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# Cointelpro

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HOLLY R. CASHMAN

**COINTELPRO.** COINTELPRO is the acronym for a domestic counterintelligence program operated from 1956 to 1971 by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and coordinated by the Domestic Intelligence Division. This program was initially devised to disrupt and neutralize the Communist Party of the United States through an aggressive campaign of covert operations. Beginning in the mid-1960s the FBI director, J. Edgar Hoover, expanded the scope of COINTELPRO to "counteract domestic terrorism and conduct investigations of individuals and organizations who threatened terroristic violence" (Federal Bureau of Investigation). The FBI justified the deployment of the draconian COINTELPRO operations to prevent Communist infiltration of "legal mass organizations" but primarily of domestic groups that dissented from government policy. COINTELPRO employed illegal and legal covert measures to "neutralize" and destroy organizations that the FBI identified as a threat to national security. A Senate committee that investigated COINTELPRO reached a radically different conclusion regarding the targets and tactics of the FBI. The committee found that "covert action programs have been used to disrupt the lawful political activities of individual Americans and groups and to discredit them, using dangerous and degrading tactics which are abhorrent in a free and decent society" (U.S. Senate). Over two thousand known COINTELPRO operations were launched against Communists and an array of domestic political organizations and social movements created and led by African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinas and Latinos. A small number of these operations were launched against white supremacists (primarily the Ku Klux Klan). The FBI unilaterally determined whether any domestic political organizations posed a threat to national security and if so whether to authorize COINTELPRO operations.

### **COINTELPRO, the FBI, and the Chicano/a Movement**

The black liberation movement, the Puerto Rican independence movement, and the American Indian Movement (AIM) were singled out for particularly aggressive intrusion. The FBI records that have been released do not indicate the extent to which official COINTELPRO operations were deployed against Chicano and Chicana organizations. Yet the history of the most prominent and militant groups of the Chicano/a movement of the 1960s and 1970s is marked by a systematic campaign of intimidation and disruption by FBI operatives. In fact the vast majority of if not all prominent Chicano and Chicana civil rights and political organizations were subject to FBI surveillance. COINTELPRO operations were directed primarily against those organizations that advocated militant cultural nationalism and national liberation. All the Chicano/a associations targeted by the FBI were legitimate

political organizations. Some were committed to social-justice goals through community-building campaigns, others to anti-Vietnam War activities, and others to non-electoral paramilitary but legal political protest to affect public policy. The Chicano/a groups targeted by the FBI included but were not limited to La Raza Unida Party, Centro de Acción Social Autónoma, the Brown Berets, the Crusade for Social Justice, the Chicano National Moratorium, and the United Farm Workers (UFW). The FBI identified some of these legitimate organizations as potential threats to national security and applied the draconian, unconstitutional methods it used in its domestic counterinsurgency operations against the Communists.

One of the earliest targets of particularly aggressive COINTELPRO and police disruption was the Colorado-based Crusade for Social Justice, founded by Rodolfo "Corky" González, a charismatic and unusually effective political leader. According to Ernesto Vigil, one of the organization's leaders and its chronicler, the crusade's "rejection of mainstream politics . . . opened the way for a strategy of militant grassroots organizing and independent political action in which Chicanos would decide their destiny independent of institutions controlled by others" (Vigil, p. 26). The FBI became alarmed at the crusade's increasingly successful organizing efforts and its growing notoriety as an effective Chicano/a liberation movement as well as at indications that it was assuming a national leadership role as a dissident organization. The FBI was ever-vigilant about the crusade's international connections to Mexican radical and Communist organizations and to domestic dissident groups, especially AIM. In order to discredit the crusade, the FBI tried to link it to Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (FALN), the clandestine Puerto Rican revolutionary organization that was responsible for a series of bombings. The FBI organized a disinformation campaign that spread rumors that the crusade and AIM had acquired weapons and conspired to use them to "kill a cop a day." Attorneys who sought to quash subpoenas served on two crusade members to appear before a federal grand jury investigating FALN argued that the FBI had a "documented history . . . to generally dissipate and discredit efforts of minority groups and civil rights organizations as part of their COINTELPRO program" and that the FBI had "practiced this program against the Crusade for Justice" (Vigil, p. 354). The crusade was infiltrated by FBI operatives and subjected to a relentless campaign of intimidation, which included fabricated charges and the misuse of the judicial process to obtain convictions of the organization's leadership, including Corky González. The destruction of the crusade's facilities and continuing legal battles depleted the organization's resources. FBI-perpetrated factionalism and incarceration of its leadership demoralized and ultimately undermined the crusade.

The Brown Berets organization (originally the Young Chicanos for Community Action) was a nonstudent youth organization at the center of the Chicano/a movement. The paramilitary Brown Berets were established in 1967 and like the Black Panthers formulated a radical nationalist cultural perspective. The Berets called for Chicano and Chicana self-reliance and militant opposition to the public authorities that were the source of Chicano and Chicana poverty and oppression. Brown Berets chapters were established nationally, and the organization was pivotal in establishing the National Chicano Moratorium Committee, which organized marches and activities against the Vietnam War. Its history was marked by confrontation with police authorities and the deaths, injuries, and incarceration of many of its members. FBI agents infiltrated many of the local Brown Beret chapters and fomented factionalism and internal discord, which debilitated the organization. In 1972 David Sánchez, the founder and leader of the Brown Berets, announced the dissolution of the movement (which claimed a membership of five thousand in ninety chapters). He faulted the government for "police harassment and infiltration, internal squabbles . . . which ruined discipline" and could lead to bloodshed (Chávez, p. 57).

Chicano and Chicana organizations that did not adopt militant cultural nationalism and avoided confrontation with public authorities were not immune from FBI surveillance and disruption. La Raza Unida Party (RUP) was another important Chicano and Chicana political organization victimized by FBI counterinsurgency operations, including infiltration, harassment, burglaries, and so on. RUP was a legitimate political party that promoted Chicano and Chicana cultural pride and was highly critical of conservative Mexican American organizations (such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and the American G.I. Forum). Although it rejected the relevance of the existing two-party system, RUP was the first ethnic-based political party that fielded candidates for elective office. From the organization's inception in 1970 through its demise in 1981, RUP's leadership was closely monitored by the FBI.

The Centro de Acción Social Autónoma (CASA) was founded by the community activists Bert Corona and Soledad Alatorre in Los Angeles as "a voluntary, democratic mutual assistance social welfare organization" to provide service to undocumented Mexican workers (Gutiérrez, p. 190). By 1975, with a membership in the thousands, it adopted a Marxist-Leninist philosophy and called for international labor unity among the Chicano and Chicana working class and workers in Mexico to organize against multinational corporations. The corporations, CASA told its followers, were responsible for the impoverishment of Latina and Latino workers throughout

the hemisphere. The FBI viewed CASA with increased concern, given its growing membership, militant internationalism, and radical critique of capitalism. CASA was infiltrated on the grounds that its activities could violate federal statutes prohibiting seditious conspiracy and advocating the overthrow of the government.

COINTELPRO also initiated illegal infiltration and surveillance of the United Farm Workers Union and its founder, César Chávez, beginning in 1965. The UFW, which was locked in a battle for survival with California growers, was infiltrated by FBI agents, who generated field reports to discredit the organization and sought to link it with Mexican Communist organizations. The FBI shared information with the growers and purposefully failed to investigate the criminal actions of the growers against the union and its impoverished members. The aggressive and extensive covert actions of the FBI and police authorities against dissident Chicano/a organizations severely weakened the vibrant Chicano/a Movement and made its dream of achieving social justice for this portion of the American population elusive.

#### **The FBI and Puerto Rican Independence and New Left Organizations**

The FBI has monitored the political activities of Puerto Rican communities in New York and Chicago, ever-vigilant to possible links between independence organizations in Puerto Rico and their sympathizers in the United States. After the 1954 Nationalist Party attack on the U.S. House of Representatives, 250 FBI agents arrested 91 Nationalists in New York. The San Juan FBI office was ordered in 1960 to “exchange ideas relative to tactics and techniques” with the New York bureau “because of the large number of Puerto Ricans residing in New York” and “the fact that” independence organizations were active in the city (Churchill and Wall, p. 71). COINTELPRO targeted the Young Lords and effectively infiltrated the organization and destroyed it by promoting irreconcilable factionalism. The Young Lords member Irís Morales wrote: “Police agents within the organization worked to intensify the differences and natural contradictions that existed among us. Intimidation tactics and beatings silenced opposition.” In Chicago, FBI agents blocked and destabilized alliances that were developing between the Black Panther Party and the Young Lords. The Chicago COINTELPRO agent monitored the emerging coalition between the Panthers and the Lords and “would submit appropriate counterintelligence suggestions” (Wolf).

Although the FBI had been involved in Puerto Rico since at least 1936, when it investigated the Nationalist Party, in 1960 Hoover expressed alarm that a resurgent independence movement on the island would establish links with the socialist Cuban government. Speaking before the General

Assembly of the United Nations on September 28, 1960, both Fidel Castro, president of Cuba, and Nikita Khrushchev, leader of the Soviet Union, condemned the United States for the “crime of colonialism” and listed Puerto Rico among the colonized nations of the world. The resurgence in the mid- to late 1950s of organizations committed to Puerto Rican independence was of particular concern to the FBI. Among the most prominent of these organizations, all built in the wake of the virtual eradication of the radical Nationalist Party, were the Puerto Rican Pro-Independence Movement (MPI); the Federation of Pro-Independence University Students (FUPI), a renewed militant Puerto Rican Socialist Party; and Acción Patriótica Unitaria. The FBI seemed convinced that these organizations, which subscribed variously to socialist or Marxist-Leninist philosophies and were avowedly critical of U.S. colonialism or were sympathetic to the Cuban socialist regime, would resurrect the militant Nationalist Party campaign for Puerto Rican independence.

It is in the context of the rapid consolidation of the Cuban Revolution, the growing internationalization of Puerto Rico’s political status, and what Socialist Party president Juan Mari Bras called the “dawn of new struggle for independence” (Silén, p. 429) that the FBI began COINTELPRO operations in Puerto Rico to wage an aggressive campaign to eviscerate and render ineffective these independence organizations. In August 1960 Hoover authorized agents in Puerto Rico to undertake a clandestine campaign to “disrupt the activities” of organizations seeking independence “through other than lawful, peaceful means” and informed them that he was “not interested in mere harassment” (Churchill and Wall, p. 68). Puerto Rico was a high priority arena for COINTELPRO operations. The FBI either worked closely or shared information with the Puerto Rican police (which had its own Intelligence Division), U.S. military intelligence, and the Central Intelligence Agency.

By the end of 1962 the FBI expanded its covert action campaign to infiltrate and disrupt the operations of virtually all groups advocating independence, irrespective of whether they advocated peaceful means to achieve this goal. The MPI and FUPI, neither of which advocated the use of violence to attain independence, were the first organizations targeted by COINTELPRO operatives. In 1966 Hoover testified that at least nine proindependence organizations that were seen as a continuous problem for U.S. internal security “were under investigation” (Merrill-Ramírez, p. 260). Mari Bras was a frequent target of harassment and persecution given his centrality to the independence cause and his international stature as an opponent of U.S. colonialism. The COINTELPRO goal was to destroy the independence organizations because their actions were drawing world attention to Puerto Rico’s colonial situation and in the process eroding the legitimacy of

the U.S.–supported Popular Democratic Party that governed the island.

The FBI planted informers and agent provocateurs in a number of organizations to create discord and confusion among *independentistas*. FBI operatives tried to discredit the movement by linking it with “Communist Cuba,” hoping that this would encourage defections. FBI operatives employed blatant tactics of intimidation and misused the police and judicial powers of the Puerto Rican government. According to Rubén Berríos, president of the Puerto Rican Independence Party, COINTELPRO waged “a frontal attack on an entire movement and an entire set of ideals. It is virtually an act of war upon our people’s will, determination and rights” (Churchill and Wall, p. 88).

The FBI’s long history of violating the civil rights of Puerto Ricans came to light in congressional testimony by Director Louis Freeh, who conceded that the agency had undertaken “egregious illegal action, maybe criminal action. . . . Particularly in the 1960s, the FBI did operate a program that did tremendous destruction to many people” (González). After the suspension of COINTELPRO, the FBI remained deeply involved in combating legitimate independence organizations, which, despite evidence to the contrary, were portrayed as potentially violent revolutionary groups. Throughout the 1970s the independence movement was subjected to a virtual campaign of terrorism that included bombings of Independence Party and Socialist Party headquarters. Mari Bras’s son was murdered in 1976. Two young independentistas were murdered in Cerro Maravilla in 1978, provoking a legislative inquiry and accusations that the FBI attempted to obstruct the investigations. According to the reporter and writer Alfred López, during a fifteen-year period (1971 to 1986) over 170 attacks of various types committed against independence movement organizations were documented. The FBI and local police were singularly incapable of investigating the cases and arresting any suspects. In December 1999 Puerto Rican governor Pedro Rosselló revealed that the Police Intelligence Division in a “corrupt practice” had compiled secret dossiers (*carpetas*) on scores of thousands of Puerto Ricans, the vast majority of whom were independence sympathizers. The FBI provided assistance and, reportedly, actual training to local police authorities on surveillance techniques and directed police agents in conducting these clandestine operations.

A long-standing campaign of state-sponsored repression against proindependence organizations and the virtual criminalization of individuals sympathetic to independence help explain the dramatic decline in popular support for self-determination in Puerto Rico during the last half of the twentieth century. Proponents of Puerto Rican independence have paid a high price for their belief that their country is a colony.

*See also* Brown Berets; Chicano/a Movement; González, Rodolfo Corky; Mari Bras, Juan; Puerto Ricans; and Young Lords Party.

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PEDRO CABÁN

**COLÓN, JESÚS** (1901–1974), writer. Jesús Colón was born into a working-class family in Cayey, Puerto Rico. At age sixteen he moved to New York, where he worked in a variety of jobs, including “washing dishes, working on the docks, or at the many odd jobs in innumerable factories and shops” (Colón 1993, p. 37). His wide range of jobs allowed him to witness the exploitation and abuse suffered by lower-class and unskilled laborers. Although Colón finished high school in New York and attended two years of college, he was primarily a self-taught individual, a tireless reader, and a collector of books and other written material, such as pamphlets, invitations, newsletters, leaflets, and periodical articles. He became increasingly aware of social, political, and economic issues as he ventured deeper into Anglo-American society.

In 1923 Colón began to publish articles in several New York newspapers, such as *Justicia*, *Gráfico*, *Pueblos*