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# Disappearing Act: Argentina During The Dirty War

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# Disappearing Act: Argentina During The Dirty War.

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A brief historical outline and analysis of the  
detention centers set up by the Argentine  
government.

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During the Argentine Dirty War, the government took a series of precautions against its citizens in order to put down subversive activities. These precautions include the creation of a secret task force with a power system running parallel to the civilian government, the abduction of citizens suspected of subversion, and placing them into a series of secret detention centers all across Argentina. A series of human rights violations were committed by the government during this time such as cruel and unusual punishment, torture and executions. In this paper, I will briefly outline the events leading to the creation of these detention centers, how they functioned, and will also outline some of the torture techniques inflicted on the prisoners as well as the disposal techniques taken by the military once the prisoners were executed.

During the early years of the 1970s political strife was already evident between the government and subversive forces such as the Montoneros and the ERP, the Ejercito Revolucionario del Pueblo or People's Revolutionary Army. Between 1970 and 1972, it is estimated that the Argentine government had already "disappeared" twelve individuals<sup>1</sup>. On August 22, 1972, the Argentine Navy had executed sixteen political prisoners in the city of Trelew and on June 20, 1973, the government had executed approximately 200 Montoneros at the Ezeiza Airport located outside Buenos Aires. (Hodges 1991)

At this time, the government believed subversives were given free reign about Argentina. Therefore, the government realized that they should take special precautions in order to restrict the movements of the subversives. The government would take a series of actions to restrict the movements of the subversives, following the doctrine of Mao Zedong who said, "the guerrilla must not be allowed to circulate like fish in the water."<sup>2</sup> This statement would later be referenced by General Jorge Rafael Videla. Shortly after the Ezeiza Airport massacre, the Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance

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<sup>1</sup> Donald C. Hodges, *Argentina's "Dirty War": An Intellectual Biography* (Austin, Texas, University of Texas Press, 1991)

<sup>2</sup> Marguerite Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1998)

(AAA) would take form. The AAA was armed and funded by the Argentine Ministry of Social Welfare and would recruit active duty and discharged police officers, active duty army officer, criminals and cadres of right wing organizations such as the Peronist Youth of the Argentine Republic, and the Peronist Trade Union Youth. (Hodges 1991) Jose Lopez Rega would serve as the mastermind of the AAA and would be organized by Alberto Villar, a coordinator of the police repressions of the early 1970s. The purpose of the AAA was to defeat the Marxist organizations in Argentina that waged a “systematic but undeclared war” against the Argentine government (Hodges 1991). According to Hodges, it is probable that the creation and subsequent acts of the AAA were done without the knowledge of President Juan Domingo Peron, for the AAA did not take responsibility for their actions until after his death.

Although Peron may have been ignorant of the intentions and deeds of the AAA, he was well aware of the conflict in his country between leftist subversives and his own government. This sentiment was expressed in a document written by Peron and presented to the Peronist Supreme Council on October 1, 1973. The first part of this document entitled “Situations,” Peron states that there was a multidimensional war being waged between the government and Marxist groups in Argentina. In this war, Argentina’s Marxist adversaries sought to slander, threaten and terrorize Argentina’s political hierarchy as well as the general population.

In the second part of this classified document, entitled “Directives,” Peron outlined a list of necessary measures to take against Argentina’s subversive enemies. In this part of the document, Peron emphasized that an aggressive campaign must be undertaken in order to redefine the differences between Marxist doctrine and his own political theory of Peronism. Peron also adds that during this state of emergency, anyone who is caught publically criticizing or questioning the government objectives will be subjected to censorship. (Hodges 1991)

In the first seven months of 1975, the AAA was responsible for 450 assassinations as well as 2,000 disappearances. (Hodges 1991) From February 1975 to April 1976, the Argentine government undertook an experiment in which a system of secret detention centers was implemented. They operated by abducting citizens suspected of subversive convictions. These abducted citizens would also be tortured during their incarceration in the detention centers. During this time, Argentina's first detention center the "Little School of Familia" was created and would serve as a model for the other 340 detention centers that would follow. (Hodges 1991)

Once this system was in place, the government would be able to abduct anyone believed to be a Marxist subversive. A terrorist, as General Videla defined was not simply "someone with a gun or a bomb, but also anyone who encourages their use by ideas incompatible with Western Christian Civilization." (Hodges 1991) However, out of the 30,000 people who eventually disappeared in Argentina only a few hundred were actually terrorists. U.S. First Secretary to Argentina, Tex Harris would later report that a vast number of the disappeared citizens were "wine and coffee subversives--- kids who sat in cafes talking about socialist ideals and how the country ought to be changed. They were easy meat," adding "if they'd sent a hundred of them post cards asking them to come and surrender, ninety five of them would've shown up."<sup>3</sup>

If the government targeted an individual to be abducted, it would authorize a team of six to twenty (or in more radical cases up to fifty) heavily armed Special Forces soldiers to undertake the mission.<sup>4</sup> These troops would arrive in official and unmarked vehicles in many cases sealing off the nearby streets. (Graziano 1992) Once these measures were taken, the troops would seize the targeted citizen, often arresting anyone else found in the citizen's company, using handcuffs, and shrouds. The

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<sup>3</sup> Andrea Malin, "Mother Who Won't Disappear" *Human Rights Quarterly* 16, (Feb. 1994) pp. 187-213

<sup>4</sup> Frank Graziano, *Divine Violence: Spectacle, Psychosexuality, & Radical Christianity in the Argentine "Dirty War"* (Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press, Inc, 1992)

prisoners would then be placed either on the floors of cars or in the trunk and transported to the nearest detention center to be tortured. The prisoner's empty house and whatever possessions the prisoner may have had would be confiscated as "war booty."<sup>5</sup> This included the children of political dissidents.

In some cases involving children, the Special Forces units would put the children in the care of the prisoner's neighbors threatening them to remain quiet about the abduction and the identity of child's real parents. In other cases the children would be placed anonymously on the doorsteps of orphanages. (Penchaszadeh 1993) However, most commonly, these children were taken in by the Special Forces units and given to childless couples who were loyal to the government. Selling the children off to non-subversive individuals was also very common. (Penchaszadeh 1993)

During their interment, the prisoners would undergo a process of torture and solitary confinement in establishments most of which were ironically named after resorts such as "El Motel" and "El Refugio<sup>6</sup>." (Graziano 1992) Almost immediately upon arrival, these prisoners, now known as desaparecidos, would be subjected to sessions of torture. Most of the time, the desaparecidos would be blindfolded and face torturers with false names who operated without the official knowledge of government officials. One of the two most common techniques of administering torture was electroshock treatment. All prisoners were subjected to torture without exception. Ana Maria Careaga, a sixteen year old desaparecido who was three months pregnant would later recall:

"As soon as we arrived at the camp, they stripped and began torturing me. The worst torture was the electric prod--- it went on for many hours, with the prod in my vagina, anus, belly, eyes, nose, ears, all over my body... When I was on the verge of cardiac arrest, they called in a doctor who gave me pills. Then I had convulsions, lost consciousness. So he gave me something else that brought me round. I wanted to die, but they wouldn't let me. They 'saved' me only so they could go on torturing me. They were saying, 'we have all the time in the world.' 'You do not exist. You're no one. If someone came

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<sup>5</sup> Victor B. Penchaszadeh, "Abduction of Children of Political Dissidents in Argentina and the Role of Genetics in Their Resolution" *Journal of Public Health Policy* 13:3 (Autumn 1993) pp. 291-305

<sup>6</sup> Spanish for "The Refuge"

looking for you (and no one has) do you think they'd ever find you here?' 'No one remembers you anymore.' The impunity they had. One would go eat, another would take his place, then he would take a break, and another would replace him." (Feitlowitz 1998)

Another commonly practiced method of torture was called the submarine. In the submarine torture method, the victim's head is submerged in a vat of water, urine and feces. When the victim was on the verge of suffocating, the victim would be briefly raised from the vat and then submerged again. Some victims such as Teresa Celia Meschiati attempted to kill themselves by drinking the putrid water but in her particular case she did not succeed. (Feitlowitz 1998) Another form of torture was known as the "dry submarine" in which a plastic bag would be placed over the head of the victim until the victim was at the point of suffocation. (Feitlowitz 1998) Other torture techniques include rape, burning, being attacked by specially trained dogs, sleep deprivation, being forced to watch other people being tortured most of the time friends and relatives, exposure to extreme temperatures and noises and simulated executions.<sup>7</sup>

These torture sessions would be performed in quirofanos or operating theaters. Most operating theaters only possessed a solitary metal table on which the victim would be held, however, some operating theaters such as ones operated by Alberto "The Uncle" Vega demanded that his operating theaters have tiled walls, surgical gowns and rubber gloves. (Feitlowitz 1998) Feitlowitz speculates this was due to Vega's incapability of handling the blood, vomit and excrement involved in the torture procedures.

The goal of the first session of torture was to obtain intelligence about subversive operations within twenty four hours of the victim's incarceration. This is because members of the Montoneros and the ERP would be alerted to the capture of their comrade in arms and would dramatically change the structure of their operations within those twenty four hours. After twenty four hours of being captured,

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<sup>7</sup> Paul G. Buchanan, "The Varied Faces of Domination: State Terror, Economic Policy, and Social Rupture during the Argentine 'Proceso' 1976-81," *American Journal of Political Science* 31 (May, 1987) pp: 336-382

all of the information the desaparecido possessed would be obsolete. Members of the Montoneros and ERP upon being captured were directed to make a one minute declaration and repeat it over and over again for twenty four hours. (Hodges 1991)

Aside from gathering useful intelligence, the goal of the torturers was to break the spirit of the subversives and compel them to collaborate with the government in bringing down their own organization. The military coerced the captured subversive operatives into believing that they were fighting a losing cause resulting that they betray their own side and fight for the government in ending the war. This torture technique was far more effective than gathering intelligence as General Camps would indicate "Only 5% (of the enemy forces) fell because of military intelligence or chance, the other 95% because of direct or indirect collaboration." (Hodges 1991)

After the sessions of tortures, most desaparecidos would be shackled, handcuffed, forced to wear a shroud and forced into a prison cell called a tubo<sup>8</sup>. The wearing of the shroud had a profoundly dehumanizing effect according to Lisandro Cubas, a survivor of the Navy Mechanics School detention who would later say:

"The psychological torture of the capucha [hood] was bad or worse than the physical... with the 'hood' on, I became fully aware of my complete lack of contact with the outside world. There was nothing to protect you, you were completely alone... The mere inability to see gradually undermines your morale, diminishing your resistance.... The 'hood' became unbearable, so much so that one Wednesday, transfer day, I shouted for them to have me transferred: 'Me... me... 571.' The 'hood' had achieved its aim, I was no longer Lisandro Raul Cubas, I was a number." (Graziano 1992)

In the process of dehumanizing their victims, the guards and torturers aspired to make themselves more than men. Some of the torturers are reported to have shouted during sessions the phrase "We are God! We are the law!"<sup>9</sup> Other torturers made less extreme statements saying, "Only God gives and takes life, but God is busy elsewhere, and we're the ones who must undertake this task in

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<sup>8</sup> Spanish for "tube." In this case a "tubo" is a cramped cell for prisoners.

<sup>9</sup> Mark J. Osiel, "Constructing Subversion in Argentina's Dirty War," *Representations* 75 (Summer 2001): 119-158

Argentina.” (Osiel 2001) Some of the torturers made blood pacts by executing prisoners together in order to solidify a mutual sense of loyalty and guilt. (Buchanan 1987)

During this process of state terrorism, the government received deliberate support from the Argentine Catholic Church. Local clergymen were often times present at torture sessions in order to coerce the victims in order to give a confession. Officers of the higher echelon were advised by priests such as Bishop Jose Miguel Medina who as one member of the military junta observed, “both the troops and command used to welcome him, avid to hear his preaching, the irreplaceable spiritual sustenance for keeping up the struggle and overcoming the lack of understanding... His advice clearly pointed the military sword in the right direction.”<sup>10</sup> Some priests counseled Navy officers after disposing of bodies of executed desaparecidos by quoting Biblical parables such as “the separation of wheat from the chaff.” (M. Osiel 2004) One anonymous soldier sought the counsel of the camp chaplain Father Sosa, who said to the soldier, “You have to think like a surgeon. If you have to amputate a disease, you can’t think about how the patient will look.” (M. Osiel 2004)

The Chief Bishop of the Army is also reported to have preached to the officers of the Army saying that “the anti-guerilla struggle is for the Argentine Republic, for its integrity, but for its altars as well... This is a struggle to defend morality, human dignity, and ultimately a struggle to defend God... Therefore I pray for divine protection over this ‘Dirty War’ in which we are engaged.” (M. Osiel 2004)

Although many of the members of the Argentine Catholic Church supported the war, some clergymen were more moderate in their support. Padre Sabas Gallardo was known for saying that the use of torture is sinful if it’s used for more than forty eight hours, the time by which the knowledge possessed by the prisoner is considered useless. (M. Osiel 2004) Other clergymen such as Bishop Jorge Novak openly opposed the Argentine Dirty War by stating,

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<sup>10</sup> Mark Osiel, “The Mental State of Torturers Argentina’s Dirty War” in Stanford Levinson, ed., *Torture* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2004)

“One wonders about officials in the recent military government who suspended the constitution and at the same time participated in Masses, listened to the word of God, received communion, and professed their faith. They must have posed the moral issues involved, so someone must have been counseling them. One can draw the logical inferences.” (M. Osiel 2004)

After prolonged sessions of torture and solitary confinement, some of the prisoners were chosen to be “transferred” or executed. In this process, the prisoners would undergo a system of triage in which the more dangerous prisoners would be given higher priority for transfer over the more harmless. By this rationale armed subversives are more dangerous than intellectuals or prisoners interred for simply passing out subversive pamphlets. In some cases, prisoners deemed incurable would be allowed to have visitors and be given the false sense of freedom before they were subjected to the transfer process. (Hodges 1991) However, in some cases, the triage system would be abandoned and prisoners would be transferred regardless of their threat to society, as U.S. Secretary Harris says in the passage below:

“There was even a guy from Army Intelligence who told me in person that the real tragedy of their operations was that half of the people eliminated were innocent even by their own criteria. But it was easier to kill them because it was less risky and less compromising than going through the legal procedures.” (Malin 1994)

Just before a transfer the prisoners would be directed to remove their clothes believing what they were told by the officers who ran the camp such as “where you’re going everyone gets the same uniform” or “you’re going North, you don’t need all those clothes.” (Feitlowitz 1998) A doctor always accompanied the transferred prisoners during this time and injected them with Pen-Naval, a sedative that gradually rendered the prisoners unconscious. (Hodges 1991) Once the prisoners were unconscious their bodies were loaded onto truck and planes to where they would be disposed. Bodies loaded onto planes would be thrown out over the Atlantic Ocean to be disposed.

Bodies loaded onto trucks would either be taken to ovens, such as the ovens of the Navy Mechanics School to be cremated. Some of the cremated bodies were placed in anonymous plots in cemeteries in Buenos Aires. In 1974, there were 13,120 cremations at the Chacarita Cemetery in Buenos

Aires. In 1976 that statistic rose to 20,500 and then to 30,000 cremations annually from 1977 to 1979. In 1980 the statistic for annual cremations fell back down to 21,381. (Hodges 1991)

In deconstructing the Argentine detention center system, one finds the Nazi doctrine of “Night and Fog.” This ideology was developed by the Wermacht in dealing with any individual with subversive ideologies against the Third Reich. Under this doctrine, subversive radicals were to be secretly confined in concentration camps with no access to the outside world. Upon being captured, the prisoner would have no legal rights or recourse. Then as Marshall Kietel of the German High Command was reported to have said, “The prisoners shall disappear without leaving traces... and no information shall be released concerning their whereabouts or destiny.” (Hodges 1991)

With this ideology, the Argentine government sought to leave no trace of their desaparecidos. However, ever since the end of the Dirty War in 1983, some groups have sought to find the truth. These groups include grassroots organizations such as the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, mothers of desaparecidos who have made demonstrations in the capital in order to find the whereabouts of their abducted children and relatives. Political organizations such as the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons have also launched investigations into uncovering the events of this inhuman system.

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