

Western Oregon University

Digital Commons@WOU

Student Theses, Papers and Projects (History)

Department of History

6-2-2007

Argentina's Dirty War

Steven B. Stone

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/his>



Part of the [Latin American History Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), and the [Political History Commons](#)

Steven B. Stone

Dr. Rector

Hist.352

06/02/07

Argentina's Dirty War

This tragedy in Argentine history is surrounded with mystery and terrifying consequences for the Argentine people. The casualty count ranged from 10,000 to 30,000 people. Innocent people as well as opponents of the military state would disappear in the middle of the night. These people are known as los desaparecidos.

The so called war began in 1976 and did not end until the election of Raul Alfonsins on Dec.10, 1983. How and why did the military start this war of repression? But more importantly why did the Argentine remain silent for 7 years

Let's start at the beginning when the military junta led a coup against Isabel Peron the wife of former president Juan Peron in 1976. The term The Dirty War was first used by the army for the battles against the leftist guerrillas.

The military state declared war against the leftist and anyone the state considered subversive. "The state was ambiguously even if covertly, involved in committing terrorist acts and in using its military and police to kill its perceived enemies. Complicating our understanding of this period are the many sub-struggles that were in progress, competition for power within the unions bureaucracy and between Peronist and dissent unions. The Peronist movement embraced both the extreme right and the extreme left."(1) Some assassinations carried out by the state were blamed on the guerrillas.

“The Triple A (Argentine Anti Communist Alliance) was an organization established within the Ministry of Social Welfare in Isabel Peron government. Triple A targeted both known left wing leaders and suspected members of supporting subversive actives” (2)

Neoliberalism was the guiding ideology of Peronism, the military undertook the task of imposing this market ideology on the economy of the state. The military had to kill off all actual and potential opponents.

The military government disclaimed all knowledge of the whereabouts of los desaparecidos. The thinkers, professors, writers and the politically inclined that might be in dissent feared for the safety of their children.

So why did the Argentine kept silence about the state’s brutally oppressive acts of terror? The answer lies with the state use of fear. Fear was an essential weapon in the military’s plan to seize, purged and remolded Argentina. “Everyday the newspapers, radios and televisions brought fresh news from the front as though it was a civil war. By March 1976 many Argentine felt they have reached the limits to their feelings of personal insecurity. Bombing, kidnappings were daily presence. (3)

The military government had conspired early on with the media to make the press as a faithful propaganda instrument of the state. “Warnings notes sent by the presidential press secretariat for having published inconvenient information or a telephone call how to play a story or to warn about an article considered offensive.”(4) The junta press policy was clear, up to ten years imprisonment for news communiqués or images for the purpose of damaging or impairing the reputation of the actives of the armed forces, security forces or police. “The message could

be even more to the point. Hector Garcia publisher of the tabloid Cronica was kidnapped and held with a hood over his head for 48 hours by military officers carrying out a preventive warning it was Garcia second abduction in less than three years.”(5)

The violence gradually was subsiding in Argentina and the fear factor while still in place began to be replaced by denial. “Social scientist Guillermo O’Donnell one of Argentina’s most prestigious social scientist and wife, psychologist Cecilia Gallia conducted a fluid study on fear and the military rule. Their finding indicated that Argentine tend to deny what was going around them. (6)

“Most said they preferred the peace established by the military to the chaos of the Peronist régime. Reports of massive right violations were chalked up as unsubstantiated rumors, with respondents frequently attributing cases of repressive violence they knew about even disappearances to be the work of a few crazies.”(7)

Yet at the same time within family structure, O’Donnell and Gallia found that a mini regime of terror had taken root, as parents terrified their children would become involved in “something” tried to control their children. The terror regime also acted on Argentine sense of class segregation. In Buenos Aires the dirty war tactic was used to address another unwanted problem the city slum dwellers. The military would send trucks into a shantytown, usually at night or early morning loading up the residents and what ever the residents could carry to be dumped like trash outside the city limits.

The military treatment of the poor contrasted with the treatment of the poor by the Peronist government who had championed the cause of the poor. “Four years of military rule found city officials bragged that 76% of city slum dwellers had been removed! To live in

Buenos Aires is not just for everyone, but for those who deserves a better city for the best city.”(8)

Argentina was not the only one who is in denial. The world turned a blind eye to the state sponsored terrorism. . The human rights violations were ignored by various U.S. administrations. Conservative administrations like the Nixon’s and Reagan’s administrations, while not wanting to be linked with the anti-Communist military tactics of the junta, nevertheless were in sympathy with the junta ideology. The U.S. concern was that Communism sponsored by leftist factions in South America could achieve another Cuba in South America.

A fear shared by Western Europe. This fear kept Western Europe involvement to a minimum. This encouraged the military state and possibly had an effect on some Argentine to become silent and accepts the terrorism tactics of the military government.

The Elite Class of Argentina was least at risk from the government acts of terrorism. Indeed the Elite Class welcomed the security that the junta offered to those who shared their views on the economy and politics. So there were many reasons for Argentine silence about the Dirty War.

I think we can agree that the number one reason was the fear factor. The submission of whole nation was due to many factors but the uncertain acts of kidnappings, murder and the disappearance of one’s children was compelling and made many Argentines repressed under the military state. Those Argentines who support the state of course would not find fault with what was seen as necessary to rid Argentina of leftist subversion. Finally denial and the use of these

repressive military terror tactics were used to remove the undesirables a solution sought by the state and those who supported it.

Argentina's Dirty War was the reaction of the military state and the Elite Class to decades of Peronist influence. It was the fear of the Right who had lost power and their security that encouraged the military to overthrow Isabel Peron and begin the reign of terror.

Under the Peron leadership the Working Class had gained the upper hand. Unions and social reforms programs for the Lower Class became the driving force for Peron's support. These changes by Juan Peron was loved by the very large Working Class but was in part paid for by the Elite Landowners. Traditionally the Elite held power in Argentina that also included the military. The Elite saw Peron's policies as Leftist in spirit. Peron was not a leftist but rather a dictator more in line with a Fascist. Peron who was hated by those who felt he had betrayed the ruling class, which had ruled since colonial days.

Fearful of a Socialist or Communist take over the military overthrow the Peron government in 1956. In those days the unions his strongest backers were in disagreement and even were demonstrating. Sensing the timing was right the military junta depose Peron at his politically weakest. The decades that followed saw factionalism grow in politics and the military. The Frondizi Presidency had some successes with the economy at first but lost ground again was seen as too Peronist like and the military step in again in 1962. The political struggle with the Peronist and military continued until Peron returned in 1973.

Peron return was short and ended in 1974 when he died. Isabel Peron became President and faced many challenges from the military and the Right until finally the military depose Isabel and began the Dirty War in 1976. The Argentine Military had planned since 1975 for

secret camps locations. The Argentine Military practiced the forced disappearance of people that was systematic, massive and secretive.

“It required building 340 secret centers in which victims were housed and preparing mass graves for their burial. It included task forces to work the streets and hundreds of people to staff the centers. (9) The military government struggled with the economy with some success but with power came corruption.

The military influence over the society had reached new height not only generals were dividing up public posts, but hundreds of retired and active duty officers took up positions on boards of private companies and managerial spots in multinational corporations. “Military men and civilian intelligence personnel began showing up the homes and offices of the relatives of missing people and those of implied dissent. Passports, information, or merely not being killed were possible for a price.(10)

“In Buenos Aires and Cordoba military men set up furniture and appliance stores stacked with goods looted from homes of the disappeared.”(10) These acts of corruption were among the many that would eventually lead to the down fall of the military rule and the end of the Dirty War. Rumors of human rights violations began to break out of Argentina by the family members of the Deparecidos.

The policies of the U.S. addressing the Dirty War were for the most part hands off policy because it was the height of Cold War with the Communist. It was feared that South America could turn to Castro’s Cuba for inspiration and become the new Communist block. When Latin counties began to adopt Anti-Communist polices of the Right Wing Washington D.C. tried to ignore the repressive policies of the Latin dictatorial states. The U.S did not support or even

recognized the human rights issues in Argentina. The U.S. refused for three years to take any action on human rights violations in fear of a Communist take over in Argentina.

Corruption and human rights violation increasingly became public to the Argentine and the rest of the world as the military junta lost control. The intimidation and suppression of the Argentine by the use of the brutal force of death squads and the uncertainty of when and where one's children may disappear caused Argentine to question the junta propaganda that Argentina was at war. Although the enemy was not a foreign power the propaganda tried to use this fear tactic as a means to instill nationality. The real fears were those of the military and the Elite Class. The subversion was the possible return to Peronism. The possible return of Leftist power and the possible submission of the ruling class fed the motivation for the Dirty War.

Growing opposition to the human rights violations and corruption that the military was so tangibly linked too led the military junta to search for some sort of distraction. The Junta needed a diversion to detract the Argentine from the abuses and corruptions of their government. Facing possible civil war and a lost of power the junta would appeal to Argentine national pride. The junta would call for the retaking of the Los Islas Malvinas which has been disputed since the 1820's with England. The British would have to leave!

The Argentine Military had incorrectly supposed that England did not have much fight left in it and was not the roaring lion of colonial days. The Argentine Junta believed Argentine Forces could easily defeat the British if the British would even fight at all. The junta felt England's supply and refueling issues was beyond their capability. The junta did not count on that the U.S. would come to the aid of Britain

The British viewed the action that was taken by Argentina as a serious slap to British willingness to maintain its position as a world power. The invasion by Argentine Forces was unacceptable to England's New Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. When it became clear that President Regan would side with England the junta was stumped thinking the U.S. would naturally side with their anti Communist ally in South America.

The Falkland War lasted 72 days at a cost unsustainable for the junta. The 72 day war revealed that England was still a great military power. The British had taken 9,800 Argentine prisoners, destroyed several capital Argentine ships and killed many Argentine sailors. The Argentine Army was not as professional as the British. The Argentine Army was mostly conscripts. The loss of the war brought the junta regime to collapse. The cries of the people in the streets were that the government had failed miserably not only in the war but also on inflation, corruption and human rights abuses. This was the last straw, facing public overthrow the junta gave up.

"The junta stepped down in 1982 and restored basic civil liberties and retracted its ban on political parties. The Dirty War ended when Raul Alfonsín's Civil Government took control of the country on Dec,10,1983.(11)

Argentina's Dirty War began because of the fears of the Right Wing and the weakness of the Isabel Peron government. These conditions presented the military with the opportunity it needed to seize power and start its rule of terror. The military had its roots with the Elite Class especially the navy and their views were very conservative. The Working Class and the unions were at odds with the Peron Government and were too weak to resist the military take over.

Anyone who distend or resisted would be seen as a leftist and subversive they would be considered a threat to the government.

The junta paranoid about a counter coup took extraordinary steps to prevent such a coup from the realm of possibility. The main tool to make the Argentine so dossal as I have tried to demonstrate was Fear! The government's use of propaganda and the censorship of any opposing views also were very affective. Kidnapping and torture by the military had been denied by some Argentines because they viewed the actions of the military as totally necessary for security.

The setting up of detention camps at least a full year before the coup started indicated the military had plans to deal with the enemies of the state. A solution was planned. The sudden disappearance of friends, neighbors and even one's own children earn the military's required silence. Even today there are hundreds of Argentine parents still searching for their kidnapped children stolen in the middle of the night. Terror used to hold the silence of a nation. If that was not enough coercion the use of bombings and assassinations on a daily bases by the Death Squads would also insure silence from the opposition. The Elite after seeing the influence of the Peronist did not questioned what the military seen as necessary to bring back order. The Elite wanted Argentina returned back to them and if some unwanted persons were hauled off like trash then the military did Argentina a favor.

Therefore in conclusion it is my belief that the brutal tactics of the military junta were employed to not only to silence the leftist ideology but also to insure the silent compliance of the Argentine people. The Elite Class shared the view with the military that the ideology of the Right would restore order and the dominance of their class. Surly these seven years of terror has to be seen as the darkest days of Argentina's history. Argentina's Dirty War did not win the

intended solution but rather exposed the corruption of power and failed to silence the human spirit of justice.

Footnotes

(1) Patricia M. Marchak, *Gods Assassins: State TerrorisArgentinathe1970*(Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 1999), 109

(2) Ibid., 112

(3) Martin Edwin Andersen, *Dossier Sereto: Argentin'a Desaparecidos and the Myth of the "Dirty War"*(Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 214

(4) Ibid., 215

(5) Ibid.,

(6) Ibid., 216

(7) Ibid., 217

(8) Ibid., 219

(9) Ibid., 205

(10) Ibid., 245

(11) John Pike, "Argentina Dirty War 1976-1983,"Global Security.org ,27 April 2005 [journal on-line]; available from <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/argentina.htm>; Internet; accessed 29 April

Steven B. Stone

Dr. Rector

Hist. 352

06/02/07

Bibliography

Andersen, Martin Edwin. *Dossier Secreto: Argentina's Desaparecidos and the Myth of the "Dirty War."* Boulder: Westview Press, 1993.

The Daily Journal n.a. "Search for children kidnapped during Argentina's Dirty War." <http://www.thedailyjournalonline.com/article.asp?CategoryId=14093&ArticleId=232365> 2004.

Guest, Iain. *Behind the Disappearances: Argentina's Dirty War Against Human Rights and The United Nations.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, c1990.

Lewis, Paul H. *Guerrillas and Generals: the "Dirty War" in Argentina.* Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2002.

Marchak, Patricia M. *God's Assassins: State Terrorism in Argentina in the 1970s.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, c1999.

Osorio, Carlos. "Kissinger to Argentines on Dirty War: "The Quicker You Succeed the Better" <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB104/index2.htm> 4 December 2003

Popkin, Margaret. "Latin American Amnesties in Comparative Perspective: Can the Past Be Buried." <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/aba/10.1111/j.1747-7093.1999.tb00329.x> 11 April 2006

Rosen-Molina, Mike. "Argentina Judge Revokes 'Dirty War' Amnesties as Unconstitutional." <http://jurist.law.pitt.edu/paperchase/2007/04/argentina-judge-revokes-dirty-war.php> 25 April 2007

U.S. Dept. of State. "Argentina Project (S2000000044)" Director Margaret P. Grafeld." n.d.

Pike, John. "Argentina Dirty War 19761983" <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/argentina.htm> 27 April 2005