

# ARGENTINA: THE DIRTY WAR, THE DISAPPEARED, THE MOTHERS AND THE GRANDMOTHERS

An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography

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My hope is that this document will prove informative to secondary school and college level instructors in a variety of disciplines. It could be used as a resource in Latin American studies course, Political Science courses, Spanish language and literature courses and multi-disciplinary courses or learning communities. As a Professor of Spanish language, I have used the subject of the Dirty War in upper level language classes in reading, writing, and speaking assignments as well as to inform the students about that horrific period of Argentine history.

In this Introduction, I will try to answer the following questions about the Dirty War:

- What were the circumstances that led to the military coup in 1976 and set the stage for the Dirty War?
- What happened during the Dirty War?
- How did the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo come together and evolve as an organization and what did they do?
- Who are the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and what did they do?
- How has justice been served?
- What is the current situation in Argentina regarding the Disappeared?

In assembling the annotated bibliography, for the most part I have included for the most part books and articles available in both Spanish and English although some of the music and poetry materials are available only in Spanish. Although such materials are not readily available in the United States, they can readily be acquired through Web sites, or in Argentina.

## OVERVIEW

March 24, 1976 is a date that will not soon be forgotten by the people of Argentina. That was the date, over 25 years ago, of the military coup that deposed Isabel Perón and sent her into exile. What followed was a seven-year period of unprecedented human rights abuses in which approximately 30,000 people were "disappeared " and hundreds of young children and babies born in captivity were taken from their legitimate families and given to the families of military officers.

Since the return to democracy in 1983, there have been many investigations into this period referred to as the "Dirty War" and certain facts, horrific in nature, are generally accepted to be true.

- **Over 30,000 people were disappeared, most of whom were never seen again.**

- **Some 500 young children and babies born to mothers who were kept alive long enough to give birth were appropriated and given to the families of high ranking military officers and their accomplices, thus robbing those children of their true identities and families.**
- **There were approximately 350 detention centers and concentration camps, some large and some small, spread throughout the entire country.**
- **Over 1,000 military personnel were involved in the abduction, physical and psychological torture and murder of the disappeared. These activities were sanctioned and planned by the military.**

I think that to really understand what happened in Argentina during the Dirty War it is necessary to go back a little in history to discover how this situation could have occurred in an apparently civilized country such as Argentina. The political heritage of Argentina has always been mixed and somewhat unstable. Although Argentina prides itself on being a modern, sophisticated country, heir to the liberal European model of constitutional democracy, it has also been heavily influenced by Imperial Spain with its authoritarian leanings and close relationships among the church, the State and the military.

## **WHAT WERE THE CIRCUMSTANCES WHICH LED TO THE 1976 COUP AND SET THE STAGE FOR THE DIRTY WAR?**

### **Military rule, Perón and Peronism**

In 1930 the military overthrew the President, starting a long period of political and social instability. Between 1930 and 1946 all the Presidents were overthrown by the military although many of these coups were supported by the civilian population. The military either ruled directly or arranged for the election of presidents who were members of the military or had its support. To this day, elected leaders, no matter what their party affiliation, have recognized that maintaining good relations with the military is the key to staying in power.

In the 20th century, Juan Domingo Perón has been the most powerful leader of Argentina, and even in death his influence continues to bear on current politics. Juan Perón was a military man who rose through the ranks to be elected President of Argentina in 1946. He was reelected for a second term but eventually was overthrown and sent into exile in 1955. He was equally admired by the extreme right and the extreme left. Perón was a man of the people, who with his charismatic wife Eva, championed the cause of the working man. He fought for social justice, a redistribution of income, the labor unions and a stronger national economy. However he was a paradoxical figure. He was also a tyrant, creating a kind of police state that prepared the way for the terror that followed. As time went on, his regime deviated from its stated goals, and its corruption, assaults on the Church and failed economic policies led to his ouster in 1955. The Peronist party was outlawed, and its insignias and slogans were banned, as was the mention of his name.

Between the years 1955 and 1973 there were ten different governments in Argentina, some lasting as little as three months. Although the governments tried to reduce the influence of the Peronist faction, a younger generation of Peronists continued to work behind the scenes to exert influence on the political process. For example, in an election to select delegates for a constitutional convention, the number of blank ballots outnumbered those of all the parties, showing that the Peronists probably still were in fact a majority, albeit a majority with real political power without leadership or focus.

Economic problems continued to assail the country and tensions were rising. The continued failure of economic policies lead to frequent changes in government, some of them backed by the more liberal and progressive newspapers of the country. Most of these coups were welcomed by the people as well.

In 1966 General Juan Carlos Onganía took control. His political philosophy was "Peronism without Perón" and like Perón, he sought to make changes from above. In an attempt to intimidate any opposition, he banned all political parties and all political activities. He intervened in the universities, expelling any students or faculty with Communist leanings. He made no attempt to accommodate the unions, which led to many strikes. The strikes were put down and its leaders put in jail. He declared his intent to remain in power indefinitely and instituted the "Revolución Argentina", a program of national regeneration, which would restore the economy and combat high inflation.

### **The "Cordobazo" and increasing violence and factionalism**

Although there was relative peace for a while, in May 1969 a huge riot erupted in the city of Córdoba, instigated by the university students and the automobile workers. However the students and autoworkers were then joined by various elements of the general population and the violence continued for 48 hours. This incident that has come to be known as the "Cordobazo" was the most violent uprising since 1945 and it showed the extent of the underlying unrest in the country. Although the government seemed surprised at the scale of the Cordobazo, the spontaneous outbreaks of violence were the only way that the students and the smaller labor unions could express their dissatisfaction. Although the "Cordobazo" predates the military coup by almost seven years, it is considered a turning point in that from that time on censorship and repression were commonplace in Argentina.

The "Cordobazo" was not an isolated incident. There was an escalation of violence throughout the country carried out by left wing groups who reacted to Onganía's dictatorship and his lack of support for national industries. In Córdoba, leftist and Communist groups ruled the university and the autoworkers unions. In 1970 several guerilla units were operating: Frente Argentino de Liberación (Argentine Liberation Front) and the Montoneros, a Peronist group. The latter group kidnapped and killed former President Aramburu in June 1970. These and other groups, both Peronist and non-Peronist, staged kidnappings, bank robberies and assassinations. In 1973 all the Peronist groups united with the Montoneros. They were strongly opposed to the Army. Most Montonero members were young people, mostly students in their twenties, from middle or upper-middle class families. The other major guerilla group, the ERP (People's Revolutionary Party) was anti-Peronist, was more Communist in nature and sought to carry out its revolutionary ideas beyond Argentina.

The counterterrorist activities by the right wing escalated in turn. In their war on 'subversion', right wing guerrilla groups started abducting student and union activists, most of whom never returned. Uprisings were common, some arising from seemingly minor situations, for example a rise in electricity rates. In 1972, in an attempt to stem the unrest, the President invited all "democratic forces" to help him combat terrorism and lifted the ban on political parties, thus setting the stage for the eventual return of Juan Perón.

### **Perón's return - a failure from the start**

Though Juan Perón was forced into exile in 1955, there were many Peronists back home in Argentina who supported him and waited for the day that he would return. Perón had had the support of many different factions and their support in the election of 1973 gave the Peronist party a clear victory. But within the Peronist party there were growing tensions among the different factions of the party, most notably the Montoneros and the labor unions. Violence between these two factions erupted at Ezeiza

airport as they awaited Perón's return in June 1973. Hundreds of people were killed in the skirmish. It was evident that even Perón himself could not restore stability to the country although in September 1973, at 78 years of age, he was elected President and his third wife Isabel was elected Vice-President.

The return of Perón did not signify, however, that the leftist violence was over. The Montoneros were still active and the ERP renewed its guerilla activities. The Army, somewhat weakened by the events of the last six years, sought ways to combat the terrorism. The Army started a new right wing anti-terrorist organization called the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance (commonly referred to as the Triple A or AAA). Perón had used the left to bolster his return to Argentina, but after the fiasco at the Ezeiza airport, Perón tried to distance himself from the terrorist activities of the Montoneros. He imposed harsh sentences for acts of terrorism. However he chose to ignore the terrorist actions of the AAA.

Juan Perón died in July 1974, a year after his return to Argentina, and his third wife, Isabel de Perón, became President. Perón had named Isabel as his Vice-President only because there was no one other person who was acceptable to the various political factions and therefore she did not have the support that she needed. She had no political experience and was unable to deal with the mounting problems in her country. The Montoneros increased the kidnappings, robberies and extortion of politicians, bankers and businessmen. Upper class businessmen were forced to hire bodyguards to protect themselves and their families.

In September 1974 the Montoneros abducted Juan and Jorge Born, owners of the largest grain exporting business in Argentina. A ransom of \$60 million dollars was paid, which to date is the largest ransom ever paid. There were also bombings and assassinations of members of the army, police, politicians and labor leaders. The Army and the police responded in kind, killing prominent leftist intellectuals. By now, all three units of the armed forces were involved in anti-subversive activities. Their targets were not only those thought to engage in terrorist activities, but also those who engaged in mild protests and those suspected of harboring them. The number of targets grew rapidly; some were held hostage and some were executed. Argentina was in state of civil war. People on both sides felt threatened in their daily lives. In November 1974, the government declared a state of siege and suspended all Constitutional rights and vowed to rid the country of the dangerous subversive elements.

The economy continued to falter. Exports fell, the deficit grew. By the end of 1975, inflation was near 200 percent. Wages were frozen and the unions declared a general strike, which was the first ever under a Peronist government. In addition, there were charges of corruption leveled at the Isabel de Perón; she was accused of diverting large sums of money into personal accounts. In December 1975, the Air Force unsuccessfully staged a coup against Perón. However, on March 24, 1976, an Army coup led by General Jorge Rafael Videla successfully took control of the government, ousting Isabel de Perón and placing her under house arrest.

## **Observations**

I think that it is important to note that by the mid 1970's the situation, both political and economic, had become so untenable that the coup was generally welcomed by the people, not only by the rightist factions represented by the military and business, but also by leftist liberal thinkers as well. For example, Jacobo Timmerman, a liberal journalist who was later held prisoner and tortured by the Junta, saw the military coup as a positive step towards economic and political stability in Argentina.

On the other end of the spectrum, the military, anti-Communist and strongly connected to the Catholic Church, saw itself as the savior of the nation. It felt threatened by the political instability and the terrorism, and attacked all potential enemies, i.e. any person or group that sought to challenge what it saw as key value: belief in a centralized, bureaucratic form of government and the good of the nation

over the rights of the individual; loyalty to religious (Catholic) traditions; strong anti-Communist sentiments and recognition of the role of the military as a father figure.

## **WHAT HAPPENED DURING THE DIRTY WAR?**

The enemies identified by the military included not only people who carried out acts of terrorism but also "ideological subversives" - elementary and secondary teachers, professors, students, factory workers, members of the press, lawyers, artists, musicians, authors, psychologists, people committed to helping the poor and disenfranchised, people who simply had a different, more liberal point of view. The ironic reality is that at this point in time most of the guerrillas who had posed a real threat had been eradicated by the AAA. Neither the Montoneros nor the ERP had the power or the following that they once had.

### **Post-coup - the Dirty War officially begins**

Shortly after taking power in 1976, Videla issued the "Statute for the Process of National Reorganization", later referred to as "El Proceso". "El Proceso" lent legitimacy to the abduction, torture and murder of thousands of Argentines; it was purportedly done for the good of the country and to control subversives. (To this day in Argentina, the term "Proceso" is still widely used to refer to the "Dirty War", a term that obviously sanitizes the "Dirty War.") An incident that has come to be known as "The Night of the Pencils" serves to illustrate how harmless some of the so-called "subversives" were. In September of 1976, a group of high school students in La Plata, a city known for its liberal and progressive views, organized to lobby the local government for subsidized bus fares for students. Shortly thereafter, they were dragged from their homes and murdered. Even more tragic, these students had been betrayed by their parish priest, which illustrates dramatically the complicit role of some members of the Church in the Dirty War.

### **Rhetoric, Justification and Social Engineering**

The different members of the Junta made frequent speeches in which they called on the people to support them in their efforts to "reorganize" the country. Citizens were called upon to sacrifice their individual rights and needs in order to "heal" the country and achieve peace "for God and country." References to "cleansing" the country of subversive elements illustrate the influence of the Nazis on the Argentina military. Many former Nazi officers had escaped to Argentina after World War II and helped train the Argentine military. The Junta members were very good with words, and their subliminal messages sought to make the people believe that the enemy was all around them. The words of Admiral Emilio Massera are representative of the rhetoric commonly heard after the coup.

"These are difficult days, days of cleansing, preparation... this country has been ill for too long for a sudden recovery. That's why we must understand that we have only begun our period of convalescence... our recuperation of the nation's health...and to do so we must cleanse the country of subversion." (Feitlowitz, 33)

The words of Iberico St. Jean, governor of the province of Buenos Aires, were more direct than most military rhetoric in describing the mission of "El Proceso":

"First we will kill all the subversives, then we will kill their collaborators, then ... their sympathizers, then... those who remain indifferent; and finally, we will kill the timid." (Feitlowitz, 32)

The Junta actively sought to recruit the Argentine people in its war against subversives. They sought to pit the Argentine people against each other by proclaiming that the enemy was internal and that you could not know who the enemy was. Argentina was portrayed as "ill" and all people needed to

join in finding the "cure". The people were constantly bombarded with propaganda, and the phrases used, while usually sounding seemingly innocent, took on new meanings. "Silence is health.", originally a civic promotion to encourage people to stop sounding their car horns and thus reduce noise pollution, clearly came to have two meanings. In Argentina, "zona de detención" is one way to say "waiting area" at a bus stop; it also means "arrest or detention zone". (Feitlowitz, 34-35)

The Junta also encouraged the people to look for "subversives" in their midst. The Ministry of Education published a pamphlet for parents of school age children entitled "How to recognize Marxist infiltration in the schools." In the view of the Junta, the use of the following words served to warn parents: "dialogue, compromise, structural change, capitalism, socialism, popular leader, liberation." Group work in the classroom was thought to be a way in which subversive elements could indoctrinate others in the group. The government saw itself in a parental role, helping parents to raise their children safely in dangerous times. (Feitlowitz, 37)

## **HOW WAS THE DIRTY WAR CARRIED OUT?**

How was the Dirty War carried out? There were about 350 detention centers, large and small, spread out across the entire country. One of the most infamous, La Perla (The Pearl) housed between 1,500 and 2,000 prisoners. One of the smallest, housing 30-40 prisoners, was in the subbasement of an upscale shopping center in Buenos Aires called Galerías Pacifico. While shoppers on the upper level browsed in boutiques, victims were being tortured several floors below.

Generally, the abductions were carried out in the early hours before dawn, with no warning or provocation. Most often several carloads of plainclothes men, in Ford Falcons, arrived and dragged people away. Victims were blindfolded and shoved into cars that sped away into the night. Other times, people were abducted away from their work in broad daylight, a show of the arrogance with which the police acted. Houses were ransacked and robbed, and remaining family members sometimes were tied up or beaten. Young children were sometimes taken with their parents; other times they were left alone in the empty apartment. Often the local police aided in the abductions by sealing off neighborhoods beforehand, or by cutting electricity to the area. Many times helicopters hovered overhead shining spotlights over the entire neighborhood.

Why were such heavy-handed tactics used to round up people who posed no real threat to the government? The "overacted" abductions were meant to convince people that the threat posed by the "internal enemy" was real. The implication was that there must be some reason why a neighbor was taken with such force. The aim was to make people think twice before engaging in any subversive activity themselves, lest the same thing happen to them, and also to force people to look the other way. This was particularly true at the beginning of the Proceso. A phrase commonly heard in reaction to hearing that someone was "disappeared" was "Por algo será." (It must be for some reason.) Often neighbors, when questioned by families of the disappeared, as to what they may have witnessed, claimed not to have heard or seen a thing.

## **What happened to these people after they were disappeared?**

The victims almost always remained blindfolded or hooded for the entire time of their captivity. This served to disorient the prisoners, as they never knew when or from where the next attack would come. Generally the prisoners were given numbers, instead of names. The torturers had nicknames such as "the rat", "the doctor", and "the priest" so that the prisoners would not know their true identity. Both of these things made it difficult for those who did escape because they did not know who their fellow prisoners were, nor did were they able to identify their torturers. Upon arriving at a detention center, they were brutally tortured, both physically and psychologically, even when the torturers knew that their victims had no information. They were sexually abused, starved, made to wallow in their

own filth, and they were burned with such things as electric cattle prods. They were held in small spaces called "tubos" (tubes), some of which were so low that they could not even sit up; when lying down, they had to be in the fetal position because they could not extend their legs. Jewish people were also subject to Nazi -like tortures as well. Hitler's speeches were heard over loudspeakers; photos of Hitler adorned the walls.

## **HOW DID THE MOTHERS COME TOGETHER AND EVOLVE AS AN ORGANIZATION AND WHAT DID THEY DO?**

### **Coming together**

When their children were first disappeared, most parents felt that there was some mistake, and although they were concerned, they also felt confident that their children would be released. However, as the mothers went from precinct station to Army barracks to hospitals, they always received the same answer; no one knew anything about their children's disappearance. Their searches were never successful. It was often suggested to them that their children had simply "disappeared", that they had gone into hiding because of their subversive activities or that they had left the country and gone into exile. Some of the victims were from middle or upper middle class educated families that had connections to the military. These families assumed that their connections would free sons and daughters who had done nothing wrong in the first place. However, they were generally met with the same response. The Junta played no favorites.

Most of these women were homemakers from middle class or lower class families; some had not even completed secondary school. Their lives revolved around managing the home and catering to the needs of their husbands and children. They were not political beings; they were not socially active. With the disappearance of their children, their worlds were turned upside down. As these women took to the streets for days on end, searching for their children, other children were left at home and fathers were forced into roles to which they were totally unaccustomed.

Many Argentine families suffered greatly during the years of the repression. Not only did they lose their children (some families lost two and three children), but many also lost their connections to their extended families. Many relatives were scared by the possibility that they too would be taken, and so they divorced themselves from the family of the disappeared, who more than ever needed a support system. Some relatives who had been somewhat supportive at the outset came to criticize the parents who refused to accept that their children were dead.

As more and more mothers went to the police stations looking for their children, or to the courts to file writs of habeas corpus, they began to talk cautiously with one another about their disappeared children. They decided to start to meet in each other's homes and in churches as well. One of the first mothers to galvanize the group was Azucena de Villaflor de De Vicente. Azucena was from a middle class background; her parents were supporters of Perón; her father was a trade union organizer. Azucena went to work in a factory at age 15. When she married, like most middle class Argentine women, she quit her job to become a homemaker. She was happy in that role until her son Nestor was abducted in 1976. She was the early guiding force of the Mothers.

It was her idea to go to the government offices in Plaza de Mayo with a petition seeking an audience with the government to try to find out what had happened to their children. Originally there were fourteen mothers who were meeting regularly. They sought to expand the group and contacted many of the other mothers that they had met in their search for their children. Many mothers were understandably afraid to join the group. In April of 1977 a group of mothers started to meet on Friday afternoons in the Plaza de Mayo, which faces the Casa Rosada, the government house. (The day was later changed to Thursdays.) The third week of their meetings, the mothers presented a petition asking to meet with the President. Two months later, their request was granted, but the meeting

between two of the mothers and the President was a huge disappointment. The President told them that all of their children had left the country. It was then that the mothers decided that they would continue to march every week until they had information as to the whereabouts of their children.

As more and more women began to gather every week, the police noted their presence. They were told that sitting in the Plaza in large numbers was tantamount to holding a public meeting, which was outlawed under the Junta. The police told them "Keep moving, keep walking." So the mothers began to march around the obelisk in the middle of the Plaza de Mayo, in a counterclockwise direction to show their defiance. Their numbers began to grow over time, and the police did not know what to do with them. They would arrive in vans and try to force the group to disband. Sometimes the police would spray them with tear gas or shoot them with water cannons or hit them with clubs. But still the mothers returned week after week. The Plaza de Mayo is a large rectangular space with many heavily trafficked commercial streets leading into it. The mothers would arrive by themselves or in pairs and would leave the same way, enabling them to quickly get lost in the crowds.

Ironically the tactics used by police to discourage the mothers only served to increase their determination. Although the return of their children was always their main objective, they could now see for themselves the need to fight against the repressive measures of the government. Through their experience, they learned about the power of solidarity and unity and through their solidarity they fought back. If a policeman asked one woman for her identity papers, they would all rush and insist that he take theirs as well. If they tried to arrest one woman, they would all demand to go, and the police would be forced to take away 60-70 mothers in their vans. Although they were defiant, they were respectful and when taunted by the police that their children were Communists, they would respond that they were merely looking for their children. These women, some of whom at first had been afraid to even march in the Plaza, found courage and resiliency that neither they, nor the government, ever could have imagined.

As their numbers grew, they had to make some changes in the way that they operated. They could no longer meet in their homes, and so they would meet in different churches every week. Some churches welcomed them, while others, feeling threatened by their presence, denied them access. They became more organized, establishing a division of labor. They were no longer merely a group of women looking for their children; they were seeking justice for the perpetrators. Whenever possible, they interviewed people who had been released to try to obtain information about where the camps were located, who their fellow detainees were and also who their captors were. The mothers started to keep records of people, places and dates. As the stories of torture grew worse, the mothers' courage grew stronger.

### **Evolving into a national and internationally known movement**

The mothers looked for ways to spread their message to the population at large. In September 1977, the Catholic community of Buenos Aires sponsored a religious procession to Luján, a town 50 km. from the city. Azucena de De Vicente thought it would be a good idea for the mothers to join the march and to explain their plight to fellow marchers. Because the mothers would be joining the march at various places along the route depending on where they lived, they needed a way to identify themselves in such a huge crowd. Someone suggested wearing a white baby shawl on their heads, as a symbol of their disappeared children. As the mothers joined the march and found each other with their white kerchiefs, they formed a white mass among the marchers. When asked who they were, they responded that they were looking for their disappeared children. Others in the procession replied that they too had missing children.

The march to Luján was a pivotal moment in their growth as an organization. They had ventured as a group outside of the Plaza de Mayo, indeed, outside of Buenos Aires, taking their message to a larger audience. They attained a high level of visibility with their kerchiefs, and it was at that point that they

decided to make the white shawls a symbol of their organization, a symbol that is now recognized around the world. And although the police followed them, they were part of a march for peace sponsored by the Catholic Church, and there was nothing that the police could do.

Although the activities of the mothers were still kept out of the Argentine press, the mothers were becoming a problem for the security forces. It was obvious that the efforts by the police to intimidate the mothers were not working. In the fall of 1977 the Military sent a young Navy coronal Alfredo Astiz, "El Angel Rubio" (The Blond Angel) to infiltrate the group. Posing as Gustavo Niño, a young man looking for his disappeared brother, he helped the mothers and they became protective of him. On December 8 a large group was gathered in a church working on a paid advertisement that they planned to put in the newspapers. As they entered the church, some noticed that there were several strangers outside the church, but they continued their work anyway. When Astiz went outside for a smoke, the police stormed the church, abducting two of the founding members as well as two French nuns who embraced their cause. Two days later, Azucena, who was supposed to have been in the church, was abducted in broad daylight in front of her house. None of these people were ever heard from again.

The Mothers were devastated by the betrayal of Gustavo Niño and the loss of their leader Azucena. Previously, the Mothers had been harassed, and on occasion had been detained and then released, but the disappearance of these five people made them realize that their own lives were at risk. Their numbers dwindled; people were afraid to associate with them; and they themselves suffered a period of repression that they had not experienced before. The Junta orchestrated a campaign to brand them as crazy old women, referring to them as "Las Locas". The Junta also spread rumors that the Mothers were being manipulated by terrorist groups such as the Montoneros. Some family members, friends and supporters distanced themselves from the mothers, and they found themselves even more isolated in their grief. For those who still had the courage to continue the fight, the group became their family and their support system. "The act of reaching out to one another ... transformed them from victims into self-confident political activists. ... In the context of a terrorist state and within a society that has traditionally kept women in marginal roles, it was a tremendous step.." (Guzman Bouvard, 80)

## **Actions and successes**

Although the threat of repercussion was constant, the Mothers kept up their campaign and although the national press paid them no attention, the foreign journalists were beginning to take notice of their activities. The presence of members of the international press protected the Mothers somewhat, because the police were unable to use repressive measures against them with the press as witnesses. The Mothers still continued to believe that their children were innocent and would be returned to them. They still focused their attention on sending petitions, filing writs of habeas corpus, and seeking the help of the Catholic Church and still marched every Thursday in the Plaza de Mayo.

In 1978 Argentina hosted the World Cup soccer championships and the Mothers knew that tourists and media people from all over the world would be visiting the country. They gathered to discuss how to respond to journalists' questions. They decided that a simple answer was the best reply: "We want our children. They must tell us where they are." That same year there was an International Conference on Cancer Research. Some of the doctors came to march with the Mothers, making sure that they wore their nametags to protect them. When police swarmed the Plaza, one of the Mothers shouted "They took them away alive, we want them returned alive." Other mothers spontaneously joined in. From that time on, the Mothers were more vocal and strident in their criticism of the government, which still claimed that they knew nothing about their disappeared children, and the spontaneous cry of one mother became their slogan. To this day, that slogan still appears on their banners, even though they know that their children will not return alive.

Meanwhile, the attention of the foreign press and the testimonies of Argentines who had fled into exile brought the human rights abuses of the Junta to the attention of groups such as Amnesty International. Father Robert Drinan, a Jesuit priest who was a congressman from Massachusetts, visited Argentina on behalf of Amnesty International. He became instrumental in blocking U. S. aid to Argentina and in persuading the newly elected President Jimmy Carter to investigate the disappearances. At the end of 1978 the Mothers decided to visit the United States and while there they met with Senators, Congressmen, and State Department officials. With their white shawls, they went to the Organization of American States and the United Nations to deliver their message: "We are the Mothers of the Disappeared from Buenos Aires, Argentina and we are coming to discuss human rights." (Guzman Bouvar, 87) They began to visit more countries and were generally warmly received. They decided to go to Rome to see the Pope. The Pope never agreed to meet with them, but the President of Italy, Sandro Petri, who would become one of their strongest allies, warmly embraced them.

The Mothers had done the unthinkable. Not only had they criticized the repressive tactics of the Junta at home, but they had also brought their case into the international arena. At this point, the world knew about the human rights abuses in Argentina and the efforts of the Mothers to find their children. The Mothers were no longer in as much danger as they had been because the Junta could not risk the abduction of a member of such a highly visible group.

The Mothers were now more than just a grass-roots organization, although they had never organized themselves in any formal way. Many felt that formalizing their association would provide more safety for the group and thus attract more mothers to their cause. At that time, there were other organizations in Argentina concerned with human rights but the Mothers wanted their own group. In August 1979 the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo formally registered as a group. The name commemorates their original meeting place but by this time there were chapters in other parts of Argentina as well which communicated with the main branch in Buenos Aires. Hebe de Bonafini, who had taken over the leadership of the group after the disappearance of Azucena de De Vicente, was elected President and continues in that role today. In 1980, with funds sent from a support group in the Netherlands, the Mothers established an office in Buenos Aires, although the space more closely resembles a home than a traditional office.

The Mothers' goals went beyond finding their own children. They denounced the lack of due process that should be a cornerstone of a democratic system that respects human rights. To this day, they have not wavered from their original mission statement: "We don't judge our detained-disappeared children, nor do we ask for their freedom. We want to be told where they are, what they are accused of, and ask that they be judged according to legal norms with the legitimate right of defense ... We ask that they not be tortured or kept in inhumane conditions..." They still insist that someone explain the disappearances to them.

In 1980, the Mothers were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. The prize was awarded to Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, the founder of SERPAJ (Christian Service for Peace and Justice), another human rights organization in Argentina. However the Mothers did receive the Peace Prize of the People, given by Norway to those who qualified for the Nobel Prize but who did not receive it. The Mothers were receiving more and more support from various countries and human rights organizations around the world. In particular, France and Italy were very supportive of the Mothers' efforts. A group of Italian political parties took out a full-page ad in *El Clarín*, one of two major Buenos Aires papers, denouncing the tactics of the military Junta.

Although the Mothers had tremendous support from the Western European nations, they lost the support of the United States when Ronald Reagan became President in 1981. The United States was no longer interested in the case of the Disappeared. Reagan sought to reestablish relations with Argentina and invited Roberto Viola, who replaced Jorge Videla as President in March 1981, to

Washington. Reagan wanted undo the sanctions of the Carter administrations on Argentina that had been imposed in response to the human rights violations. He wanted to weaken the powers of the United Nations in the area of human rights and he appointed Jeanne Kirkpatrick, a supporter of the military Junta, as the U. S. representative to the U.N. Kirkpatrick refused to meet with the Mothers on several occasions when she traveled to Buenos Aires and the Mothers lost the support and protection of the U.S. embassy in Buenos Aires.

## **Political developments**

However, it appeared as if the Junta was falling apart. There was much dissension among the military leaders, and the economy, after several years of relative stability, was faltering. The unions were beginning to protect the economic conditions in the country. By this time, thousands of mothers and supporters marched on Thursday afternoons in the Plaza de Mayo, in plain view of the Casa Rosada, the seat of government. Viola was replaced in December 1981 by General Leopoldo Galtieri.

In an attempt to divert attention from the mounting domestic problems, both political and economic, the Junta decided to invade the Falkland Islands (in Argentina referred to as Islas Malvinas) which had been controlled by the British since 1833. The Argentine marines invaded in March 1982 under the command of Alfredo Astiz, the man who had infiltrated and betrayed the Mothers several years earlier. Their hope was that the people of Argentina would unite in a patriotic war to reclaim the islands that they had always felt were rightfully theirs. In truth, the Argentine people were vocally supportive of the invasion. They also thought that the British would not go to battle over a few islands thousands of miles away from the mainland and that the United States would support the invasion. They were wrong on both counts. The British launched a full-scale assault from the air and from the sea, and the United States not only lent their military support but also imposed economic sanctions on Argentina as well. The Armed Forces were so confident that they would win that they sent their newest recruits into battle. Poorly equipped and trained, they were quickly defeated. The war was over in less than three months and Galtieri was removed from office.

The Junta no longer had the ability to maintain power, and it was clear that the military dictatorship was coming to an end. Galtieri's replacement, Reynaldo Bignone, oversaw the transition to a democratic form of government. The ban on political parties was lifted in July 1982. That same day, over 5,000 people gathered in a Buenos Aires soccer stadium to hear Raúl Alfonsín, the leader of the Radical Union party, who would become the next freely elected President of Argentina.

Although the Junta was forced to admit its political defeat, it still refused to be forthcoming with any information on the disappeared. In August of 1982, it announced that there would be no published list of detained-disappeared nor would there be any explanation. The Junta intended to exonerate its members and their subordinates before the return to a civilian government. However, the multi-party coalition refused to promise the military an amnesty.

## **The Mothers' actions after the Dirty War**

In the fall of 1983, Raúl Alfonsín of the Radical Civic Union ran a presidential campaign in which he rejected an attempt by the military to exonerate itself. He appealed to the voters with the simple slogan "Democracy or Anti-Democracy". He easily won the election, garnering 52 percent of the popular vote. Alfonsín now had to deal with a number of difficult issues. The economic situation was in a complete state of crisis. The military, still convinced that it had saved Argentina from leftist terrorists, wanted amnesty.

The Mothers were demanding the re-appearance of their children or at the very least, revenge for those responsible for the tortures and murders of the disappeared. Some mothers still help out hope that their children were alive and would be released. On December 9, the day that Bignone was to

leave the Casa Rosada, the Mothers organized a march in which their supporters carried life-size cardboard silhouettes of the 30,000 disappeared. The next day was Human Rights Day and the inauguration of the new President. The Mothers were invited to the swearing in at the Congress. The first official act of the new Chamber of Deputies was to abolish the Junta's self-interested amnesty law.

After the return to democracy, the various human rights groups operating in Argentina struggled with the dilemma of how to seek truth and justice and, at the same time, support the fledgling democracy. Many groups and some of the Mothers fully supported the new government, fearing that any public criticism might lead to a return of military rule. However, the Mothers had learned a lot in the past seven years and many believed it naïve to think that their children would suddenly reappear and that those responsible would be brought to justice without continued strong pressure through confrontational tactics. During their struggle, they had become much more political and somewhat radicalized. This difference in perspective led to a rift between the Mothers and several more moderate human rights groups and also to dissension among the Mothers themselves.

The Mothers continued to protest, using the powerful language of slogans as a way to keep the issue of the disappeared alive. "Jail to those who have committed genocide", "Judgement and Punishment for All Culprits" were some of the slogans that succinctly delivered the Mothers' message that they were determined to call to account all those who were guilty of the atrocities of the Dirty War. They feared that the new government, in an attempt to "heal" the country, would not prosecute those responsible. Alfonsín found himself in a very difficult situation as he tried to balance being true to his campaign promise to prosecute both the military and guerrilla leaders and appeasing the military.

In fact the issue of the disappeared was becoming a very high profile issue for Alfonsín. In 1983, mass graves containing hundreds of unidentified corpses were found all over the country. The military tried to say that these were paupers' graves, but the "paupers" had bullet holes in their heads. Large barrels with the dead bodies were found floating in the Río de la Plata. A month before the election, General Camps, one of the most notorious of the torturers, proudly admitted responsibility for the death of over 5,000 people, whom he claimed were not even people because they were subversives.

Shortly after his inauguration, Alfonsín shocked the nation and the world by announcing that he would prosecute nine members of the Juntas that had ruled Argentina since 1976 as well as the leaders of the Montoneros and the ERP. In this announcement, he denounced both the violence of the state and the violence of the leftist guerrillas. This came to be known as the "theory of the two devils." This angered the Mothers because it implied that the Junta was somewhat justified in its campaign of terror and also that their own children were terrorists. In February 1984, soon after announcing that the Junta leaders would be prosecuted, Alfonsín passed a law that allowed for these cases to be heard by a military tribunal and not in a civilian court. The law, which is known as the law of Due Obedience, also stated that military officers below the rank of general were presumed to have committed these acts because they were obeying the orders of their commanding officers and are therefore immune from prosecution. Alfonsín defended the law by stating that it established a hierarchy of responsibility and that those guilty of masterminding the atrocities would be brought to justice. Clearly he was trying to appease both the military and those who demanded the truth about the Dirty War.

The law was further amended in 1987 to apply to all those below the rank of general, which resulted in large numbers of high-ranking military officers being freed and having their cases dismissed.

The following day the Mothers appeared at Casa Rosada with boxes of testimony and demanded that the President establish a commission made up of Senators and Congressmen to investigate the disappearances and punish the guilty. As a compromise, in December 1983, he selected a committee, comprised of some legislators and some prominent citizens, with the noted author

Ernesto Sabato as its chair. CONADEP (The National Commission on the Disappeared) had significantly less power than the Mothers had hoped. Although it had the power to review testimony and send criminal cases to court, but it did not have the authority to subpoena or to force testimony.

CONADEP took depositions from thousands of survivors, witnesses, and relatives of the disappeared. Regional offices were set up in different parts of the country and testimony was received in consulates and embassies all over world. Nine months later, in September 1984, CONADEP issued its report, *Nunca Más* (Never again). The depth and breadth of the atrocities committed during El Proceso shocked the world. There were over 350 camps and prisons, and as many as 1,300 military personnel were involved. The report graphically detailed the tortures that the victims had to endure. Prisoners, alive although drugged, were tossed from airplanes into the Atlantic Ocean. The disappeared came from all different social classes encompassing a wide range of occupations; many of them had no connection at all to terrorist groups or activities. Community activists, particularly those concerned with helping the poor, teachers, students, sociologists, psychologists, lawyers and young pregnant women were especially vulnerable. The abductions, torture and murder had been carefully calculated and planned, and often included the looting and ransacking of homes. The officers often referred to the "booty of war", which we now know included hundreds of babies born in captivity.

With the publication of *Nunca Más* there could be no more denial by the military. Victims who previously had been afraid to testify now came forth. There seemed to be an endless string of stories of abduction, torture and death. Many officers who had not been imprisoned fled the country. The public outrage was such that the accused were transferred from military detention centers to civilian prisons and their cases would now be heard in civilian courts. The trial of the leaders of El Proceso began in April of 1985 and lasted until the end of the year. General Videla and Admiral Massera received life sentences. General Viola was sentenced to seventeen years in prison. General Galtieri was acquitted on the charges of repression but sentenced to military detention due to his incompetence during the Falklands War. Colonel Camps, commander of the Buenos Aires Provincial Police, was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison. Other high-ranking officers were sentenced to less than ten years in jail.

The military knew that it was likely that the prosecution of those responsible would not stop with these men and it continued to try to exert pressure on Alfonsín to grant some sort of amnesty. He refused to do that but in the fall of 1986 Alfonsín, bowing to pressure from the military, proposed the law of "Punto Final" (Final Stop), which would place a time limit on the prosecutions. He felt that prolonged trials, which potentially could last years, would eventually become intolerable to the military and jeopardize democracy. The law was passed on December 24, 1986, and it stated that all new cases must be filed within sixty days. Human rights groups worked round the clock and at the end of the sixty days, another 300 cases were filed, many of them against high-ranking generals and admirals.

While the trials and their outcomes generally satisfied the public demand for truth and justice, the Mothers were very dissatisfied and became even more radical and militant in their philosophy and in their activities. Disappointed with the focus of CONADEP, the Mothers refused to cooperate with the members of the Commission and instead started their own campaign to publicize their growing body of testimony, which now had names of some of the repressors, places and dates. The Mothers felt that CONADEP placed too much emphasis on mass extermination and the disposal of bodies. They felt that CONADEP's focus was on the past because it was meant to close the case on the Dirty War. The Mothers, on the other hand, were still hoping that some of the disappeared might still be found alive. It was about this time that the Mothers adopted the slogan "Aparición con vida" (Bring them back alive.) Most of the country felt that the Mothers were being unrealistic and that they needed to accept the reality of the death of their children.

A law had been passed offering economic reparation to families of the disappeared but in order to

receive the money, the family had to declare the person dead. The government document read "... there exist reasonable possibilities that (they) have died as a result of their own terrorist activities." Although most of the Mothers were from lower class families who could have used the money, they refused to sign the document. They wanted no part of the "blood money" being offered under such circumstances. The legislation also allowed for the government to declare the person dead and to give an indemnity payment to the families.

The Mothers viewed these tactics as a form of psychological torture as well as intimidation. Beatriz Rubenstein, the President of the La Plata chapter of the Mothers, one day received a box with the alleged bones of her daughter with the following letter:

Dear Madam,

In response to your incessant search for your daughter Patricia, we have decided to send you part of her remains which should satisfy your anxiety to be reunited with your daughter... In case you were unaware..., we are listing the crimes that she committed with her husband Carlos Francesco:

- Betrayal of her country
- Concealing the enemy
- Collaborating actively with Montonero assassins

For these reasons she was condemned to death. May God have mercy on her soul.

While many of the Mothers, as religious Catholics, wanted to have the remains of their children so that they could give them a proper burial, most would not accept a result that labeled their children as criminals and allowed the torturers to go free. They blocked exhumations of bodies. Their mission had gone way beyond the search for their children. Their increasingly combative manner and ceaseless demands for justice alienated some of the human rights groups, as well as some of the mothers, who felt that they were not acting in the best interests of the country and that they were jeopardizing democracy. President Alfonsín, as well as numerous newspapers throughout the country, criticized the Mothers, and once again there were allegations that they were being financed by the Montoneros.

In 1986, there was a split in the organization and twelve mothers left to form La Línea Fundadora de las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo (The Founding Line), reflecting that some of them were in the original group. The split was due to policy differences and political style. Many of the Línea Fundadora Mothers supported the exhumations; many wanted to bury their dead children and have a place to pay their respects. They also wanted to work within the new political system as an interest group rather than outside as an opposition group.

Although they are not as radical as the Mothers group, they are still committed to bringing justice and to keeping the memory of their children alive in the hopes that what happened in Argentina between 1976-1983 will never happen again. They also march on Thursdays in the Plaza de Mayo. As they circle the obelisk in the center of the Plaza, with their baby shawls and photos of their loved ones, you can not tell the two groups apart.

## **WHO WERE THE GRANDMOTHERS OF THE PLAZA DE MAYO?**

Another group that deals with the issue of the disappeared is the Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo (The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo), an organization founded in October 1977. Many of the women who were abducted during el Proceso were pregnant, some obviously so and some not. Some very young children, younger than three years old, were also abducted with their parents. The exact number of disappeared children is not known, as many young women were abducted in the early stages of pregnancy and their families may not have know about it. It is estimated that about 500

children were kidnapped by their abductors and given to the families of military officers or their friends who were unable to have children of their own. What is known is that there were so many pregnant women abducted that eventually the Junta established small maternity hospitals within several of the larger detention centers.

In many cases, these children have been brought up by the very men who murdered their parents. There were several reasons why these children were given to military officers rather than returned to live with their grandparents. The military was afraid that if released, these children would probably grow up hating the military for having killed their parents and that the children would themselves become subversives. Another reason was that separating these innocent children from their legitimate families was considered an appropriate (and especially cruel) punishment for the families of the disappeared that involved losing two generations.

The Grandmothers groups came together much as the Mothers group did; grandmothers searching for the whereabouts of their infant grandchildren. Many of the women began as Mothers and as more and more realized that they had lost their grandchildren, they organized a separate group to search for them. They functioned much like the Mothers, meeting in peoples homes until the group became too large. Then they would meet in restaurants, coffee shops, in parks or at the zoo, appearing to be older women enjoying each other's company. However, they, like the Mothers, spent their days organizing, filing writs of habeas corpus, signing petitions and visiting the hospitals and orphanages. They also visited the juvenile courts; however the judges were not sympathetic because most of them had been appointed by the Junta and believed its anti-subversive rhetoric. One judge told the Grandmothers: "...your children were terrorists, and 'terrorist' is synonymous with 'murderer'. I do not intend to return children to murderers...those children are in the hand of decent families that will... educate them right...Over my dead body will you obtain custody of them." (Arditti, 57)

The Grandmothers also looked for support from the Catholic Church but in most cases it ignored their pleas for help. Most of these women were from poor families, and the priests suggested that they leave things alone because their grandchildren would be able to enjoy a better life economically with their new families.

The Grandmothers had help from CLAMOR, a human rights organization in Brazil. CLAMOR put them in contact with Argentines who had been released from confinement and had gone into exile. These exiles were able to give them information about some of the disappeared that had been in prison with them. In August 1979, the Grandmothers got their first break when a Chilean woman recognized in a bulletin that CLAMOR had published the photos of a brother and sister who had been abducted when they were three years and one year old, respectively. In this case, the adoptive parents were unsuspecting, but it gave the Grandmothers the hope that many more children were alive and could be found.

The Grandmothers were like detectives, receiving bits of information from different sources. People passed them tips that proved useful in their investigation. People would call anonymously or would hand them slips of paper on Thursdays in the Plaza de Mayo with information about families who had adopted children since 1976 or about women who had given birth in captivity. The Grandmothers were sometimes able to find out that the sex and date of birth of their grandchildren. Once the Grandmothers received a tip, they would follow up on the information to ascertain if the child was their grandchild. They would take pictures with telephoto lens in the parks, grandmothers would look for work as a maid with the suspected family, and grandfathers would pose as plumbers or gardeners. The Grandmothers published bulletins with the information they had gathered and with photos of those children who had been abducted as toddlers.

## **Proving paternity**

As they collected more evidence, they organized into teams - legal, medical, psychological and investigative - to deal with the myriad of issues involved in reclaiming their grandchildren. The biggest obstacle that they had to surmount was how to definitively prove that any children found were in fact their grandchildren. When Chicha Mariani, one of the founding members of the group, learned that there was a blood test that could establish a biological link between parent and child, she wondered if a link could be proved between a child and another close relation. In November 1982, an Argentine doctor living in exile put the Grandmothers in contact with Dr. Fred Allen of the New York Blood Center. He felt certain that by modifying the mathematical proportions that were used in standard paternity tests that a test for "grandparentage" could be developed. The Grandmothers then set out to find the scientists who had enough expertise in the field of genetics to develop such a test.

The Grandmothers learned from scientists at the National Institute for Health that Dr. Mary-Claire King, a geneticist from Berkeley, CA, might have the expertise to help them. In June 1984 Dr. King accompanied a team of forensic scientists sent by the AAAS (American Association for the Advancement of Science) to assist in exhumations ordered by CONADEP. While in she was in Argentina, a Chilean doctor referred her to Dr. Ana Di Leonardo, a geneticist working at the Durand Hospital in Buenos Aires. Mary-Claire King was impressed with her experience and with the modern facilities at the hospital. Together they developed the formula that would enable them to prove "grandparentage" Soon after, they tested an eight-year old girl who was living with a policeman. It was established with 99.9 percent certainty that she was the granddaughter of one of the Grandmothers and soon after she was returned to her family of origin. Judges who previously had been hesitant to return children to their presumed families now had objective empirical evidence to rely on.

The Grandmothers then saw the need for a national genetic database for the families of the disappeared because it was possible that some children might not be found for many years and that the grandparents themselves might die in the meantime. The Grandmothers felt that the state should establish this databank as way of reparation to the families of the disappeared. In February 1986, after lobbying for the databank for two years, the Grandmothers were granted a meeting with President Alfonsín. They presented him with several demands: that the government work towards restitution of the children, that he ask the Argentine people to help in this effort, and that he immediately send to Congress a bill to create the National Genetic Data Bank. Alfonsín granted their request. The law, passed the following year, stipulated that the services of the bank would be free to the families of the disappeared and that the courts perform the genetic testing on any child up for adoption whose parents were unknown. By 1996, over 2,000 people representing 175 families had deposited blood in the bank. As of this summer (2001), the identity of 73 children has been confirmed.

What happens to these children once they are found presents a difficult situation for all involved - the grandmothers, the grandchildren and their adoptive parents. Moreover, the circumstances vary widely. Some children were adopted by families who were unaware of the children's origin. Families that had tried unsuccessfully to have their own children were told, for example, that someone's cousin was in "a family way" and wanted to give the baby up for adoption. Other families knew who the babies were, and in many cases, babies were brought up the very military man who had tortured and killed their parents. For most children, the discovery of their true identify and that of their adoptive parents was traumatic. Many had been raised in loving homes and did not want to go with their legitimate families. Many who had been raised by military families had nothing in common with their birth families. Some children who were found were returned to their legitimate families. Some, by mutual arrangement, stayed with their adoptive families. All of the children are now between the ages of 20-26 and those who find out their true identities at this point are adults and will not have decide where to live. However, they can have their adoptions annulled and have their family names restored to them. But that does not lessen the psychological trauma that these people experienced and will continue to experience.

The Grandmothers run frequent public awareness campaigns, encouraging any one who questions his true identity to be tested. Obviously the search for the true identity of their grandchildren is of utmost importance to the Grandmothers. An important factor for the children themselves is knowing their medical history. The law of Full Stop, which set a deadline for the prosecution of the torturers, does not apply in cases of child abduction and there is no amnesty for the kidnapping of a child. At this point, prosecuting those who have abducted the children of the disappeared is the only way that justice can be served. All the human rights groups operating in Argentina are in agreement that the abductors should be imprisoned. Although the Mothers were against the mass exhumations that took place in the mid-1980s, they are in favor of such exhumations as will help to verify the true identity of the grandchildren.

One of the most recent cases involves the notorious Col. Alfredo Astiz (The Blond Angel), who was the young officer who infiltrated and betrayed the Mothers. Italy has been trying to extradite him because he was reputed to have abducted the daughter of an Italian woman who was disappeared. Officials feel confident that they have found this woman, now in her late twenties, living in La Plata. In early July of 2001, Col. Astiz turned himself in, but the woman, now in her late twenties, refuses to be tested because she is afraid of the consequences for her adoptive father. At this point it is unclear what will happen to the Col. Astiz.

## **HOW HAS JUSTICE BEEN SERVED?**

Worried about the high-ranking officers still awaiting trial, many in the military, still proclaiming their innocence, continued to exert pressure on Alfonsín. On Easter weekend in April 1987, there was a military uprising, led by Lieutenant Colonel Aldo Rico, demanding amnesty laws. The rebels who became known as the carapintadas because of their painted black faces, were forced to back down after Alfonsín rallied the Argentine people for their support. Over 50,000 people gathered outside the army barracks where the rebels were located to demonstrate their support for the President and the rebels were forced to back down. Although several smaller insurrections in 1988 were unsuccessful, Alfonsín bowed to the increasing pressure from the military and eventually amended the Law of Due Obedience. The original law had exempted all military below a certain rank; the new version gave amnesty to all military officers except those accused of rape, theft and the appropriation of children.

Beset with a host of problems, both economic and political, President Alfonsín decided to end his presidency six months early. In May 1989 Carlos Saúl Menem, a Peronist, was elected to the Presidency, the first time in sixty years that two consecutive presidents had been democratically elected. Menem had won with a clear majority and had been supported by the labor unions. Once in office, however, he became much more conservative than he had been during his campaign, both in his plan for the economy and in his approach to human rights issues.

The search for justice for the disappeared suffered serious setbacks during Menem's administration. Soon after his election, in October 1989, he pardoned all high-ranking military officers who had not yet been charged. He also pardoned the carapintada rebels who had rebelled against the government of Alfonsín in 1987-88. The most crushing blow came a year later, in December 1990, when he pardoned all the members of the Junta who had been tried and convicted in 1985. The masterminds of the Dirty War were now free, having served only small parts of their sentences. In all, Menem pardoned 280 people. The freed military officers felt that they had been vindicated by the pardons and expressed no regrets about their actions. One day after his release from prison, General Videla demanded an apology from the government and once again insisted that the military Junta had saved the country.

Menem gave two rationales for his actions. First, because he himself had been held captive for five years during the Dirty War he felt that had the moral authority to grant pardon to his own oppressors. Second, it was time to heal the country and unite as a nation to solve other pressing problems such

as the economy. However, over eighty percent of the population disagreed with his decision and in late December 1999 over 80,000 people gathered in the Plaza de Mayo to protest the pardons.

The pardons shocked the country and the world and gave the Mothers a renewed sense of purpose. They again traveled to all parts of the world condemning the pardons and encouraging other governments to put pressure on Menem. The Mothers vowed to hunt down the assassins themselves. They gathered signatures of prominent people from all walks of life and delivered them to the Casa Rosada. They placed silhouettes of the disappeared all around the Plaza de Mayo. "We will not forget. We will not pardon." became their new slogans. Other human rights groups, as well as members of the opposing political party, joined them in their marches. President Menem reacted by censuring the press and many of the protests were not covered by the media. Journalists were subject to intimidation and threats. Free speech was curtailed. Democracy in Argentina again was diminished.

Although the amnesty laws passed by President Alfonsín and the pardons granted by President Menem clearly put an end to the prosecution of those responsible for the atrocities of the Dirty War, the struggle for justice goes on, carried out by groups such as the Mothers and the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, La Línea Fundadora de las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, CELS (Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales), H.I.J.O.S. (Children for Identity and Justice and against Oblivion and Silence), and others. However, the amnesty and pardons legitimized the actions of the Junta during the Dirty War, and allowed many of the younger officers who were never tried for their crimes to remain in the military or the provincial police forces. The impunity with which they acted during the "Proceso" is still palpable today. There have been many instances when young people have been illegally detained and journalists have been murdered. In 1997 the burned body of investigative photojournalist José Luis Cabezas was found in the trunk of his car.

The country's desire for "pacification" and "reconciliation" allows the culture of impunity and silence to continue. In May 1990 a human rights organization called the People's Permanent Tribunal met in Buenos Aires to discuss the crimes against humanity perpetrated by the military Junta. It stated: "Under the justification of pardoning, forgetting, or reconciling, the structures, mechanisms and attitudes of the past remain intact in the present." (Arditti, 160) For the families and others concerned with the protection of human rights, reconciliation is not something that can be mandated by the government. It is something that must be earned, arrived at through the admission of guilt and the punishment of those who are guilty.

Many people in Argentina who feel that justice has not been served continue their struggle to keep the memory of the disappeared alive. The legacy of groups such as the Mothers and the Grandmothers goes beyond their accomplishments in the area of human rights. Their tenacity and courage serves as an inspiration to many young people in Argentina and all over the world. It is interesting to note that in the past seven to eight years many more young people are becoming more politically active, despite the risks they face in a country that discourages dissent. They are concerned not only with the issue of the disappeared, but also with social concerns such as education, poverty, unemployment and health care. One such group is H.I.J.O.S. (Children), founded in 1995 by the children of the disappeared. In June 1996, they helped the Mothers celebrate the "First Thousand Thursdays". Their philosophy is expressed in the words of one of the HIJOS who spoke that day: "For us, HIJOS, this march of the Mothers represents contact with our history and the struggle of our parents. Those who believed in the victory of death were wrong: twenty years afterward, here we are to say "presente." (Arditti, 168)

### **The present situation**

All of the human rights groups continue to fight for the appeal of the amnesty and pardons granted by Presidents Alfonsín and Menem. The Grandmothers continue the search for their grandchildren.

There are military officers serving time for the abduction of the children - at this time the only crime with which a military officer can be charged. Many European nations are actively seeking the extradition of military officers charged with abducting their citizens. Although those officers who were charged, and then pardoned, are now free, they are not free to leave the country because they would be arrested on human rights violation as soon as they set foot on foreign soil. However, the most notorious of the accused, whose faces the Argentines came to know very well during the trials in 1985, are virtually prisoners in their own homes. When they go out into the public, to a restaurant or a movie theater, they are immediately recognized and vilified. People know who they are, where they live, and who their family members are.

The most important development is very recent. In March 2001 Federal Judge Gabriel Cavallo declared in a ruling that immunity laws that prevent prosecution of all but the highest-ranking officers (Law of Due Obedience) are unconstitutional because they violate international human rights treaties that have been signed by Argentina. This ruling has given new hope to the cause and human rights groups such as CELS are pressing for the courts to open more cases. However, the military will most likely appeal and the case may go all the way to the Supreme Court.

## **ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY**

This bibliography is relatively short. I have not included any articles from periodicals and I have included a small number of books on the subject. There are many more books available, and anyone wanting more resources can find an exhaustive list in the bibliographies of the books listed below. I have divided the bibliography into two sections: non-fiction and the arts. In the non-fiction section, I have also listed some Web sites that are useful as well as the names of several human rights organizations. Works that are available in both languages I have designated with **[Eng/ Esp]**.

In the arts section, I have included the names of many authors, artists, musicians and cinematographers who deal with the subject of the Dirty War in their works. Works that **I know** are available in both languages I have designated with **[Eng/ Esp]**.

### **NON-FICTION**

**Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo, Missing Children Who Disappeared in Argentina between 1976 and 1983, Buenos Aires: Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo, 1988 [Eng/ Esp] [www.abuelas.org](http://www.abuelas.org) or [www.wmani.apc.org/abuelas](http://www.wmani.apc.org/abuelas)**

Their Web site is very informative. The Grandmothers also publish a bulletin.

**Argentina: The Military Junta and Human Rights: Report of the Trial of the Former Junta Members, London: Amnesty International, 1987**

Amnesty International has published many other documents related to the Dirty War and their Web site also has information.

[www.amnestyinternational.org](http://www.amnestyinternational.org)

[www.americaswatch.org](http://www.americaswatch.org)

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

**Arditti, Rita, Searching for Life: The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Disappeared**

**Children of Argentina, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999**

This book tells the history of the Grandmothers of the Plaza and how their persistence led to the development of a test to determine the paternity of a child whose parents are deceased.

**Asociación de Ex-Detenidos Desaparecidos.** The Association of Ex-Detained-Disappeared.

[www.exdesaparecidos.org.ar](http://www.exdesaparecidos.org.ar)

**Bouvard, Marguerite Guzman, Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1994**

This story of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, as well as describing their organization, also gives an excellent account of the Dirty War and what has happened in Argentina since the return to democracy in 1983.

**Carlson, Eric Stener, I remember Julia: Voices of the Disappeared, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996**

Eric Stener is a physician who spent two months in Buenos Aires as a volunteer with the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team excavating the mass graves of the victims of the Dirty War. He set out to find out all he could about one victim, "Julia", by interviewing her family and friends, and his remembrance of Julia serves as a testimony to all the Disappeared.

**CELS (Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales)** One of the most active human rights groups in Argentina today, it is involved in many issues in addition to the struggle for justice for the disappeared. [www.cels.org.ar](http://www.cels.org.ar)

**Dussel, Finocchio, and Gojman, Haciendo memoria en el país de Nunca Más, Buenos Aires: Eudeba (Universidad de Buenos Aires), 1997**

This very important book by three professors at the University of Buenos Aires was written to help secondary teachers in Argentina deal with the subject of the Dirty War in their classes. It is a curriculum guide that examines the political, economic and social situation in Argentina prior to 1976 as well as what happened during the Dirty War. It also includes music and literature that deals with the Dirty War. Included is a two-page bibliography of authors writing between 1976-1983.

**Feitlowitz, Marguerite, A Lexicon of Horror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998**

This book, more than any other, provides chilling details of the horror of the Dirty War. It also gives insight into how the military perverted language both to psychologically torture its victims as well as to manipulate and deceive the people of Argentina.

**Foster, David William. Violence in Argentine Literature: Cultural Responses to Tyranny. University of Missouri, 1995**

**Guest, Ian, Behind the Disappearances: Argentina's Dirty War against Human Rights and the United Nations. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990**

**H.I.J.O.S** The Association of the Children of the Disappeared

**Joyce, Christopher and Eric Stover, Witnesses from the Grave: The Stories Bones Tell. New York: Ballantine Books, 1992**

A book about Clyde Snow, a forensic anthropologist, who traveled to Argentina to help in the exhumation and identification of many of the bodies of the disappeared.

**Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo** [www.madres.org](http://www.madres.org) The Web site of the Mothers has several

language options and has a lot of information about their organization. There are interviews, a link to their bookstore, etc. The Mothers have published many books of poetry dedicated to the Disappeared.

**Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo- Línea Fundadora** The "other" Mothers' groups which split from the original group in 1986.

**Mellibovsky, Matilde, Circle of Love over Death: Testimonies of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1997 [Eng/ Esp]**

Through the personal testimonies of some twenty Mothers, we learn about who the Disappeared were. The book also contains some poems written by the Mothers.

**Mignone, Emilio, Witness to the Truth: The Complicity of the Catholic Church and Dictatorship in Argentina, 1976-1983. Translated by Philip Berryman. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988 [Eng/ Esp]**

Mignone was a founder of CELS (Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales) and a member of the CONADEP Commission whose daughter was disappeared. In his search for his daughter, Mignone, a Catholic, discovered that some priests, while pretending to be helpful to those families seeking help, in fact was gathering information that the military then used to gather more victims.

**Partnoy, Alicia, The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival in Argentina, Pittsburgh, PA: Cleis Press, 1986 [Eng/ Esp]**

Alicia Partnoy was one of the few Disappeared who was freed after spending two years in a camp.

Her account of time spent at the "Little School" was one of the first first-hand accounts to be published. After her release, she immediately went into exile in the US. She later returned to Argentina to give testimony before CONADEP, which resulted in the conviction of four generals.

**Rock, David, Argentina 1516-1987: From Spanish Colonization to Alfonsín, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987**

Chapters VI through VIII offer a good overview of the political, social and economic conditions that led up to the military coup in 1976.

**Taylor, Diana, Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's Dirty War. Raleigh, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997**

In her book on the Dirty War, Taylor examines how the military represented itself as the savior of Argentina and through its rhetoric limited the ability of the people to respond. She also examines the rise of theatrical productions and other performance works that attempted to resist the actions of the Junta.

**Timerman, Jacobo, Prisoner without a name, Cell without a number, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981 [Eng/ Esp]**

This book is particularly note-worthy because it was published (abroad) while the military Junta still ruled Argentina. A first-hand account written by the journalist Jacobo Timerman shortly after his release after thirty months in prison. This book also gives disturbing portraits of the torturers as well as insights into how Timerman coped during his time as a prisoner.

**Verbitsky, Horacio, The Flight: Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior, New York: The New Press, 1996 [Eng/ Esp]**

When Navy Officer Francisco Scilingo confessed in 1995 to having taken part in the dumping of live bodies into the Atlantic Ocean, it was "old news". Details of these flights had become public during the CONADEP hearings. However, Scilingo was the first military officer to break the code of silence, and his testimony offers insight into the evil minds of the torturers.

## THE ARTS

### LITERATURE

**Below are the names of some of the authors who were writing during the period of the Dirty War and one or two of their works.**

Aira, César. Ema, la cautiva. 1981  
Asis, Jorge. Carne picada. 1981  
Bonasso, Miguel. El libro de todos los engaños. 1984  
Castillo, Abelardo. Cuentos completos. 1998  
Cohen, Marcelo. El país de la dama eléctrica. 1984  
Dal Masetto, Antonio. Fuego a discreción. 1984  
Feinman, José Pablo. Ni el tiro del final. 1982  
Fogwill, Rodolfo. Los pichiciegos. 1983  
Giardinelli, Mempo. Qué solos se quedan los muertos. 1985  
Gelman, Juan. (father of a disappeared daughter) Ni el flaco perdón de Dios. 1997  
Heker, Liliana. Los bordes de lo real [Eng./Esp] 1991  
El fin de la historia. 1996  
Kozameh, Alicia. Steps under Water [Eng/ Esp] 1996  
Martínez, Carlos Damaso. Hay cenizas en el aire. 1982  
Piglia, Ricardo. Respiración artificial. 1980  
Saer, Juan José, Nadie nada nunca. 1980  
Shua, Ana María. Soy paciente. 1980  
Soriano, Osvaldo. No habrá más penas ni olvido, 1984  
Szichman, Mario. A las 20:25 la señora entró en la inmortalidad. 1981, 1984  
Valenzuela, Luisa. Bedside Manners. [Eng/ Esp] 1994  
The Censors: A bilingual selection of stories [Eng/ Esp] 1988  
Symmetries [Eng/Esp] 1993

### FILM

**El Botín de Guerra.** (The Booty of War) a documentary about the abducted children of the disappeared.

**El Garaje Olimpo.** A movie about the horror of the Dirty War. "El Garaje" was one of the many concentration camps.

**La Historia Oficial.** (The Official Story; available in the US) A movie about the mother of an adopted daughter who begins to suspect that her daughter was taken from one of the disappeared.

**Una sombra ya pronto serás. directed by Hector Olivera**  
**No habrá más penas ni olvido, directed by Hector Olivera**

### THE VISUAL ARTS

Carlos Alonso (father of a disappeared daughter)  
Luis Fernando Benedit  
Antonio Berni  
Juan Carlos Distéfano  
Alberto Heredia  
Mauricio Lasansky  
Pablo Suárez

## **MUSIC**

Charly García. Canción de Alicia en el país. 1980  
Fito Páez. Cuervos en casa. 1983  
Mercedes Sosa. Todavía cantamos, todavía pedimos  
Los Piojos. Muy despacito  
Todos tus muertos El Chupadero  
Bono (U2) Mother of God (William Butler Yeats)  
La Renga. El rito de los corazones sangrando

(Some of the above songs can be found on a CD recording of a live concert performed in October 1997 for the benefit of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo.)