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THE RECONCILIATION IN ARGENTINA: IS IT COMPLETE?

Tina R. Niedzwiecki

The people refer to it as “the Dirty War.” The Argentines thought that the “temporary” military government that took over in 1976 was rescuing them from the poorly-led Isabel Perón government. (Isabel was president Juan Perón’s third wife and vice-president prior to his death.) Isabel forced the country into economic turmoil through her mismanagement. To add to the country’s economic decay, guerrilla movements became active and used violence to show their presence. The military government tried to eradicate traces of Isabel and any sense of disorder caused by guerrilla groups through radical and extreme measures.

The “Dirty War” began in 1975 even before this military coup and would last for the next seven years, during which time some of the Argentine people would be subjected to unimaginable torture which often led to death, all at the hands of the Argentine military. Depending on the source, as few as ten thousand and as many as thirty thousand people died or disappeared at the hands of this military government. The military hoped to restructure society and rid it of all “problems.” This meant excluding all leftist groups from political participation and, in an extreme case, banning the Peronist party, which still supported the views of the late president. In order to fully implement its plan, the military found it necessary to eliminate certain factors from society. These “factors” were people, who were taken and killed or tortured because the military found that their respective political beliefs were threatening to its plan for society.

In 1983 the rule of terror finally came to an end when Raúl Alfonsín of the Radical Party was democratically elected with over fifty percent of the vote. The transition to democracy had begun. One of the first issues the new leader addressed was the enormous disrespect for basic human rights under the military regime. He dealt with the issue by establishing La Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (the National Commission on the Disappearance of People). The group’s purpose was to investigate the human rights violations, the result of which was the Nunca Más (Never Again) report which explained in detail its findings.

Democracy continued with the next transition of power to the freely elected President Carlos Menem. At the time of this writing,
Menem is still president, and the violent military regime of the not-very-distant past seems a mere faded memory. The Argentine people perhaps have suffered enough and want simply to forget, but something will not let them.

In this paper, I will discuss and evaluate the democratic transition in detail with a special focus on the human rights violations of the military regime and, consequently, the reconciliation which Argentine society faced. I will also examine the different social and political groups involved in the process of democratization and reconciliation. Finally, I will analyze the success of the reconciliation under both the Alfonsín and Menem administrations respectively.

The Coup of 1976

On July 1, 1974, President Juan Perón died while serving as Argentina’s president for the second time. Perón was a man who, for generations, served as the figurehead of the political party that bears his name and continues on with great strength in Argentine politics. Upon his death, his vice-president took office. The new president was now the late president’s wife, Isabel. Under her rule, Argentina deteriorated economically, socially and politically. The military took it upon itself to relieve the situation by intervening. This regime sought to drastically change society and was not afraid to use violence to accomplish these goals.

The overthrow was orchestrated by one General Jorge Rafael Videla. He and his regime took on two huge responsibilities. The first was to quell recent uprisings by such violent guerrilla groups as the Montoneros. This radical and often violent group grew out of supporters of the former President Perón’s politics and social reforms. The group’s objective was for Peronist politics to prevail. Like a typical leftist guerrilla group in Latin America, it would use violent and illegal measures to prove its point, for example, kidnappings, protests which ended in violence, etc. The second responsibility that General Videla undertook was to try to salvage Argentina’s economy from virtual destruction. (For further information regarding Argentina’s economic struggles see Arthur Comstock’s essay in this volume.)

With Juan Perón dead, the Peronist guerrilla groups started to push for political power. Eventually violent occurrences became so frequent that the country was facing a full scale guerrilla war. The guerrillas were kidnapping prominent government officials, setting off bombs, and even assassinating figures within the army and other institutions. Soon the armed forces intervened and answered the guerrillas’ actions with violence, torture and death. The military reacted to the guerrillas’ violence by subjecting Argentina to extreme repression. The military began to stage its own violent outbursts without any forewarning. In addition, it began taking prisoners who soon came to be called the “disappeared.” The number of people that disappeared grew rapidly. The military would use these hostages as a way to deter guerrillas from any further violent acts and often would even execute them. (Rock, p. 363)

With the country almost under a state of siege, the military took the responsibility of stopping the violent outbursts and restoring order. The only problem was that it didn’t stop the bloodshed. Instead of stopping the guerrillas’ violence by reacting with its own violence, the military’s plan escalated into a bloody battle which would be named “the Dirty War.”

All of this, coupled with the economic decay of the country, led to the extreme circumstances of tension and confusion that so often precede unusual solutions. As in the case of many Latin American countries, Argentina’s “solution” was the 1976 coup d’état.

In order to ensure success, the military regime began “eliminating” members of society who would threaten its prosperity through forced disappearances, torture, and death. Despite this reign of terror, the country’s situation did not improve. The military regime’s subsequent attempt at economic reforms succeeded for about four years, bringing inflation down to 88 percent per year in 1980: but by 1981 Argentina would find itself once again in economic crisis. Inflation rose to over 100 percent per year, and the country faced a recession. (Skidmore and Smith, p. 105) The military regime’s goal was to restructure society, but what it achieved was scarring it.

In one final attempt at dignity, the military regime, which was now led by General Leopoldo Galtieri, decided to try to boost national pride
and consequently gain national support through an event which would end up costing the regime its power. The event was what is now known as the Falklands/Malvinas War. These islands lie off the coast of Argentina, but are still controlled and populated by the British. Argentina invaded the islands on April 2, 1982, in what promised to be a small dispute with a simple ending. Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister of Britain, had other ideas, however. She quickly dispatched troops to the small islands and the dispute became an international incident. In the end Britain triumphed, and her victory cost the Argentine military its political power. After the Falklands/Malvinas War the Argentine economy continued to deteriorate. This in turn led to the end of the military rule and the beginning of a transition to democracy.

The Democratic Transition: a Political Perspective

In December of 1983 Raúl Alfonsín of the UCR party (Unión Cívica Radical) succeeded the last of the military presidents, General Reynaldo Bignone, and became the first civilian democratically elected president of Argentina since the coup of 1976. Alfonsín had two major goals for his government and he accomplished one. His first goal was the consolidation of democracy. This he achieved. His second was economic recovery. This he did not achieve. In order to begin the reconciliation of Argentina’s society, Alfonsín set up an investigation of human rights violations. This resulted in the Nunca Más (Never Again) report which documented the violations. This report, along with the successful and peaceful transition to democracy, helped him to accomplish his first objective. His second objective, economic reform, would be attained by his successor, President Menem.

The Peronist candidate, Carlos Menem, won the next democratic election for President in May 1989. He began revitalizing the economy by privatizing such companies as the national telephone company, ENTEL, and the national airlines, Aerolíneas Argentinas. (Skidmore & Smith, p. 110) He followed up Alfonsín’s failed attempt at changing the currency to the austral by instituting the new peso as the form of currency. Finally, he tied the peso to the US dollar, making the exchange rate between the two countries’ currencies even. Inflation subsequently declined, and Argentina’s inflation rate has been relatively stable through the present.

The Military Government and Human Rights

In 1976 Argentina’s new military government faced considerable opposition. In order to cope with the various threats, the junta used its military to perpetuate gross human rights violations which included torture, death and “detained-disappearance.” This last form of repression, detained-disappearance, was a tactic not uncommon to other Latin American military regimes. The controlling body would arrest a person for questioning, for example, and he or she would never return. Evidence of death was never found, so the person was not considered executed, though that was the likely fate. Instead, because the last known status was arrest, the person was considered “detained,” but at the same time “disappeared.” In 1976 alone, the number of those considered detained-disappeared rose to over 4,000. (Skaar, p. 49) By using these repressive tactics, the military could instill fear in society while eliminating opponents of the government at the same time. (Skaar, p. 49) The details of the human rights violations are documented in the Nunca Más report. The report also contains detailed testimonies about torture and disappearance.

Though arrests may have seemed random, not just anyone was taken by the military, at least not at first. The coming of the military dictatorship meant the systematic disappearance of the opposition: in this case the guerrillas. According to David Rock, Thousands vanished into prisons and police torture chambers. During the previous six years (1970-1976) the guerrillas’ victims had numbered at most two or three hundred; the price now exacted in retaliation, mostly through “disappearances,” was at least 10,000. The repression quite deliberately, it seemed, was arbitrary, uncoordinated, and indiscriminate, which intensified its powers of intimidation. (Rock, pp. 367-68) The military’s use of intimidation spread to people who merely knew or were associated with
the opposition. Girlfriends, boyfriends, wives, husbands, friends, and relatives of the suspected opposition were taken, questioned and tortured. Depending on the source, the number of disappearances ranges anywhere from 10,000 (Rock, p. 368) to 30,000 (according to the human rights group las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo). The problem with estimating a precise number is that in many cases there were no bodies found. The military government enacted a concerted effort to cover up the disposal of the bodies. For example, bodies would be flown out and dumped into the ocean, where they would certainly never be found.

There is another group of victims that, to this author, symbolizes the horror of the Argentine dictatorship. This group is the children, and their disappearance is a phenomenon unique to Argentina. Children were taken because of their parents' political and ideological ties. There were two such groups of “disappeared children.” One group was the offspring of detained women who were pregnant. Pregnant women were taken and tortured just as the military would take and torture anyone in “normal” condition. Often, their babies were born while the mothers were incarcerated. According to the Nunca Más report, “Many pregnant women were kidnapped... and during their captivity they suffered every type of ridicule....” (Nunca Más report, p. 317) There is also considerable evidence that members of the military sometimes took the babies and raised them as their own children.

Other children were taken because they happened to be with their parents who were being arrested. These children were incarcerated and treated badly, like their parents. Some of them were also adopted by military families. Finally, there were children who were too old to be considered young children incapable of free thought and ideas, yet not old enough to be considered adults. As stated in the Nunca Más report, “Almost 250 girls and boys that were between the ages of 13 and 18 years old disappeared.... They were kidnapped in their homes, in the public street or upon leaving school... There were many adolescents who disappeared as a consequence of the repression exercised against their parents.” (translated into English, Nunca Más report, p. 324) Some of these children were eventually returned, but are scarred emotionally for life. Some are still being looked for and may never be found.

The Formation of Human Rights Organizations

The public, especially those closely involved with or related to those who had disappeared, did not ignore the gross human rights violations. Instead, many in Argentine society bravely confronted the opposition.

It is hard to imagine that a government would have the capability of invading and violating an entire nation's rights. What is even harder to imagine is how those who were left behind by husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, and children were able to cope. The fact is, the victims didn't cope; they fought back, and they did it by forming political human rights organizations.

Ten major organizations were formed during the military regime to combat and protest the government’s gross human rights violations. These were educational and social groups that concentrated on specific themes, including detained and disappeared persons, persons who were forced into exile, and basic human rights violations. I will focus here on two groups in particular that received the most attention both nationally and abroad. They were the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo. These groups, like others, were formed in protest of the detained and disappeared with the intentions of discovering the whereabouts of their children and grandchildren. Their tactics and the attention they received made them unique.

These groups were able to form under formidable conditions. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo began protesting on Thursday, April 30, 1977. They began as a group of fourteen women who met every Thursday in the Plaza de Mayo to protest the disappearance of their children. (This not only included young children, but grown adults as well.) The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo found that every Thursday their group grew and grew. Finally on August 22, 1979, the group was officially formed. Eventually, the group
grew to include 2,500 members and had members throughout Argentina, not just Buenos Aires. (Frühling, Alberti, and Portales, pp. 46-48) The group received international attention and has been featured in documentaries about human rights abuses.

The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo formed in 1977 to combat the same problem, but it did so in a different way. The group protested the disappearance of their grandchildren who were either taken with their parents at the time of the coup or were born in captivity. The group differed from the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo because it primarily concentrated on looking for the children rather than simply protesting visibly, though both groups did participate in both activities. According to Hugo Frühling, the group’s main objective was “to obtain the identification of each one of the children and total or partial restitution... to their true families. Up to the moment [1988] they have found 45 children out of a total of 208 registered as disappeared.” (Translated into English, Frühling, Alberti, and Portales, p. 21) The group remains active today looking for the children and trying to match them with their respective families. These groups and others played significant roles through active protest during the military regime. Later, they would evolve to become important voices that would be heard by the democratic government during its transition period. President Alfonsín catered to these groups during his campaign by promising that he would not adhere to a law of general amnesty. The groups succeeded by forcing the recognition of the human rights violations committed during the military regime. One could say that they were even essential in the process of reconciling Argentine society.

Human Rights and the Transition to Democracy

As briefly mentioned earlier in this paper, in 1983 the military’s reign of terror ended and the era of democracy began with President Alfonsín. How the newly elected president handled the situation regarding human rights violations is significant for many reasons. One of President Alfonsín’s campaign promises was retribution for human rights violators. During his presidential campaign this was a key issue, because the military junta had passed a law in September of 1983 which granted amnesty to anyone who had committed crimes during the military regime against leftist guerrilla forces. (Powell) Alfonsín vowed to overturn this law under civilian rule, and he did exactly that once in office.

He began the healing process by appointing a commission (the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons) which investigated and detailed the execution or disappearance of 8,906 people in Argentina. (Skidmore and Smith, p. 108) This commission published the Nunca Más report which other Latin American countries, including Chile, would use as a model when they faced the process of democratization in the future. The report includes testimonies of victims and their respective families. Though the report is thorough, some believe the total number of people represented is underestimated. The commission explains its objectives and the process it went through in a long and moving prologue, part of which reads as follows:

With sadness, with pain we have completed the mission that was entrusted to us in the moment of the Constitutional President of the Republic. This job was very hard, because we had to repair a difficult puzzle, many years after the facts occurred, when they have deliberately erased all of the faces, they have burned all of the documents and they have demolished the buildings... The most terrible drama that the nation suffered in all its history was during the period that the military dictatorship lasted through, initiated in March 1976, and it will serve to make us understand that only democracy is capable of preserving a population... that only democracy can maintain and save the sacred and essential rights of the human creature. Only this way will we be able to be sure that NEVER AGAIN in our country will the famous events... be repeated in the civilized world. (Translated into English, from the Prologue of the Nunca Más report, pp. 10-11)

The Nunca Más report was an essential first step in the process of reconciling Argentina. Alfonsín did not stop, however, with the official investigation made public through the document.
The Argentine people, led by the ambitious human rights groups, were not satisfied by the
Nunca Más report alone. They wanted the abolition of amnesty for the armed forces and that included anyone who committed human rights violations. Alfonsín, under pressure by these groups, made the path-breaking decision to lift the amnesty law installed by the military junta, and forced major military leaders to stand accused of violating human rights before a civilian court. The government’s judicial branch charged and tried nine of the most important and powerful generals of the military regime.

The human rights trials were a new occurrence in the way Latin American countries with histories of human rights violations handled the process of democratization. In 1985 the whole world watched as Argentina’s judicial system tried the very men who once ruled the country. They were former presidents and former army generals Jorge Videla, Viola and Leopoldo Galtieri; former navy chiefs Massera, Armando Lambruschini and Jorge Anaya, and former air force leaders Orlando Agosti, Omar Graffigna and Basilio Lami Dozo. (Beard, “Carter Human Rights Aide...” p. C5) An impressive 835 witnesses recounted tales of torture chambers and murders ordered by the leaders. Throughout the trials, the leaders and their defenders maintained that during the period of the military dictatorship the country had been in a state of war, a national emergency. They even tried to argue that their actions were heroic and that they saved the country from a “communist state.” (Beard, “Argentine ‘Dirty War’ Trial Ends,” p. C11) These arguments may have saved some of the leaders from a lifetime behind bars. Though there were different sentences ranging from life imprisonment to acquittals, the convictions symbolized a sense of justice and a readiness for Argentine society to put its past behind it. (Reuters, “Argentine Activists...” p. 11)

The human rights trials represented an effort by the Alfonsín government to reconcile its broken nation by forcing an elite few to take responsibility for their actions during the dictatorship, without the expense, hassle, and further heartbreak of trying every military officer guilty of human rights violations. The idea was a potent one. It is impossible to expect a nation torn apart by the death of as many as thirty thousand people to embrace democracy without first reconciling with its recent past. The compromise of prosecuting the generals was one that allowed the symbolic punishment of the human rights violators to take place. The generals represented the repression; and even though not every soldier was tried and punished, through the trials of the generals a form of reconciliation was achieved. For these reasons, President Alfonsín’s human rights trials were a unique and bold approach to beginning his country’s transition to democracy.

**The Breakdown of Justice**

The trials resulted in the sentencing of a total of nine of Argentina’s top rulers and armed forces leaders. Unfortunately, this sentencing was the only justice that Argentine society would see. Everything that happened afterwards served to only frustrate human rights activists and organizations.

It all started when President Alfonsín started to rescind some of his original constraints on the amnesty laws. Because the military reacted with hostility to the sentencing of its commanders, Alfonsín was forced by protests of human rights organizations to retract his promise of a ban on general amnesty. He did so by introducing a law in 1987 that erased charges against military officers and junior military officers. (Atwood, 1987) Alfonsín’s introduction of the new law that would, in essence, support amnesty in some cases angered human rights organizations. He never intended to dismantle any of his previous actions by pardoning sentenced generals, however. In this sense, he was trying to help the reconciliation process by appeasing the human rights groups with trials, but without frustrating the military by dragging every one of its officers through the court system. However, the human rights organizations thought everyone should be punished while the military complained it had been merely acting in the best interest of the country.

Alfonsín had ventured into unchartered territory by charging and indicting generals for human rights violations. Though some activists say he did not go far enough, he had gone further than anyone before him had had the courage to go. With his policies the Argentine
people may have found that they could put the past behind them and accept the punishment of a few top officials as punishment for all who were guilty. This theory, of course, can never be tested because in 1989, Peronist President Carlos Menem took office, and the reconciliation process came to a standstill.

The Reconciliation and Its Demise

In an attempt to "heal lingering wounds" Menem effectively unraveled Raúl Alfonsín's human rights policy by issuing pardons for the convicted military generals. (Smith, p. 1) Menem's actions, however, suspiciously appeared to be more of an endeavor to stimulate the reconciliation of the military and the government rather than that of the military and Argentine society as a whole. This action proved so controversial that the human rights organizations declared December 30, 1990, as a day of "mourning" to show opposition against the pardon. (Bonasegna, p. 4) But Menem stood by his action claiming that it was "a necessary step toward national reconciliation." (Malamud-Goti, p. 517) Human rights activists as well as political analysts disagreed, seeing the action as a setback in the democratic transition.

Menem garnered much criticism with his seemingly anti-human rights actions, and consequently he received many resignations under his administration. For example, Mrs. Fernandez Meijide, a human rights activist, reacted to Menem's second attempt at "healing the nation" by stating: "Once again, civilian power... gives in to military power. This pardon has little to do with pacifying the country and a lot to do with an attempt to prevent military pressure in the future." (Bonasegna, p. 4) Menem's actions only prolonged the painful reconciliation process.

Individual Attempts to Heal a Nation

If the Argentines learned one thing during their years under oppressive military rule, it was that through group effort and determination many dreams can become real. The democratic government may have failed the human rights activists' and organizations' expectations, but that did not stop the groups from progressing towards reconciliation. Human rights groups continued to protest every step backwards that the government took in its wishy-washy stance on amnesty. The groups also contributed on a smaller scale by searching for missing children, trying to identify bodies, and, perhaps the most important, never losing the hope of finding out the truth and achieving justice.

There have been rare instances of reunions of a child with either the child's grandparents (because the parents were detained-disappeared persons) or the natural parents. In 1983 one such reunion took place. In this incident, a poor family found an abandoned infant during the years of the "Dirty War" and moved away from Buenos Aires to escape the violence. They took the child with them and adopted and raised the baby as their own. The child's name is Tamara Ana Maria Arce. Her adoptive parents told her what they thought to be the truth, that she had been abandoned by her natural mother, but what they did not know was that her mother was one of the detained-disappeared persons. Unlike many of the detained-disappeared, however, she had been released. Following her release she spent two years searching for her daughter. (Diehl, p. A1) Because of the organization and resources of groups like the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Rose Mary Riveros reunited with her daughter in Lima, Peru, in September of 1983. Sadly, however, stories like this one are unusual. More often than not, the children who are being desperately sought out by relatives are never found.

Another facet of the healing process is finding the remains of the detained-disappeared. Berta Schuberoff is the mother of Marcelo Gelman, who disappeared during the "Dirty War." The mothers realize now that their missing sons or daughters are in fact dead. Many of their bodies will never be found because of the extreme measures taken by the military to hide them. Berta Schuberoff is different, however, for in 1989, her son's body was found and identified. Upon finally learning the true fate of her son she reacted by saying, "When they gave me back his remains..., I cried a lot, which I had not been able to do before.... After 13 years I was at last able to mourn." (Ford, p. 6) Because of the work of the
Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, many families have been able to finally lay their loved ones to rest. This knowledge has tremendous healing effects. The Argentine people may have been robbed of their justice, but some of them are helping uncover the truth. Without both reconciliation is unlikely.

Truth Revealed

At the time of my writing this article, some startling new evidence about exactly what happened during the “Dirty War” was uncovered. In late March 1995, former navy Lieutenant Commander Adolfo Francisco Sclingo admitted in his book about the “Dirty War” that people were thrown to their deaths from airplanes as a form of execution. This practice had often been rumored to be true, but the written acknowledgement of it by someone who witnessed and even participated in the events is unprecedented. According to Sclingo the victims were “told they were being transferred from the notorious detention center in the Navy School of Mechanics in Buenos Aires [and] were so weak from torture and confinement that they had to be helped onto the planes, where they were heavily sedated.” (Honore, p. 14A) In addition, Sclingo admitted having taken part in pushing prisoners to their deaths on two flights.

The publicity of this recent admission has sparked some controversy; but at the same time, the general attitude of the Argentine people has not changed. In other words, people still want to forget about the “Dirty War.” The people who have been stirred by this news are the Catholic Church and the human rights activists.

The Catholic Church in particular has been involved because of Sclingo’s implication that the Church approved of this form of execution as a humane act. Accordingly, the Church has opened an investigation into the violations of the “Dirty War.” According to a recent article, “Argentina’s Roman Catholic Bishops pledged yesterday [April 29, 1995] to come clean on the church’s role in the “dirty war” of the 1970s... Argentina’s bishops responded with a March 8 statement condemning chaplains who might have supported the torturers, but said they themselves had always tried to save people.” (Reuters, “Argentine Bishops...,” p. 25) The Church’s continued investigation into human rights violations is something that is of particular interest to human rights activists.

Conclusion

Reconciliation had a chance in Argentina. Most other Latin American countries did not even try to do what Alfonsín did to restore democracy and heal wounds simultaneously. It is a difficult task, but his handling of it won him international recognition and acclaim. Menem did succeed him in a peaceful transition of democratic power. He also succeeded in bringing about enormous economic reform to the country. But he failed in the eyes of human rights organizations and the people of Argentina who continue to suffer to this day because justice was not served. Their sons and daughters, husbands and wives, mothers and fathers disappeared, were tortured, and were murdered; and most of the people responsible have never been brought to justice. The country’s healing process was stunted and it has never had the chance to learn the truth, mourn its losses and begin again. As the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo chant, “We will not forgive and we will not forget.” Without retribution, Argentina’s people may never forget the “Dirty War.”


Frühling, Hugo; Alberti, Gloria and Portales, Felipe. Organizaciones de Derechos Humanos de América del Sur [Human Rights Organizations of South America], Santiago, Chile: Instituto Interamericano de Derechos Humanos, 1989.


La Constitucion Nacional y los Derechos Humanos [The National Constitution and Human Rights]


