

Bolivia's Enigmatic Chief

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 7— He speaks of himself as "a man of the people," but much of his life has been spent as a member of a middle-class elite.

He speaks of himself as a revolutionary, yet he frowns on extremists of the right and the left, and he was instrumental in the

Man death of a revolutionary idol. He is, in brief, an enigma. Juan

News José Torres, a short, stocky professional military officer who was thrust to the height of power yesterday as the new President of Bolivia in the climax of the latest upheaval of his country's tumultuous political life.

After a lifetime spent in relative obscurity, General Torres emerged suddenly to proclaim himself leader of the "revolution of the people" to capture control of a loose alliance of left-wing civilians and military officers and to turn the right-wing coup that began Sunday into a leftist takeover.

Though the mustachioed General calls himself a "revolutionary nationalist," no observer is certain what that will mean in Bolivia.

His past holds elements of contradiction and irony—a former staunch opposition to violent revolution and all brands of leftist ideology won him a reputation as a rightist; yet he participated in a coup that brought to power a regime with strong leftist and nationalist tendencies.

Physically and culturally, the 49-year-old army general, who has survived the purges and political infighting that have characterized military life in Bolivia in recent years, is a man of mixed background.

His dark eyes and high cheekbones in a darkly reddish face are characteristically Indian, and he is fond of reminding his listeners that he came from a poor family of Indian background in Cochabamba, where he was born on March 5, 1921.

But he was trained at the Bolivian military academy, which made him by education a member of the Bolivian middleclass and by profession and rank a member of an elite.



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Not easily labeled

Known as a man whose smiles fail to distract from his cold eyes, he rose most rapidly in rank during the 12-year presidency of Victor Paz Estensoro, who achieved office after a revolt by miners and young officers. By the time the Paz presidency was ended in 1964, Captain Torres, who had helped him to achieve office, had become Colonel Torres.

As Colonel Torres, he supported the military coup that finished the leftist and democratic Paz regime. Subsequently, under the late President René Barrientos Ortuño, an air force officer, he served as Ambassador to Uruguay and briefly as Minister of Labor and Social Security.

His solid, if not brilliant army career, included field commands, services as a teacher at the Bolivian military academy, and staff duty. In 1967, with the rank of General, he was named Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces by President Barrientos.

It was this assignment that brought the man who called himself a revolutionary into an ironic conflict with Ernesto Che Guevara, the revolutionary idol. It was General Torres who planned the United States-supported operation against the Cuban guerrilla that resulted in Guevara's death in 1967.

Subsequently, General Torres conducted negotiations with foreign publishing concerns for the sale of the rights to the Guevara diary.

When General Barrientos died in an airplane crash in April, 1969, General Torres continued to serve in the succeeding civilian government, as secretary general of the Supreme Council of National Defense.

But for a long time, his principal alliance had been with General Alfredo Ovando

Candia, who had been senior military officer when the government had faced the threat. With General Ovando, General Torres had been one of the senior group of army commanders who approved the order that Guevara was to be killed if captured.

In September, 1969, General Torres joined General Ovando in a coup that overthrew the regime of Luis Adolfo Siles Salinas and brought to power a military regime with strong leftist and nationalist overtones. General Torres was immediately named chief of the armed forces.