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Long Term Impact of Military Dictatorship and State Terrorism on Argentine Society

Latin American countries have individually faced periods of political, economic, and social turmoil at different times in their history. But their collective distress was perpetuated for decades and was even supported by hegemonic superpowers, particularly the United States, since the twentieth century. Such disarray left these countries straggling behind in a state of disorder and stagnation. Central and South American citizens were stripped of their constitutional rights by their own semblances of governments and this air of despair has left them deeply divided, furthermore lagging behind those societies that have been afforded the privileges of time and liberty to develop. This essay will focus on the effects of Argentina's military dictatorship. Argentine citizens were not only violated figuratively and literally by their government, but as a result, they were—and still are—motivated to seek truth about an era of covert state terrorism when a breed of state-sponsored warfare systematically murdered, kidnapped, and tortured tens of thousands of innocent civilians between the years of 1976 and 1983. Questions remain unanswered and nearly a whole decade has been whitewashed, leaving Argentine society in distrust of its own government, in fear of personal safety, and an entire memory vanished along with the *desaparecidos* of the Dirty War.

Following the death of Juan Peron in 1974, Isabelita, his third wife, became president and perpetuated economic distress and terrorist violence in 'a "dirty war" that was already underway against the left, both guerrillas and noncombatants,' only to be overthrown by a military regime

led by General Jorge Videla in 1976¹. This was roughly the start of *El Proceso*'s war on subversion, 'using a sui generis definition of subversive, because it encompassed guerrillas, Marxists of varying persuasion, liberals, and reform-minded Catholics and Jews, as well as all those suspected of actively, remotely, or accidentally, willingly or unwillingly, aiding or abetting'² Videla's definition of a terrorist which was defined as 'not just someone with a gun or a bomb but also someone who spreads ideas that are contrary to Western and Christian civilization.'³ The military dictatorship's 'war on subversives knew no rules at all' and targeted anyone they could.⁴ In a series of four consecutive military juntas, each consisting of the Commander in Chief of the Army, Commander in Chief of the Navy, and Commander in Chief of the Air Force, the country was essentially and profoundly destroyed. Videla was the frontman of the junta through March 1981 when the second group of commanders took control, led by General Roberto Viola. General Leopoldo Galtieri's junta replaced them in 1982 until the loss of the Falklands War forced him into resignation just a few months later.

On March 26 of 1976, the junta issued a statement that announced the necessity for the country to undergo a Process of National Reorganization in order to 'promote economic development, eradicate subversion, and restore the values fundamental to the integral management of the state, emphasizing the sense of morality, fitness, and efficiency indispensable for the reconstitution of the nation.'⁵ War was waged in the cities and in the countryside through conventional disputes with guerrilla forces, but also through a clandestine campaign that was

¹ T.C. Wright, 'The Latin American Human Rights Crisis' *State Terrorism in Latin America: Chile, Argentina, and International Human Rights* (2007) 29

² M. Navarro, 'The Personal is Political: Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo' *Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements* (2001) 244

³ *The Times*. London. 4 January 1978

⁴ T.C. Wright, 'The Latin American Human Rights Crisis' 33

⁵ M. Navarro, 'The Personal Is Political' 245

executed by special task forces. Less than three years after the Chilean coup, the Argentine military learned from them and modified their guerrilla warfare tactics: 'desiring to avoid the near-universal condemnation that had greeted the bloodbath across the Andes, they devised a manner of eliminating left without overflowing the prisons, holding mock trials, or leaving bodies to be collected and identified,' perfecting their methods of forced disappearances and creating a pattern.⁶ Victims were taken methodically, at an arbitrary place and time of day. They were taken from their homes or workplaces, on the streets or at school, by groups of five to ten men who were armed but dressed as civilians. If the disappearance occurred in the victim's home, the family was tortured with their eyes taped shut. Driving away in unmarked vehicles, often Ford Falcons, the kidnapers frequently conducted these crimes under the veil of a blackout.⁷ It was systematically and brutally carried out so as to protect the identity of the perpetrators. They 'had little concern about being held accountable for their crimes, and victims had little recourse to outside aid,' largely in part because the authorities the relatives of victims would seek help from completely denied that abductions were occurring in Argentina.⁸ They maintained anonymity and secrecy, instilling a specific kind of fear in the victims, their families, and the Argentine public that one could be taken anywhere at anytime without a trace. Bodies were burned, buried in unmarked graves, or dropped from helicopters into the sea or the Rio de la Plata. Detention centres were kept clandestine and the military had control of the courts where writs of habeas corpus were continuously denied, evidence of the 'erosion of political and social legitimacy' in the country.⁹

⁶ T.C. Wright, 'The Latin American Human Rights Crisis' 29

⁷ M. Navarro, 'The Personal Is Political' 246

⁸ T.C. Wright, 'The Latin American Human Rights Crisis' 18

⁹ C. Waisman, 'Reversal of Development in Argentina' (1987) 92

Human rights organizations lobbied to ‘consolidate human rights as a central political issue’ and achieved the inclusion of ‘social, economic, and cultural human rights...as part of democratic Argentina’s constitutional reform in 1994.’¹⁰ HIJOS (Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio: Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice Against Oblivion and Silence) and Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo could be seen as a step towards the direction of more democratic participation. A group that was started by only fourteen women gathered in front of the Casa Rosada in downtown Buenos Aires for the first time on April 30, 1977 to demand answers from their government. These women were mostly housewives without previous political experience, ‘transformed... into political subjects and, ultimately, into the symbol of resistance’ to the dictatorship.¹¹ The group grew to thousands and their final march was not until 2006. Commemorative cycles, public protests, and marches strengthen political mourning and help comfort grieving family members of victims of state violence.

The 1983 election of Raul Alfonsín brought campaigns for the prosecution of the perpetrators during *El Proceso* through the Trial of the Juntas but, under political pressure and scrutiny, he stunted this progress in the restoration of democracy and recuperation of cultural trauma with the *Punto Final* Full Stop and Due Obedience laws in 1986 and 1987. These laws put an end to the investigations and justified the human rights violations as simply following orders and were not repealed until 2003. President Carlos Menem even pardoned the perpetrators in 1989, excusing the entirety of the Dirty War. Instability and inconsistency with respect to the treatment of the Argentine human rights crisis during the military dictatorship are cyclical; ‘whether the cycle...can be broken in a country with a stagnated economy, highly mobilized

¹⁰ M. Humphrey, E. Valverde ‘Human Rights, Victimhood, and Impunity: An Anthropology of Democracy in Argentina’ (2007) 183

¹¹ M. Navarro, ‘The Personal Is Political’ 241

social forces, and a military and security apparatus still imperfectly controlled by the government is an open question' that may be answered by the general attitudes towards the acknowledgement of state terrorism.¹² The trials polarized the populations and divided it 'between the guilty and the innocent,' creating a rift in the sense of recovery and a 'thinness of citizenship in contemporary democratic Argentina and Latin America' that inhibited progress towards reconciliation and democracy.¹³ This division is not uncommon in the wake of dictatorships, as 'deep fissures separated the armed forces and the groups that had supported their rule from the individuals and groups who had suffered the wrath of state terrorism and who were backed by human rights movements that had been formed during the period of repression. The central issue dividing societies was justice versus impunity'¹⁴ and Argentina was dichotomized. Today the country's collective memory is healed through commemorations and national days of remembrance, such as Mother's Day and the Day of Remembrance for Truth and Justice. Every kind of life was attacked by the junta: women and children were no exception and many pregnant women were held in the underground jails until giving birth, then killed and their babies were given up for adoption to military families. This was sordid and cruel twist of destiny that quite literally rewrote and fabricated a generation's details by sweeping the truth under the rug. The generation's collective memory is therefore completely distorted and based on lies created by its program of authority, a false version of history that is still being uncovered today. Argentina is still grappling with its past of torture and repression as the United States declassifies more documents which will reveal its role in that dirty chapter in the Argentine history and may also

¹² C. Waisman, 'Reversal of Development in Argentina' 97

¹³ M. Humphrey, E. Valverde 'Human Rights, Victimhood, and Impunity 182

¹⁴ T.C. Wright, 'The Latin American Human Rights Crisis' 33

give some solace and consolation to relatives of those victims who disappeared during the military regime.

Operation Condor tore the Southern Cone apart. In efforts to eliminate potential oppositional movements, Latin American countries like Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, Bolivia and Brazil used a state of terror to combat ‘terrorism,’ as so defined by General Videla. Supported through the United States’ CIA, dictatorships killed, tortured, and kidnapped youth for simply spreading left-wing leaflets in plazas or actually being involved in abductions or bombings. Anyone with any association to someone who had anti-government leanings was in absolute peril. Each of the aforementioned countries had long histories of militarized control, but Argentina was the only one with such extreme reforms, an ‘authoritarian approach to policing in which individual rights took a back seat to public order,’ deeming the civil liberties and basic human rights of its people unimportant.¹⁵ Former United States’ Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, gave Argentina’s military junta the green light in 1976, enabling an entire region’s destruction and forcing its people into social, economic, and political upheaval. Within the ‘logic of state terror,’ civilian groups were ‘singled out for murder in order to send a chilling signal to a wider target population and thus deter an undesired behaviour’ that threatened the military’s control.¹⁶ All of these factors, even when finally recognized by the rest of the world, amounted to the complete destruction and regression of a potentially prosperous nation. Looking backwards the secret unravelling of Argentina’s economy, government, and society seems unimaginable and is undeniable, but at the time of the events, the world *chose* to neglect this. By doing so, governments of higher power handpicked Latin America’s fate in what is now phrased as

¹⁵ D. Pion-Berlin, ‘Authoritarian Legacies and Their Impact on Latin America’ *Latin American Politics and Society* (2005) 164

¹⁶ D. Pion-Berlin, ‘Authoritarian Legacies’ (2005) 169

‘underdevelopment,’ and therefore discredits the region’s efforts and strives for developing democratically on part of the public. Countries are labelled with synonyms for ‘unfit’ or ‘developing’ while turning a blind eye to the root of the cause. Cries for help were ignored and the ‘demands for justice persist because they are anchored in the emotional lives of the survivors and the families of the victims,’ a fundamental aspect of Latin American collective culture and memory.¹⁷ The result of years of state-sponsored violence is a region that is still learning to navigate departments that have been refined in other, more privileged and powerful countries. While this essay only details Argentina’s history of state terrorism, the long-term impact of these military dictatorships in all of Latin America have left a corner of the world broken and behind.

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¹⁷ M. Humphrey, E. Valverde ‘Human Rights, Victimhood, and Impunity 179