

Comments on the sinking
of "Graf Spee", by the Vice
President of the Republic,
Dr. Alberto Guani, on the
occasion of the visit of
H.M.S. "Ajax". Radio City.
Montevideo, January 8, 1946

At 23.30 hours on Wednesday, 13th December, 1939, the German battleship "Admiral Graf Spee" entered the port of Montevideo. On the afternoon of that same day it had been engaged in naval combat in the proximity of Punta del Este, in Uruguayan territorial waters, with the cruisers of the Royal Navy, "Exeter", "Achilles" and "Ajax", to the latter of which we are now giving such a heartfelt welcome in our city. The German warship entered the port of Montevideo under the command of Captain Hans Langdorf. The following day, 14th December, the German Minister called on the speaker to inform him officially of the presence of the "Admiral Graf Spee" in the port of Montevideo, and to ask him to concede a suitable period of time to repair the damage suffered by the ship and make it seaworthy again.

The Government, in accordance with its declaration of neutrality at the outbreak of war, directed that the competent maritime authorities should examine the damage suffered by the "Admiral Graf Spee" in order then to determine the time required to effect the repairs necessary to make it fit to go to sea. The technical inspection having been made, and after having heard the request made by the British Minister in Montevideo to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the German ship should be interned if its stay in the port exceeded 24 hours, a similar request having been made by the French Minister, M. Gentil — the Government fixed a period of 72 hours, during which the necessary repairs should be carried out, a period which expired on the 17th December, at 20 hours. It is worthy of note that on the 17th December at 15 hours the heads of American missions in Montevideo met me in my office in the Ministry in order to learn the latest news regarding the international situation. I must state that, to our satisfaction, all the heads of missions expressed to me, the Foreign Minister, their cordial solidarity with the Uruguayan Government, and with our people in the difficult circumstances. At 15.30 hours that same day the German Legation informed the Port Authorities that the "Admiral Graf Spee" would leave the port of Montevideo after 18.15 hours. That same evening at 16 hours the 31 wounded, who

still were on board the warship, were transferred and interned in the Military Hospital. At 18.15 hours the "Admiral Graf Spee" moved out "to sea" as stated in the official notice.

Meanwhile, the German merchant ship "Tacoma" which was anchored in the port, moved out without a pilot and without previous permission, in the wake of the German battleship. It anchored near the "Admiral Graf Spee", embarked its crew, who were again transferred to a lighter and two Argentine tugs which put alongside. At 20 hours the "Admiral Graf Spee" was blown up four miles to the South of Punta de Yeguas. Once the "Graf Spee" was scuttled, the Uruguayan sloops "Zapicán" and "Huracán" made contact with the picket boat which Captain Hans Langsdorf had boarded, and detained it. By my instructions it was allowed to proceed in view of the fact that this vessel was fulfilling the order to abandon the port of Montevideo, given by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The merchant ship "Tacoma" had arrived in the morning of the 22nd of November, 1939 and anchored in the ante-port, along with the merchant ship "Lahn", also German. That same day it asked for a pilot through its shipping agent, and, on the authorities going aboard, its Captain stated that he had come from Talcahuano, whence he had sailed the 9th of November and had been obliged to put in here. I mention the "Tacoma" because the tortuous activities of this ship on the occasion of the events which I am relating, is one more proof of the double dealing, the hypocrisy and bad faith, from the international and political point of view, of the people who have been brought up in the Nazi-fascist school.

To return to the Battle of Punta del Este. The newspaper "El País" said that this event was of an exceptional character in our diplomatic and political history, making Uruguay resemble the little David who put himself in the way before the overbearing march of Goliath, which in this case was the "Graf Spee". The indignation in proud Berlin can well be imagined on learning the Uruguayan decision to establish in definite form the 72 hours term for the damaged vessel in the port of Montevideo, and some comments have stated that in that historic moment our country risked its all at that most uncertain time, when prudent people became angry and the weak began to tremble.

Nevertheless, diplomats of the American nations in conference in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the international press, the technical authorities, all supported the principles of the resolution of my Ministry. Therefore, whatever there is of dramatic in this historic fact, whatever the insinuations made by certain organs of

the press, these have nothing to do with the truth and the legal reality of the facts. The "Graf Spee" defeated in the Battle of Punta del Este was prevented by our Government in accordance with the prevailing international conventions, from remaining in the port of Montevideo in order to increase her fighting power.

With the perspective that the distance which separates us from these happenings affords, as I call them to mind now, I am convinced of the justice of the legal conduct followed by the Uruguayan Government during this memorable episode.

Whilst the press, dominated by its natural desire for news, gave its opinion, and the inhabitants of Montevideo clustered in the cafes and in the streets of the city and aired their opinions, inside the Ministry our only concern was the problem of international order that destiny had thought fit to set us, in order to show once more that diplomacy is not, as many believe, a contemplative function but a permanent struggle, one without rest; that it functions principally through experience and history. That is why the past has always to be remembered and lived over again.

The events which we have been attending in these days, on account of the presence of your heroic British ship in our waters, represent without doubt a re-awakening for our public spirit, so that it may never forget how much we Uruguayans and the American nations owe to Britain's formidable effort which, along with that of its allies, was able to bring about the triumph forever, I trust, of the cause of international law and justice.

The name of the English people has often been linked with our national life from the very first days in which our nation merely existed in the thoughts of men.

In the first hour of the political formation of our country it was England which, while revealing to us the secret, hitherto unknown, of our own strength, brought us at the same time our first arms for our spiritual struggles in the printing press which made it possible for us to publish in "La Estrella del Sur" the principles of liberty and thought so welcome to our republican spirit. Later, when engaged in our revolution for freedom, when the people of the Easter Province were still far from the day of nationhood, when they had to be sure of the navigation of their rivers and guard that essential right, they turned their eyes again towards you. This was the origin of the treaty of Free Trade effected by Artigas as Head of the "Orientales", and the Commander of His Majesty's Naval Forces, on the 8th of August, 1817. That was the first international act in our history, signed in "Villa

de Purificación", which was then the seat of the Protectorate of Free Peoples. The name of this historic town recalls to me the name of an English traveller called Robertson, a friend of Artigas, who visited him there and who was the first to give us an idea of the character of this great Uruguayan leader in a fair and penetrating manner.

On the 18th of July, 1830, the day on which the first political constitution of the State was established in front of the Cabildo, alongside our national flag, in a position of honour, flew the old and glorious flag of Great Britain.

Thanks to the able efforts of British diplomacy the principles of Uruguayan emancipation, already fought for by their sons in the field of battle, were legally recognised in 1828. With this fact is associated the name of Lord Canning of illustrious memory, who, in a memorable speech and before anybody else, declared in the British Parliament the right of the young American nations to lead their own lives and to separate themselves from political chains repugnant to our spirit, devoted as it is to independence and liberty.

You can see then, that the book of the history of our mutual relations is rich in suggestions of every kind. It shows us how at different times of our history the people of lands so far apart and so different in age, seek each other out and are able to satisfy so many interests and enlarge their destiny by means of reciprocal and lawful concessions.

Then came the days of pain and ruin the days of the Great War of 1914. Uruguay brought then to the cause of the Allies, which was her own, her mite of sympathy and help.

Our people can be proud to have accompanied, from the beginning, the defenders of liberty and justice. The strength of a nation is not only measured by material greatness, or by the size of its territory but what contributes more to increase and define that strength is its devotion to the standards of law which control the proper conduct of the peoples and the Governments which respect the dignity of man.

Our international course has never deviated from these clear lines. In the diplomatic circles of Europe in the League of Nations and in conferences and congresses wherever the name of Uruguay is quoted it is always associated with the cause of truth and justice.

The history of the last few years provides eloquent instances which help to confirm these reflections. When the European war

broke out, the Republic at the outset declared its neutrality, but that did not prevent it formulating an opinion favourable to the Allied cause, nor from maintaining later in the Conferences of Panama and Havana postulates in favour of an American action which subsequently made possible the policy of total solidarity with the democracies of the Old World. We have a certainly no less outstanding example of my line of thought in the episode of the arrival of the "Admiral Graf Spee" in the port of Montevideo.

Few cases, such as this, show the tremendous superiority derived from the application and loyal execution of international conventions when faced with the unbridled use of material force.

Uruguay firmly bound to the standards of law which she understood it was her duty to apply, found herself invigorated in this case, although her resources were limited, by an insuperable strength which enabled her to make her sovereignty respected and to comply at the same time with the legal standards to which she was bound.

The German people will have learned after its defeat that there is nothing more vain than the conception of violence and arbitrary acts; that something much stronger than tyranny exists — ideals and justice; that there is something really imperishable and indestructible — the right of men and people to live free and without other restrictions and other limitations than those imposed by consideration for the happiness and the welfare of others.

The arrival in our waters of this glorious British ship which fought so heroically in front of Punta del Este in order to wipe the German pirate ship from off the seas, can be compared with the continuous efforts of our country to extirpate once and for all, as political arms in the hands of American Governments, all those systems that are at war with liberty and democracy, because the observance of the fundamental principles on which these are based constitutes the guarantee and security of concord and peace among nations.

The war which has just ended was taking us fatally to the lowest and most deplorable level of barbarity and savagery. To kill children at night in bed and the women who looked after them, to destroy the temples of faith, and to wish to make of cities and their inhabitants a mountain of rubble and ruins, all this seems to be, in the unprecedented struggle which has just ended, like a cruel crime paradoxically nestling in the heavens up there where little children and their mothers cast their eyes when they say their prayers of pity and of love.

The "Ajax" whose legendary name in Greek means the symbol of fearlessness and gallantry in the fight, two days ago, six years after the heroic fight, passed the today almost invisible remains of her adversary, the "Admiral Graf Spee".

When the arrogant Teuton ship was scuttled in front of Punta de Yeguas, I personally was present at this tremendous sight, and recalling this to you today, I can tell you that the enormous column of smoke which rose for days and nights from her plates twisted with fire, seemed to me tragically to presage that all the accumulated strength of the totalitarians against right was also destined to a similar fate — to be blown away like smoke by the power of justice. And so it was.

We give our thanks to you heroic seamen of Great Britain and also to all the glorious forces of the United Nations who were able to confront and conquer this international political monster called Nazi-fascism.

Long live Great Britain!

Long live the United Nations!

