with two police officers, including Remón Cantera, were shareholders in the National Cooperative, which held the monopoly for the slaughter of cattle in Panama City, and which had benefitted from the US expansion in the country during the war, and would likewise suffer from any withdrawals and downsizing of the US military presence.

The turning point for the Jiménez Brin regime would involve the ultimately futile attempt by the US and Panamanian Governments to seek to extend, at least in part, the terms of a 1942 Agreement that allowed the US the additional defence sites outside the Canal Zone.⁵¹ This had united the opposition factions. By May 1947, with Arias Madrid now released, the student groups had joined with the Panamanian communist party (*Partido del Pueblo*)⁵² in opposition to the Jiménez Brin regime and/or the continued US presence in the Republic.

By 1947, general opposition to what was perceived as US imperialism, particularly among the growing middle class, had reached a peak. United, albeit briefly, by a dislike of the ruling elite, seen as pro-American, and the US itself, as epitomised by the abortive Filós-Hines Agreement for the continued presence of US bases in the Republic postwar, students, political groups and a large women's movement would combine to force the rejection of the Agreement.

On 10 December 1947, the National Assembly voted in favour of allowing continued use of US military bases in the Republic⁵³, which was followed by two weeks of face-offs between the National Police and the protestors. There was violence on 12 December, when the National Police put down a student protest, and both the President and Remón Cantera (by then the commander of the force) were quick to allege communist agitation, and President repeated this claim to the US. However, popular reaction to the violence united even greater numbers in the continuing protests, which escalated and, on 20 December, a US soldier was stabbed in Colón and the US Army placed Panama City and Colón off-limits to military personnel. By now, most schools and businesses were closed, civic groups, labour organisations and professional clubs had joined the protest and workers threatened a general strike if the treaty allowing continued use by the US of bases outside the Canal Zone was ratified by the National Assembly.

⁵¹ For more on the background to, and end of, this Agreement, see <http://raytodd.blog/2022/10/08/panama-operating-outside-the-zone-the-1942-agreement-and-the-1947-row/>

⁵² Which, of course, triggered concern and suspicions on the part of the US authorities.

⁵³ In the final version of the Treaty, the US had reduced its requirements from 75 defence sites of 32,000 hectares to just 13 of 10,500 hectares.

Eventually, popular pressure on the National Assembly (and the threat of physical violence from the crowds massed outside), saw it reject the Treaty, with the US then vacating all the sites in the Republic by early 1948.

Meanwhile, the National Police had completed its transformation into a powerful military unit by December 1947, with Colonel Remón Cantera having assumed the leadership, and it had a professional cadre of trained officers, with an *esprit de corps*, and the equipment it needed to impose its will.

In 1948, as had happened many times before, the President called on the National Police to subdue political opposition and restore order. Therefore, the police declared a three-month state of siege and, armed with emergency powers, the nationalist opposition backed down. It was by now apparent that the National Police were the only group in the country with any semblance of focus, cohesion, and organisation – despite not managing to fully quell the nationalist opposition to the bases Treaty. It was also clear that the biggest change by December 1947 was the obvious fact that the *Policia Nacional* had become the most important part of the country's political hierarchy – and would soon prove itself able to select and dismiss Presidents at will.

Even after the matter of the US bases was resolved, with the US withdrawal by early 1948, the National Police continued the state of siege. When the US and Panama reached another unpopular agreement, this time on commercial air traffic⁵⁴, the force openly bullied opponents of the agreement, killing two protestors and injuring more.

The National Police enabled the Jiménez Brin administration to continue in place, and it was seen that its Commander then effectively dictated the outcome of the 1948 election, seeming to run the country from his office in police headquarters. In this election, the first in eight years, the elite chose Domingo Díaz as its candidate, who would face Arnulfo Arias Madrid, he now being the candidate of the newly-formed *Partido Revolucionario Auténtico*

⁵⁴ The controversial postwar commercial aviation agreement involved international commercial traffic being switched from Albrook Field in the Canal Zone (or Albrook Air Force base, as it had become) to the new Tocumen International Airport, around 15 miles from Panama City, and in the Republic.

(PRA). Several armed clashes followed between rival supporters. Then, following discovery of a plot by Arias Madrid's supporters to overthrow the government and gain control of the National Police, the President suspended certain constitutional rights, including freedom of speech and the right of assembly.

At first the National Police stayed out of the campaign, but as Arias Madrid supporters gained ground, the police backed the President and Díaz – effectively handing the election to the latter. President Díaz then signed the unpopular commercial air traffic agreement with the US, with the National Police violently putting down protests, with constitutional rights again suspended and a state of siege declared from 25 April to 29 July 1949.

However, President Díaz died in August 1949, the First Vice-President, Daniel Chánis, became interim President on 28 July. He then fell out with Remón Cantera (seemingly over the latter's control of a cattle slaughtering monopoly in Panama City, of which the police chief was co-owner) and the new President sought to dismiss the police chief – only for the police to then surround the Presidential Palace and instead demand the President's resignation.

Remón Cantera then persuaded the Supreme Court to swear in his cousin, Roberto Chiari, as provisional President for the remainder of the Díaz presidential term, and Chánis renounced his resignation – but argued that it was done under duress. Strikes broke out – standing up to the police had made Chánis popular with students and other activists. But the police put down protests and Chánis' resignation stood, only for the Supreme Court to rule in his favour three days later. Following this ruling Chiari said he would honour the Court's decision, angering his cousin.

In a surprising move Remón Cantera then chose Arias Madrid to be President after all. He reconvened the National Elections Board which “found” enough votes to declare Arias Madrid the actual winner of the election after all. Remón Cantera then had an emergency session of the National Assembly convened, which proclaimed Arias Madrid as President.

This unlikely alliance was never going to last and, as President, Arias Madrid sought to counter Remón Cantera's support base in the National Police by reorganising the Secret Police. He also sought to reinstate his 1941 Constitution (which had been replaced in 1946), which would increase his term of office to six years, and he also jailed hundreds of political opponents.

The public now turned to Remón Cantera as the only means to dispose of what was seen as an increasingly dictatorial administration. It seemed that the police were the most powerful and best organised body in the country, and its chief was the only person able to get rid of Arias Madrid. On 9 May 1951, after Arias Madrid attempted to suspend the National Assembly, he was impeached, together with the First Vice-President. When Arias Madrid resisted, the police moved against him⁵⁵ and surrounded the Presidential Palace. After a prolonged gunfight that left nine people dead, Arias Madrid and his followers were removed.

Behind the scenes, Remón Cantera appointed ministers for the new cabinet, chose judges for the Supreme Court and manipulated his political allies into key positions in the National Assembly. Five of the country's political parties became part of his coalition, recognising that he had become the most powerful man in Panamanian politics.

The US also supported him, and there was a hope that he could stabilise Panama's political situation. The international situation had changed, following the Berlin Airlift and the outbreak of the Korean War, with the Cold War well underway. State Department officials secretly acknowledged that the pre-war Good Neighbor Policy was defunct, and that the danger (or fear) of communism spreading was the greater risk. Hence, a strong, anti-communist leader in Panama, assuring the security of the Canal, would be welcome.

In the 1952 election, Remón Cantera faced his cousin, Roberto Chiari. Despite initially backing the latter, Arias Madrid (who was still banned from involvement in politics himself) recognised the likelihood of a Remón Cantera victory and changed his support to him, only

⁵⁵ Remón Cantera did not involve himself personally, as he was positioning himself as a candidate in the 1952 elections – which he would win.

to then change his mind and call on his supporters to boycott the election, and Remón Cantera became President.

One of the first things the new President did, in 1952, was to rename the *Policia Nacional* as the *Guardia Nacional* (National Guard).⁵⁶

Remón Cantera was assassinated in 1955⁵⁷, and his second-in-command at the National Police, Bolivar Vallarino, assumed control. Vallarino, coming from one of the country's wealthiest families, allowed the urban commercial elite more say in politics and temporarily removed the police as the mainspring of Panamanian politics. With the death of Remón Cantera, the role of the armed forces in mobilising the lower classes against the urban commercial elite had been curtailed, and politics were once again controlled by the oligarchy.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the National Guard continued to increase in size and in 1968 a coup (said to have been tolerated by the US) saw the National Guard (which would be renamed the Panama Defense Force in 1983⁵⁹) retain *de facto* power until the US invasion in 1989.⁶⁰

Ray Todd

Panama City

Republic of Panama

1 December 2023

⁵⁶ In 1983, Manuel Noriega renamed the National Guard as the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF). The national police force is now, once more, the National Police (*Policia Nacional*).

⁵⁷ Declassified CIA papers appear to suggest he died on the orders of the American gangster "Lucky" Luciano.

⁵⁸ https://arsof-history.org/arsof_in_panama/pdf/gen/panama_country_study_area_handbook.pdf

⁵⁹ Law No 20 of 1983 refers.

⁶⁰ *Civil-Military Relations in a Civilianised State: Panama* by Ronald D Sylvia and Constantine P Danopoulos (University Press of Florida, Journal of Political and Military Sociology, Vol 33 No 1, Summer 2005)