Political violence in Argentina during the 1970s

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POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN ARGENTINA

DURING THE 1970s

by

Arya B. Kazemi

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

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Department of Political Science
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ABSTRACT

The topic of this thesis is a historical study of selected controversial topics within the broader phenomenon of political violence in Argentina during the decade of the 1970s. A historical background from 1930 until 1969 (of the events and political problems in Argentina) which prompted the formation of armed guerrilla movements in order to create political change, is outlined in the first chapter. The growth of the guerrilla movements and the evolution of their respective political ideologies during the years 1970-75 are discussed in the second chapter, which also discusses the relative success of the guerrillas in their armed actions.

The third chapter examines the most debated aspects of political violence in Argentina during the 1970s: the legitimacy of the Argentine military's illegal and covert crackdown on "subversion" in the second half of the decade (1975-79). Whether the military's campaign was a random attack against any opposition to the military government, which came to power in March of 1976, or a necessary, publicly supported form of bringing peace back to a country seemingly on the verge of anarchy. Although no definite conclusion can be drawn upon these issues, I raise various estimates and critique each group's methodology.

This paper relies heavily on primary sources such as personal interviews
This paper relies heavily on primary sources such as personal interviews and official documents as well as the latest published revelations on the topics which I compiled during my nine month stay in Argentina (January until September, 1995), in order to give a first hand, non-biased perspective on the topic. The conclusion, however, is based partly on my personal observations on the issue of the military's brutal campaign.
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This thesis is a project that began out of my vague personal curiosity about the topic, yet by the time I returned to the U.S. in September of 1995, the nine months I had spent in Argentina conducting research and interviews turned out to be the most interesting and rewarding period of my 21 years. I intended to conduct a comprehensive examination of the difficult and sensitive issue of the political violence in Argentina during the 1970s, but one Argentine friend told me: "Don't go crazy trying to find out what exactly happened, because even us Argentines don't know."

Since my research project dealt with the darkest period in Argentina's history, I fully expected my share of bad experiences, yet the overwhelming majority of people I came in contact with went out of their way to aid me in any way possible. I hope these people as well as the people in the United States who got this project off on the right foot share a bit of my satisfaction in the quality of the content of the following thesis.

A truly special thanks goes out to Dr. Felix Herrera and his family who treated me like a son and through their kindness and warmth made the always difficult transition to living in a foreign country much easier to bear.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Argentina, a country which prides itself on Europeanness due to the majority of its population being descendants of Italian, Spanish, French and other immigrants who left Europe for the economically prosperous Argentina at the turn of the twentieth century, has had a history of internal political turmoil and subsequent military intervention. Despite its wealth and its relative racial homogeneity, in fact, Argentina shares many political characteristics with its poorer and more ethnically diverse neighbors, such as Bolivia and Paraguay.

The Pre-Perón Years: 1930-45

In the twentieth century the Argentine military has taken power six times (1930, 1943, 1955, 1962, 1966 and 1976), but for the history of political violence in Argentina, the events of 17th October, 1945 seem the first major move towards widespread public discontent and uprising.

The first coup, led in 1930 by General Jose Uriburu, was a result of the onset of the Great Depression and the public's demand for a new government...
with a better economic plan. The second coup, in 1943, led by General Arturo Rawson, was bloodless like the first and widely supported by the public and political parties alike. The coup of 1943 would be the beginning of the rise of a military figure who would dominate Argentina's political scene until his death in 1974, Juan Domingo Perón. Perón, who had been born on October 8, 1895, to Italian immigrants, enjoyed a steady rise up the military ladder. His assignment in Mussolini's Italy from 1939 to 1941 would influence his nationalist, anti-Communist and quasi-fascist political ideologies. From June 1943 until June 1944, Perón would ascend from the rank of colonel to Minister of War, and then to Vice-President in the government of General Edelmiro Farrel, who had taken over as president in February 1944 but was considered only a military figurehead. During Farrel's tenure, Perón would choose the position of secretary of labor rather than vice-president, as the best way to consolidate his power base among the working class and Argentina's many unions.

1945 marked the end of World War II and the United States had finally outpositioned the British in terms of influence in Latin America (although the U.S. influence in Argentina was longstanding). The Truman Administration saw the seemingly inevitable rise of Perón to the top of Argentina's government as troublesome, not only due to his pro-Fascist tendencies, but also due to Argentina's previous pro-Axis stance during the war (U.S. and Britain had imposed numerous economic sanctions on Argentina because of its anti-allied
Farrel was not only coming under pressure from the American Ambassador, Spruille Braden, to dismiss Perón, but also from Argentina's powerful oligarchy, who saw Perón's pro-labor policies as disastrous to their interests which had flourished for so long under a system traditionally not concerned with working class rights. Farrel finally dismissed Perón from his multiple posts in early October, 1945, and sent him to an island off the coast of the capital, Buenos Aires.

The Perónist Years: 1945-55

It was on the 17th of October, 1945, that thousands of workers would flood from all over the country to march on the government house (Casa Rosada), demanding Perón's return. In the face of such opposition, Farrel quickly succumbed and brought Perón back to his multiple posts and announced formal elections for February 1946 after which Perón would be recognized as the official leader of the country. The events of October 17th had solidified Perón's position as the leader of Argentina and ten years of Perónismo began.

These ten years (1945-55) can be divided into two parts: the Evita years (1945-1952), and the post-Evita years (1952-1955). Evita (Eva Duarte de Perón) was born in 1919 in Los Toldos, province of Buenos Aires, and had worked her way up from poverty to become a radio and screen star. Shortly after meeting Perón in January, 1943 she married him and became his staunchest supporter.
Through her broadcasts, she played a pivotal role in persuading the masses to organize for the October 17th showdown, and when Perón became President in 1946, she was not only dubbed the "spiritual leader of the nation", she also acted as the main figure in carrying out the pro-working class social reforms outlined in Perónismo. Through the Eva Perón Foundation, an anti-aristocracy campaign was launched in which Evita gave money, clothes, land and other gifts taken from the wealthy to the workers who were the backbone of Perón's support. These supporters were called the shirtless ones, or *descamisados*.

The Evita years were the golden age of Perónism, as not only did his wife's positive international image offset prior concerns about the president's Fascist tendencies, but also internally, the economy was in an upswing in terms of income growth largely due to the vast profits made by Argentina during and following WWII in terms of exports to Europe (at this time, the country also had the largest gold reserves in the world). Positive pro-worker laws were implemented which emphasized higher pensions, extended holidays and restricted work schedules. Shortly before Perón was elected to another six year term as President in the elections of June 4, 1952, Evita had suddenly become sick and frail, and she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Evita passed away on July 26, 1952 at the age of 33.

From this point on, Perón's presidency began to crumble. Many wavered on their previous backing of Perón. Not only was his personal life in question,
(he supposedly took a 13 year-old mistress shortly after Evita's death), but his economic policies also began to fail as most of the positive growth of years past had begun to vanish due to the recovery of European agriculture and inefficiency of nationalized industries. The final blow to Perón's power occurred when he extended his repression of opponents all the way to the Catholic church. A previous ally, the church denounced Perón's personal life and his move towards legalizing divorce and prostitution as well as his banning of religious influence in public schools.

On June 16, 1955, one of the bloodiest episodes of military intervention in Argentine political history occurred, as naval planes bombarded Buenos Aires' main plaza, (the Plaza de Mayo), which was filled with pro-Perónist demonstrators urging Perón to stay on in power; the result was 355 civilian casualties. Although the navy failed to oust Perón, (because the army was still backing him), this unprecedented attack created a widespread fear of a civil war between pro and anti-Perónist camps. Perón had threatened civil war by claiming that for every dead Perónist there would be five dead anti-Perónists and, at the end of August, a state of siege had been declared. In September, the army once again decided to step in and take control of a politically unstable country. The coup started in the cities of Cordoba and Bahia Blanca on September 16th, but Perón did not leave for exile in Paraguay until the 19th when the navy threatened to shell oil installations in Buenos Aires, and its leader General Eduardo Lonardi was sworn
in as President.

Although Lonardi was strongly anti-Perónist, he recognized that the Perónists were too large a political force to be completely ignored in the political process, and he considered allowing them to retain their voting rights. This was unacceptable to the right wing of the military and, subsequently, Lonardi was replaced by General Pedro Eugenio Aramburu in November of 1955, after a period of inner struggles in the armed forces. Aramburu quickly carried out the demands of the vehement anti-Perónists by presenting a presidential decree banning the Perónist party from any political activity as well as prohibiting anyone from running again who had held office at the local or national level during Perón's tenure.

Endless Instability: 1955-69

Perón was charged in absentia with corruption, treason and smuggling. His main body of support, the General Confederation of Labor (Confederacion General Del Trabajo or CGT), was placed under military control. The degree of anti-Perónist sentiment on the part of Aramburu's regime was so strong that Perón's name could not appear in the press (he was referred to as the "Fugitive Tyrant") and public displays of Perón and Evita were outlawed. An anti-Perónist curriculum was introduced in public schools and Perónist slogans and insignias were declared illegal.
A special dilemma for Aramburu was Evita's corpse, which had been preserved so that no decomposition would take place. Aramburu knew the power that Evita's memory had over Perón's supporters, and thought it best that the body be smuggled out of Argentina. The body was being held secretly at the CGT headquarters until 1956, when it was shipped to Italy and buried under a false name. For 18 years, until 1974, when Evita's body was finally returned to Argentina in 1974, the whereabouts of the corpse was not only a much-debated mystery within Argentina, but also a rallying point for Perónists, who were outraged at Aramburu's actions. The degree to which Aramburu was willing to go to crush any pro-Perónist movement became clear in 1956, when a group of officers and civilians led by General Juan Jose Valle staged a rebellion in the province of Corrientes in protest against all the anti-Perónist measures. When the rebellion failed, Valle and twenty-seven of his followers were executed. This was the first time since the mid-nineteenth century that rebellion was punished by death in Argentina.

Aramburu, however, did keep his promise of making a transition to democracy, as in 1958 Arturo Frondizi was elected President. Frondizi's election seemed to mark the beginning of a gradual return for Perónists, as Perón's endorsement from exile of Frondizi's campaign was seen as the major difference in the outcome of the elections. But in 1962, this trend was reversed as the military, fearing that Frondizi was becoming too pro-Perónist, removed him from
power, replacing him with another civilian, Jose Guido. Although there was no doubt that Guido was a military puppet, the military preferred that no military junta be installed at that point.

In the period after Peron's departure in 1955, the armed forces had been divided into two different political camps. One group, the "Blues" (Azules), favored a return to constitutional government, but by aligning the Peronists behind a new military leader. The other group, the "Reds" (colorados), were vehement anti-Peronists who favored an indefinite military dictatorship. One reason for the outcome of the 1962 coup, neither a military junta nor presidential elections, was the nearly equal power of these two factions; another was the need to maintain the pretense of democracy to the international community for the purpose of assuring economic aid.

In 1963, the "Blues" had gained the upper hand in the military power struggle and declared another election. This time, Arturo Illia of the Radical Party, UCR (Unión Cívica Radical), won the presidency, but with only a quarter of the total vote, as up to twenty percent had followed Peron's instructions and cast blank ballots, thereby showing their dissatisfaction with all candidates in the elections. Forty percent of the vote had been divided among forty-seven minor parties which were offspring of major parties (including UCR itself).

Illia's tenure was plagued with problems as the economic difficulties which had started in 1930, and which Peron's nationalization policies had exacerbated.
Consumer prices had risen at an annual average rate of thirty percent since 1955, and Illia's lack of popularity among Perónists didn't help his efforts to turn the economy around, as worker strikes became commonplace.

By the time General Juan Carlos Ongania staged a coup to overthrow Illia on June 28, 1966, the change was welcomed by a majority of Argentines. One poll showed sixty-six percent of the population to be "happy" with the change and only six percent to be opposed. The Argentine public had clearly grown tired of the political and economic instability of the post-Perón years (1955-1966) during which five presidents, three civilian and two military, had been unable to set a clear course for the nation.

From the onset of Ongania's arrival in office it became clear that this military regime was not like those in the past, which had only short-term plans. He stated that his regime would stay in power indefinitely (sin plazos) and he declared "La Revolucion Argentina" (the Argentine revolution), a plan for the regeneration of the economy, society and politics. Ongania wasted no time in implementing an authoritarian plan in which all political parties were dissolved, all forms of political activity were banned, the press came under the regime's control and censorship commissions were set up to monitor films and television broadcasts. The regime's obsession with communism and morality led to burnings of those books deemed "Pro-Communist" and the closing down of some of Buenos Aires' most popular cabarets.
The first signs of violent repression by Ongania's regime occurred on July 29, 1966, when the military participated in a crackdown on universities in what became known as the "night of the long batons". Under a law passed in 1918, all universities in Argentina were granted "autonomy"; and their grounds were off limits to police and military forces. The university would be run by a "tripartite council" of professors, students and alumni.

When Ongania announced the removal of the tripartite councils and the appointment of government picked officials to run the universities, students, who had been the only major group to oppose the Ongania coup, occupied one of the buildings of the University of Buenos Aires in protest. The military used immediate force in removing all students and faculty from the building. In the aftermath, more than thirty people were hospitalized and more than two hundred arrested\(^9\). Shortly afterwards, most of the presidents, deans, and faculties of Argentina's eight national universities resigned in protest. This not only allowed governmental control of the universities, but also gave the Ongania regime an excuse for outlawing all student unions. Ongania's economic moves seemed brighter than his political actions. The man he appointed as the minister of economics, Adalbert Krieger Vasena, installed a plan which by 1969 had managed to curb inflation and increase industrial growth and public investment.\(^20\) But in May 1969, a public uprising in the industrial city of Cordoba, which became known as the Cordobazo, would dramatically alter the Argentine political scene.
The Cordobazo grew out of the government's decision to raise the price of meal tickets at a northeastern university. A student was subsequently killed on May 15, 1969 in protests held in the city of Corrientes; this death would lead to more demonstrations across the country. On May 17th, a student was killed in the city of Rosario and on May 20th, another student was blinded by a grenade in Cordoba. On May 29th, a general strike was called in Cordoba and students and auto workers, unhappy with summary firings in the region's Renault car factory, took to the streets.

What followed was two days of mayhem, as protestors burned shops, cars and buses. When police cracked down on the protestors 14 were killed and hundreds wounded. The fallout from the Cordobazo included the resignation of Krieger Vasena, largely due to reluctance of foreign investors to invest money in Argentina, which they saw as an increasingly unstable country.

The Cordoba uprising was only partially Perónist inspired, as some of the auto workers unions were not CGT influenced, and many of the students were too young to have any links to Perónism. Rather, the workers rose up because they saw the Krieger Vasena plan as another in a long line of economic measures which ultimately made the rich wealthier and the working class poorer by lowering real wages. The students were clearly fed up with the academic repression that had started with the night of the long batons, and they were also heavily influenced by recent student protests in Paris (the evenements of 1968).
The Cordobazo led to another rift in the military ranks which was an extension of the earlier rivalry between the "blues" and "reds". This time a hard-line faction wanted even stronger authoritarian rule, while another more liberal faction wanted concessions made to protestors.

During the following months more unprecedented acts of violence occurred. In June, Augusto Vandor, a pro-Perónist leader of the CGT, was assassinated by unknown assailants. The next day, as American dignitary Nelson Rockefeller planned his visit to Argentina, a series of supermarkets belonging to his family were bombed (no one claimed responsibility for the bombings), and in September, large protests were held in the city of Rosario.

As Argentina prepared to embark on the decade of the 1970s, it was evident that the country was in a great deal of turmoil. Yet no one could imagine the terrible violence in the decade to come.
CHAPTER 2

THE RISE OF THE GUERRILLAS

Between 1959 and 1969, there were various attempts made at waging rural guerrilla warfare in Argentina. On the heels of the victory of the Sierra Maestra guerrillas in Cuba (on New Year's Day, 1959), a group of roughly twenty people established two guerrilla camps in the rural province of Tucuman in September of 1959. This group, which called itself the Uturuncos,23 had as their objective the removal of President Frondizi and the return of Perón, but the group was captured by police on Christmas day, 1959, and was never able to reorganize.24

In 1963, a journalist named Jorge Ricardo Masseti began recruiting members for the People's Guerrilla Army, EGP (Ejercito Guerrillero del Pueblo). This group with roughly thirty members operated for a short period of time in the north of Argentina, but within a year all members were either captured, dead of hunger or shot for desertion.25

The violent actions taken after the cordobazo in 1969 (the Vandor assassination and supermarket bombings), which are officially recorded as the first violent acts of pro-Perónist guerrillas, remain a debated historical point as many involved in the Perónist guerrilla movement put the responsibility for these acts
Birth of the ERP and Montoneros: 1970

The year 1970 marked the official beginning of the two guerrilla groups which had the greatest impact on the political scene during the 1970s: the Montoneros and the ERP (People's Revolutionary Army).

The Montoneros were founded by a group of four middle class, fervent Catholic college students who had as their platform an armed struggle for a workers regime modeled on Cuba. Intermeshed with this was their loyalty to bringing back Perón and the memory of Evita. The ERP was founded by Mario Roberto Santucho, a certified public accountant, who had spent considerable time in Cuba in the 1960's and even visited the United States for two months in 1963. Contrary to popular belief, he was never a student at Harvard (although that became a huge part of the "Santucho Myth" in the 1970s) since he was still not through with his accounting studies in Argentina at that time.

The effects of the unprecedented bloodshed of the 1955 coup and the vehement anti-Perónist propaganda campaign that followed had a tremendous effect on Argentina's youth. Roberto Perdía, who would later become one of the heads of the leftist Perónist guerrilla organization, the Montoneros, recalls: "We went from being taught in school that Evita was a saint to being taught that she was a whore."

A second event which greatly affected the young politically active
Argentines of the 1970s, was the Cuban Revolution of 1959 led by Fidel Castro and an Argentine doctor, Che Guevara. The situation in Cuba gave those disaffected with social inequality and the seemingly endless struggle for power between the military and civilians in Argentina a new blueprint for how their country should be run and a formula for taking power.

The 29th of May is National Army Day in Argentina and in 1970 the Montoneros saw this day as a perfect time to start their armed battle. Their target was none other than the retired General Aramburu, the man seen as responsible for the bloodshed of 1955. The four founders of the organization, dressed as military personnel, apprehended Aramburu while pretending to give him an escort from his Buenos Aires apartment and took him to a remote farm in the province of Buenos Aires, where he was given a "People's Tribunal", sentenced to death and shot in the head. His body was found a few days later in the basement of the rural house. Mario Firmenich, who is the only remaining survivor of the incident, has always referred to the execution as carrying out "the People's will."

To this day, this incident remains a controversial one. Many have the theory that the abduction was carried out or at least sponsored by the Ongania military government that was in place at the time, which saw the retired Aramburu as a danger to the military's power because he held considerable popularity in both military and civilian ranks. Firmenich, however, has shrugged this off as the inability of the public to accept that four youngsters could pull off
such a daring action and later go on to build a guerrilla force numbering in the thousands.\textsuperscript{35}

Mario Santucho had begun the building of the Revolutionary Workers Party, PRT (\textit{Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores}) in the province of Tucuman in the late 1960's, just after completing his studies at the University of Tucuman. In July 1970, during the congress of the PRT, a resolution was passed creating an armed wing of the party, named the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP). The objective of this army was to destabilize the armed forces to make possible the insurrection of the proletariat.\textsuperscript{36}

The idea of a Trotskyist guerrilla movement was a truly unique one to Latin America. The main reason Santucho chose this ideology as a platform may have been to make an absolute distinction from the prevailing Perónist armed movement that was starting to take place at the time (led by the \textit{Montoneros}). However, not all of the rank and file of the PRT-ERP had a Trotskyist political background; communists, other leftists, and nationalists were among those who saw Santucho's path as the best one for a revolution in Argentina.\textsuperscript{37}

According to surviving PRT/ERP members, Trotsky was never really seen by the organization members in the same way the Perónists saw Perón (Che Guevara was the main figure the ERP drew its inspiration from).\textsuperscript{38} Santucho, after meeting with prominent Argentine leftist theorist Nahuel Moreno in 1963, took a liking to Moreno's idea of how Trotskyism can and should be applied in
Argentina, which involved uniting the industrial workers of greater Buenos Aires with rural workers and farmers to oppose the "bourgeois state.\textsuperscript{39}

To build up their base of support, both the \textit{Montoneros} and ERP had similar target groups: Lower class workers (\textit{obreros}), students and trade union syndicalists who had the ability to recruit large groups of workers into the guerrilla organization. Both organizations were also full of middle class students and college graduates; a majority of the ERP's original members were students from the University of Tucuman (mostly friends of Santucho) who were engineers, economists (including second in command Enrique Gorriaran Merlo) or pre-med students. Both guerrilla organizations began a similar plan of action for carrying out their goals: attacks on military barracks or police precinct stations by small groups of armed guerrillas who would try to rob as many weapons as possible while causing maximum casualties. Sometimes military or police personnel would be targeted in public while off-duty. The guerrillas' most impressive operations were those carried out in order to gain funds: numbers of banks were held up for large sums of money and both domestic and foreign businessmen were kidnapped and held for ransom.\textsuperscript{40}

During the years 1970-73, the ERP was much more active in carrying out operations than the \textit{Montoneros}, even after the capture of Santucho on August 31, 1971, upon his arriving at a meeting of all the guerrilla factions in the city of Cordoba. This meeting, which included other high ranking members of the ERP
and Montoneros and the much smaller Revolutionary Armed Forces, FAR (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarios) and the Perónist armed forces, FAP (Fuerzas Armadas Perónistas), was raided by the local police who were tailing Santucho. There were the numerous kidnappings of foreign executives in Argentina during 1971 and 1972, in order to assure the release of not only Santucho but all the other guerrillas who had been captured and sentenced to long jail terms by the special judges created by the military government to deal specifically with the "subversion". But even all the pressure brought forth by foreign governments (especially those of Italy and England) could not assure the release of the captured guerrillas. At this time, the death penalty was outlawed in Argentina but according to Gorriaran Merlo, who was captured at the same meeting with Santucho, torture was all too frequent, especially the use of a pointed electric cattle prod (picana) which was lowered onto a body and released electrical shocks to sensitive areas (usually the mouth, nipples, genitals).

Despite all this, the public in general seemed to welcome the resistance to the seemingly endless succession of military rule. A poll in 1972 showed that 45 percent of the residents of greater Buenos Aires justified the guerrillas' action. In poorer, rural areas the guerrillas often had a Robin Hood type role. Miguel Molfino, one of the original members of ERP in the rural province of Chaco, remembers how the local organization's activities in the early 1970s consisted of hijacking trucks carrying milk and distributing them in the shanty towns of the
province where the ERP was perceived as heroes.\textsuperscript{45}

The major figures of the guerrilla organizations were moved in early 1972 to a prison in the city of Rawson, in the Patagonian province of Chubut, and there they carefully planned their escape.\textsuperscript{46} On August 15, 1972, twenty-five of the guerrillas, divided into one group consisting of the six leading figures and another of nineteen followers, made their daring escape attempt from the prison. Only the first group, which included Santucho, Merlo and Fernando Vaca Narvaja (one of the heads of the Montoneros) managed successfully to leave Argentina. They hijacked a plane at the Trelew Airport and took it to Chile, which at that time had a government led by Salvador Allende, a social democrat. The other 19 escapees were captured at the airport and a week later, on August 22nd, sixteen of the nineteen were reported dead, shot according to the government, while making another escape attempt. The three survivors, however, described what occurred as an execution.\textsuperscript{47}

The aftermath of this incident was tremendous pressure on the military to step down in favor of a democracy. By early 1973, Juan Perón finally decided to return to Argentina from exile in Spain in order to take part in the democratic elections conceded by the military regime for later that year. The person chosen to be the temporary president was Dr. Hector Campora, a dentist with long-time ties to the Perónist movement.
Amnesties, Ezeiza and the Triple-A: 1973

Upon taking over from General Lanusse, Campora put out an amnesty law for all imprisoned guerrillas and on May 25, 1973, 371 political prisoners were freed. The thousands who celebrated this day in Plaza de Mayo shouted a slogan at the military personnel who were vacating the government house and which would later prove ironic: "They're going, they're going and never coming back!" (Se van! Se van! Y nunca volveran!).

Thus ended seven years of military rule (1966-1973) and there was a great deal of optimism as far as the possibility of ending political violence in Argentina. By this time, the major guerrilla organizations had gained ever increasing support. During the brief interim presidency of Campora, pro-guerrilla propaganda was freely and openly displayed throughout the streets of Buenos Aires and other major cities. The prisoners who had benefitted from the amnesty were welcomed back as heroes and there were public marches by the Montoneros and open news conferences held by Santucho and other ERP leaders.

While in Spain, Perón's second wife, Isabel, came across a mysterious figure who would slowly but surely gain complete control over both her and Perón. He was Jose Lopez Rega, whose fascination with the occult, especially astrology, had earned him the nickname "The Sorcerer" (El Brujo). Lopez Rega had very distinct visions for the direction in which the Perónist movement should go after Perón's return. He was in the Perónist extreme right, which was deeply troubled
by the "Marxist infiltration" of the Perónist movement by the Montoneros. Before leaving Spain, he arranged for a band of armed thugs in Argentina to combat the Montoneros who were coming to Ezeiza International Airport to greet Perón. What followed on June 20, 1973, was a complete disaster. More than a million people had come to welcome Perón back, yet they were caught in the crossfire of the extremist organizations. The aftermath was more than 200 deaths. This was a true turning point in the cycle of violence in Argentina in the 1970s, as it became clear that even the return of Perón wasn't going to bring peace.

Shortly after the Ezeiza massacre, the ERP went back into clandestinity and once again began armed operations. On the 13th of July Campora resigned and turned over the government to Raul Lasitiri, Lopez Rega's son-in-law. Even before Perón was inaugurated on October 12, 1973 after receiving an overwhelming majority of the votes with Isabel as his vice presidential candidate, Lopez Rega's band of armed followers, the AAA, (Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance, Alianza Anti-Communista Argentina), went into action carrying out hits on the Perónist left. Not only the Montoneros and ERP, but prominent syndicalists, writers and priests were targeted. The most prominent assassination by the AAA was that of Jose Rucci, the head of the Congress of Workers, CGT, on the 25th of September, 1973, although it was officially blamed on the Montoneros. In reality, the Montoneros were still content with Perón's return and
concentrated on building better relations with Perón and even the military. It had become clear to everybody that Perón's death was imminent due to his increasingly bad health, and the guerrillas and the armed forces saw a need for cooperation after Perón's death. The army and the Montoneros embarked on a joint operation titled Operation Dorrego in October of 1973, where 800 members of the Perónist youth branch of the Montoneros (Juventud Perónista), joined 5,000 army members to undertake a public works project in Buenos Aires which lasted for 20 days.52

The army had stayed away from combating the guerrillas up to that period and had no interest in combat in the post-Perón period. The feeling within the army was that any internal terrorism should be left to the Federal Police and the courts to handle.53

The degree to which the guerrillas were gaining strength during this period is evident. Nearly 50,000 people attended a Montoneros rally in a soccer stadium in Buenos Aires on March 11, 197454, and in January 1974 an unprecedented 80 ERP guerrillas headed by Gorriaran Merlo attacked an army barracks in the town of Azul in the province of Buenos Aires.55 By this time, Perón was under steady pressure from Lopez Rega who had been named Minister of Welfare and operated the Triple-A out of the Ministry of Welfare building in downtown Buenos Aires.56 Finally, on May Day (May 1st, 1974) Perón finally broke ranks with the Montoneros.
During a gathering of approximately 100,000 supporters in the Plaza de Mayo, he labeled the Montoneros as "traitors and infiltrators." After these remarks the Montoneros left the plaza and the audience was cut in half. A week after the event some of the leading Montoneros held a meeting with Perón to try to smooth the tension in the Perónist ranks. This meeting was not successful, however, as the overwhelming influence of Lopez Rega made it impossible for Perón to make any concessions to leftist branches of his movement. On July 1, 1974, Juan Perón passed away at 78 years of age, his cause of death being pneumonia. As hundreds of thousands of Argentines paid their last respects to Perón, his wife Isabel, who had held the position of vice president, was sworn in as Latin America's first female president. Her tenure, which lasted until March 24, 1976, would be one of unimagined public unrest and violence.

Tucuman: What Really Happened?

The province of Tucuman is located in the North of Argentina (bordered by the province of Santiago del Estero, Santucho's birthplace). This area is often arrogantly referred to as Argentina's "gateway to Latin America" by the porteños of Buenos Aires, and is also the location of Argentina's declaration of independence from Spain on the 9th of July, 1816.

Like other northern provinces, it is poverty-stricken, densely populated, and although partly mountainous, dependent on sugar as its main source of income.
All these factors seemed to indicate to Santucho that Tucuman was the perfect place to start a Cuban type revolutionary movement, as the mountains and sugar cane fields could be an ideal hideout for guerrillas and popular support could be gathered from dissatisfied workers.

For years, the true nature of and facts about the guerrilla campaign launched by the ERP in the province of Tucuman during Isabel Perón's government has been in doubt. The military would use the claim that one third of the province was under guerrilla control as a measure of the guerrillas threat to the state and as a justification for the brutal campaign launched by the military in the province beginning in February of 1975, titled Operation Independence (Operativa Independencia). In 1995, in an interview with the program "60 Minutes", current Argentine President Carlos Menem went as far as stating that the whole province was under ERP control, while others claim that the situation was vastly blown out of proportion and that the guerrillas in reality numbered only a few dozen.

The ERP campaign that officially began the same day that Perón died was truly an ambitious one; one of its goals was the creation of "liberated zones" where small towns and villages of Tucuman would temporarily be taken over by a band of guerrillas and declared a "free zone", with the hope that these zones would receive official international recognition as separate from the rest of Argentina. The other goal was the destabilization of Isabel's government to the
point that the military would have to take over once more, to set up the final showdown.

In Santucho's opinion, this would lead to an all-out civil war and a final, decisive battle for control of Argentina between the armed forces and the armed guerrilla factions. This tactic would prove to be a resounding failure, however, as no international recognition was ever given to any of the liberated zones and the presidential decree of February 1975, which gave the army the order to "neutralize and/or annihilate" the subversive elements in Tucuman by launching Operation Independence would be the beginning of the brutal yet largely clandestine campaign waged by the military in their Dirty War. Until February 1975, the armed forces had had no direct role in the political violence; the federal police were the main anti-guerrilla enforcement organization.  

According to the locals, the estimate that one third of the province was under ERP control is exaggerated because the mountain guerrillas had a strategy of frequent movements through different zones and then making a timely strike on the armed forces. The guerrillas never really controlled a significant amount of land because they could not take complete control of a strategic location (such as a village) for an extended period without having to face a direct assault by the army, for which they had neither the manpower nor the equipment. The much-disputed quantity of guerrillas in Tucuman may be impossible to pinpoint, yet Gorriaran Merlo put the figure at 600 in the beginning of 1975, before the
military's entrance into the province. This figure may not be a reliable one because by the end of 1974 Merlo had been removed from the leadership branch of the ERP by Santucho for "abuse of power", stemming from his involvement in the execution of an ERP member suspected of being a government agent, and therefore did not have direct knowledge of in the events of Tucuman.\textsuperscript{61}

Perhaps a more reliable figure is that of 200 to 300 guerrillas, as estimated by General Mario Benjamin Menendez (who later headed the Argentine troops in the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas war against the United Kingdom) who in 1975 served a tour of duty in Tucuman as an army colonel.\textsuperscript{62}

The statement by President Menem claiming complete ERP control of the province is completely unfounded since the guerrillas never managed a campaign to capture the province's capital, San Miguel de Tucuman. The most significant operation carried out by ERP in Tucuman was the attack on the village of Manchala on May 28, 1975 in which one hundred forty-three guerrillas (of whom 17 were killed) participated.\textsuperscript{63} Yet even in this attack, the ERP was unsuccessful in overrunning the village, being pushed back into the mountains.

The events in Tucuman and a total overview of the Argentine armed forces' tactics used in the "Dirty War" do not clarify the exact origin of the term "Dirty War" (\textit{La Guerra Sucia}). However, it was favored by the military in describing the methods used by the guerrillas in their campaign. It is clear that the ferocity of the military was completely underestimated not only by the public but also by the
guerrillas. When the army arrived in Tucuman it set up 14 clandestine concentration camps, not only for captured guerrillas but also anyone suspected of being a sympathizer. Those who before this point had openly favored ERP's cause without fear of retribution would become the first of the many "disappeared" (Desaparacidos).

See Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

THE FIVE-STEP PATH OF DISAPPEARANCE

STEP 1 ABDUCTION

home: 62%
street: 25%
work: 13%

STEP 2 PRISONER ASSESSMENT CENTER torture & interrogation

1-6 months

STEP 3 EXECUTION BODY DUMPED in nearby Department

STEP 4 LOCAL INVESTIGATION BURIED AS "NUL" in single or mass grave

STEP 5 REMAIN 5-15 years after burial

Source: Dr. Clyde Snow of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF), 1984.
The statistics below also show a rather decisive rout of the ERP by the military in the Province of Tucuman, by comparing the relative number of casualties by both sides:

Table 1: Tucuman Casualty Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Official Number of Casualties of the Armed and Security Forces</th>
<th>Official Number of Disappeared According to National Commission on the Disappeared (CONADEP)</th>
<th>Official Number of Subversive Casualties as Reported by the Armed Forces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total number of casualties of the armed forces and security forces (1970-1979) 32

Total number of attacks attributed to subversion (1970-1979) 51

Total number of subversive casualties in Tucuman (1970-1979) 242

Total number of disappearances attributed to the armed forces (1970-1979) 565

Source: National Commission on the Disappeared (CONADEP), Las Cifras de la Guerra Sucia (1985), 44.
By October 1975 it had become clear to Santucho that the Tucuman endeavor was a lost cause, as his rural guerrillas had suffered heavy losses in causalities and equipment. At this juncture he decided to join the Montoneros, who had been more successful in their urban warfare since Perón's death, to form the Organization for the Liberation of Argentina, OLA (La Organizacion para la Liberacion de Argentina).^67

Eighty percent of disappearances in Tucuman occurred after the coup of March 1976, when there was no guerrilla force to speak of, nor even a single death attributed to subversion; in fact, Operation Independence had ended in February 1976. After the operation was officially terminated, General Acel Vilas, who had headed the operation, was replaced by General Antonio Domingo Bussi. The province was not yet completely free of subversive influence during the years 1976-1977 (after the military coup), as Montonero reinforcements were sent to Tucuman not for combat, but rather to infiltrate and recruit workers within the factories and sugar cane fields to join the organization in their battle against the military dictatorship.68 During the period of military rule a huge "civil action" campaign was launched in Tucuman, headed by Bussi, during which many hospitals and schools were built and the province's public debt was forgiven by the dictatorship.69 The majority of the repression and disappearances in Tucuman, therefore, was not directed at the ERP, but at suspected Montoneros and their collaborators.
The Urban Battles

In hindsight, Mario Firmenich has declared the decision made by the Montoneros on September 6, 1974, to go back to clandestinity and take up arms against the constitutional government of Isabel Perón was a "grave error". Yet, during the first few months of renewed battles against the government, and particularly against Lopez Rega's Triple-A, the Montoneros carried out a number of dramatic operations. One of the most spectacular was the September 1974 kidnapping of the Born brothers (Juan and Jorge), heads of the Bunge & Born Company in Argentina, who were released in exchange for an unprecedented $60 million ransom. On February 28, 1975, John Patrick Egan, the American consul in the city of Cordoba, was shot to death by his Montonero captors after being kidnapped and forced to make anti-American statements. These two acts finally focused heavy international attention on the extent of political violence in Argentina. In July 1975, U.S. Senator Jessie Helms would pay a visit to Buenos Aires to meet with the leading military figures. In these meetings, Helms would convey the Ford administration's outrage at the Egan kidnapping and the American desire to end the leftist guerrilla threat in Argentina.

The Montoneros, like the ERP, had a military coup as their objective and toward the end of 1975 it had become clear that the constitutional government was on its way out. In July, Lopez Rega was forced into exile (given the ambassadorial post in Spain), due to pressure put on Isabel by both the military
and the syndicalist sector of the Perónist movement. This marked the end of the Triple-A; the exact number of casualties caused by this organization is impossible to calculate because officially it never existed, but the general figure is as high as 2,000 murders, much of which were committed on the streets of Buenos Aires during daylight hours in view of many bystanders.

Although there were lists of Triple-A members apparently in the possession of the military, no one was ever prosecuted for the Triple-A's crimes. Lopez Rega, who after spending many years in exile (including time in the United States) returned to Argentina in the late 1980's, never stood trial due to ill health (he died in 1989). Now the military was in charge of "fighting subversion" and when Isabel was forced to take a leave of absence in October 1975 due to "exhaustion," the interim president, Italo Luder, a respected Perónist figure, issued a presidential decree (2770/71/72) which would later become a focal point of the military's justification for the methods used to wipe out the so-called subversives.

The decree extended "the authorization to the armed forces to execute the military and security operations that would be necessary to annihilate the actions of subversive elements in all the country." The remarks made by the head of the army, General Jorge Rafael Videla (appointed in August, 1975), during the conference of the Armies of the Americas in Montevideo, Uruguay held in late October of 1975, was an ominous warning of what was to come: "If needed, all the necessary persons will die in order to achieve peace in Argentina."
When the junta members were put on trial in 1985 for the human rights violations that occurred during 1876-83 military dictatorship, they used the term "annihilate" as meaning to kill; yet when Luder testified at the trial, he stated that the decree meant that the infrastructure of the armed organizations should be destroyed according to law. The military's operations were carried out clandestinely and without any judicial proceedings for the "subversives". Furthermore, the coup of 1976 meant that the decree was no longer legally valid after March 24, the beginning of the period when the majority of disappearances and other human rights violations took place.

The End of the ERP Army

The 23rd of December 1975 (Good Sunday) would mark the biggest and most daring urban guerrilla operation ever in Argentina, as up to 250 ERP guerrillas would storm the army's largest ammunition depot in the Buenos Aires suburb of Monte Chingolo. This was an attack expected by the army, as one ERP member who was a double agent Jesus Rainier, had already tipped off the army of the impending attack. After a short yet bloody battle the ERP was forced to retreat in defeat, leaving behind 49 casualties. By this time Santucho had finally come to grips with the fact that the setbacks in Tucuman had handicapped the ERP's military capability, and this attack was a kamikaze effort to replenish arms desperately needed to continue the guerrilla warfare. This resounding defeat
marked the end of ERP as an armed, military threat to the state.

Although the Monte Chingolo disaster was not the end of PRT-ERP as an organization (later in this essay there is an outline of how the organization was dismantled after the military takeover), this attack had just as big a psychological impact as a military one. One former army officer compares what happened in Monte Chingolo with a hypothetical attack on the U.S. army headquarters in Quantico, Virginia, since the distance from Quantico to Washington D.C. is roughly the same as Monte Chingolo to downtown Buenos Aires.80

The scale of the attack not only put a huge fright in the 10 million residents of greater Buenos Aires, it made the army even more anxious to unleash a full scale war against the guerrillas. Five days before the Monte Chingolo attack, the army had refused to give its support to a coup attempt by the far right-wing of the Air Force (led by Brigadier Jesus Capellini), as Videla still held out hope for the possibility of a civilian resolution, although the scheduled presidential election was still 11 months away (November 1976).81 Two days after the Monte Chingolo attack (on Christmas day), Videla issued an ultimatum to Isabel Perón for her to regain control of the country within 90 days or the military would take over82 (Videla kept his word, as the coup took place exactly 90 days later).

This period had a very ominous feel as the violence continued. In the city of Cordoba there were 32 kidnappings83 during January and February of 1976; the
Montoneros, who apparently still saw the federal police as their enemy, killed 13 and wounded 10 policemen during the same period. In the week before the coup there were 42 deaths officially attributed to left and right in the terrorists; there was an estimate of a bomb explosion every 3 hours in the country and a political killing every five hours.84

Some of the personal accounts of this period are rather remarkable. Noted Argentine journalist Rogelio Garcia Lupo describes how on a visit to Allende's Chile in early 1973 he saw that many walls in Santiago had the word "Jakarta" spray painted on them (in reference to the 1965 military coup in Indonesia which left approximately half a million casualties) in anticipation of what was to come in September of that year (Allende's bloody overthrow). Now, during the first few weeks of 1976, many walls in Buenos Aires had "Chile" spray-painted on them as an eerie forecast of the inevitable coup to come.85

ERP member Miguel Molfino remembers how upon arriving in the capital towards the end of 1975, "There seemed to be a smell of death on the streets." By the middle of March the expectation of the coup had reached a level of absurdity, as newspaper vendors yelled out, "The coup has been delayed for another day" according to the headlines. The last hope for a civilian resolution was destroyed on March 16th when the leader of the Radical Party, Dr. Ricardo Balbin, stated on national television that "I have no solutions."86
CHAPTER 3

THE PROCESS OF NATIONAL REORGANIZATION 1976-83

Eight days after Balbin's comments, the long awaited coup was executed quietly and without bloodshed (in what was called operation Aries), as Isabel Perón was arrested by Air Force Brigadier Basilio Lami Dozo (who later in 1981-1982 would join the ruling junta as the head of the Air Force) after being forced to step off a helicopter that had taken off from the government house. She was taken to the Patagonian province of Neuquen, where she would spend the next five years imprisoned until given an amnesty in 1981; she then returned to Spain. Thus began the process of national reorganization (El Proceso de Reorganizacion Nacional). The ruling military junta (the joint heads of state) was composed of Army leader Videla, (also given the official post of Presidency), Navy Chief Emilio Massera and Brigadier Orlando Agosti as the Air Force representative.

Were the Coup and Repression for Economic Reasons?

Volumes can be and have been written on how and why a country with such vast natural resources such as Argentina has been caught in an economic quagmire for most of the 20th century, yet undoubtedly the absolute economic
freefall that occurred during Isabel Perón's government was as unprecedented and out of control as the political violence that was occurring at the same period.

By March 1976 the inflation rate, which had been 335 percent the year before, was running at an annual rate of 800 percent, the highest inflation rate in the world at that time. The new military regime would need a dramatic turn around economically to maintain any level of public support, and the person chosen for this task, after a series of meetings in early 1976, was Dr. Jose Alfredo Martinez de Hoz.

Martinez de Hoz came from one of Argentina's most distinguished "oligarchical" families. He was educated at Eton, Harvard and MIT and his father had been president of the Sociedad Rural (the Society of Landholders). Although a lawyer by profession he had already served a brief term as Economics Minister in 1963, and when approached by the military chiefs in 1976 was the head of the Acindar Steel Group, Argentina's largest private steel company.

The economic plan that he unveiled on April 2, 1976 would truly be revolutionary as its undermined all the foundations of post-World War II economics in Argentina. State control of industry and protectionism for trade unions were originally implemented by Perón during his First term as president and even while he was in exile, these policies for the most part stood in place. Martinez de Hoz called for large scale privatization of state-owned industries, a temporary freeze on real wages for workers, lifting of all price and exchange
controls and tariff reductions for some import products.91

When asked today if the coup of 1976 was an economic one, Martinez de Hoz replies that it was "a coup for all reasons."92 This may be true, since the entire fabric of Argentine society was falling apart under Isabel's regime; yet it is also clear that implementing the new economic plan was higher on the Junta's list of priorities than their anti-subversive campaign, since the armed forces could have carried on their clandestine repression indefinitely with Isabel in power.

As to how much of the post-coup repression was economic related, the Junta's takeover of all trade unions and the outlawing of strikes and the subsequent crackdown on trade union heads (sindicalists) and workers (obreros) during 1976-78 suggest a definite link, as does the fact that nearly half of the disappeared (48 percent) were workers (30 percent blue collar obreros and 18 percent white collar professional).93 In analyzing the anti-obrero campaign, it is important to note that the industrial workers were the main target group for recruitment by both the ERP and Montoneros. Strikes and industrial sabotage were especially used by the Montoneros, and this influence would last even after the organization's military defeat in 1979. In that year, with Videla still the President and Martinez de Hoz in charge of the economy, violent repression of strikes ended.94

The other issue in which the military repression became entangled with Martinez de Hoz's economic plans was unemployment, as the military Junta had
made it clear to the economics minister that unemployment should be kept at a minimum since probably a huge number of newly-laid off workers would greatly benefit Montonero recruitment.

Martinez de Hoz was successful in meeting this challenge by keeping the unemployment in single digits throughout his term (1976-81).\textsuperscript{95}

An Overview of the "Dirty War" 1975 - 1979

In determining the exact dates of a war which is fought by two sides, the point where one side becomes completely unable to fight is the ending of the conflict. In the case of the "Dirty War", Operativa Independencia in Tucuman in 1975 was the beginning and November 1979, which saw the last subversive attack, according to the military, is the reference point as the end of the repressive campaign waged by the armed forces.\textsuperscript{96} During the process of National Reorganization, the military, however, would not give up its main form of anti-subversive operations, the disappearance of civilians, until the last days of El Proceso. Even in 1983, with democratic elections scheduled to take place, there were still a few disappearances.\textsuperscript{97} El Proceso ended on the tenth of December, 1983.
Table 2: Casualty Figures of the Dirty War

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Deaths attributed to Subversive Action</th>
<th>National Commission on the Disappeared Detained-Disappeared (CONADEP)</th>
<th>Civilian Deaths in Supposed Confrontations with Security Forces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>359</td>
<td>564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>4105</td>
<td>1277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>3098</td>
<td>555</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>969</td>
<td>63</td>
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<td>1979</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>83</td>
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<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>8910</td>
<td>2462</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The military’s brutality and complete disregard for human rights during the *El Proceso* is extremely well documented: 341 clandestine camps or PACS (Prisoner Assessment Centers) were set up throughout the country (see Figure 2). Officially, 8,910 civilians would disappear to go along with 2,462 recorded deaths (as reported officially in the newspapers) of subversives in the hands of the military (see Figure 3).
Interestingly enough, almost none of the 3,000 official political prisoners at the time of the March, 1976 coup would disappear during the military government; they accounted for just 0.4 percent of the disappeared. The reason for this was that once these prisoners were officially incarcerated, their
disappearance could not be denied by the military government. In the case of civilians who had not been arrested, the military could give various excuses, the most popular being the secret flight of the suspected disappeared into foreign exile, to clear itself of responsibility for the disappearance.

Why the Disappearances?

The means used by the Argentine armed forces in the "Dirty War" (disappearances, torture and/or executions) have always been traced to the training of Argentina military personnel by French officers with experience in Algeria and Indochina in fighting guerrilla operations, as well as American influence in applying methods used in Vietnam against the Vietcong. Yet in reality, these means had been practiced on a much smaller scale by the local and federal police departments against suspected criminals.

Upon sizing power, the military government reinstated the death penalty for anyone who killed or injured security forces personnel or attacked public utilities. Why, then, did the military decide to keep its anti-subversive action outside the law? The 1973 Campora amnesties had shown that the guerrillas were not going to give up the armed struggle, no matter how much time they would spend in prison, since eventually the military would have to return power; therefore, killing them was the only effective deterrent. Second, the justice system was no longer able to effectively punish the guerrillas due to assassination of
judges and threats against a judge's families by guerrillas. Finally, the thousands of judicially sanctioned executions needed to bring back peace to the country would completely discredit the government. The recent events of the 1973 coup in Chile where a very public crackdown on leftists had raised international condemnation and also the Pope's criticism, had shown the Argentine military the consequences of a public anti-subversive campaign. On an international scale it would endanger outside economic assistance to Argentina as well as put the country's long-awaited turn to host the world's biggest sporting event, the World Cup of Soccer, set for 1978.

How Fair was the Military's War?

The answer to this question, while it may never be completely known, is still evolving today. The real number of the disappeared is a much debated issue. The human rights group, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, who every Thursday since April of 1977 have protested in front of the Government House for their disappeared children's return, completely reject the official figure of 9,000 put together by the National Commission on Disappearances (National Commission on the Disappeared) in 1984. According to the Mothers, the figure is closer to 30,000. Yet due to fear of another military government, thousands of families have not yet reported the disappearances of their loved ones.

There are many contradictions in trying to get an overall estimate of the
real figure of disappeared. For example, in Tucuman, in the mountains where the ERP once fought, some locals speak of dozens of unreported missing, while in the city of San Miguel, the capital of Tucuman, nobody seems to know of such cases. Yet, the fact that all of the disappeared were not reported in 1984 to National Commission on the Disappeared is clear by the 1995 release of a list by the Argentine government of 290 names not originally given to National Commission on the Disappeared due to the fears of the families of the disappeared.¹⁰¹

The consensus figure among retired military personnel of the Dirty War era is roughly 6,000 disappeared who were eventually executed. According to the former soldiers, the rest on the National Commission on the Disappeared list are either still in exile or living in Argentina with new identities since the military government put collaborators in a program similar to the American Witness Protection Program.¹⁰²

Since throwing bodies into the ocean from airplanes or cremation were preferred methods of disposing of the disappeared (the rest were buried as no names, NN (Ningun Nombre), official military lists may be the only way to solve this debated figure. According to Human Rights activist Emilio Mignone, in a 1978 meeting with Admiral Massera, he was told by Massera that although complete lists of the disappeared existed, they could not be released because the other two junta members (General Videla and Brigadier Agosti) did not approve of such an action.¹⁰³
Figure 4

OPERATING PACs and EXCESS NNs

Source: Dr. Clyde Snow and the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF), 1984.

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Figure 5
TOTAL NN DEATHS REPORTED
Buenos Aires Province, 1970-84

Source: Dr. Clyde Snow of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF), 1984.

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By taking a common sense approach, one can see that the notion of 20,000 unreported missing is highly unlikely since Argentina, despite being the 8th largest country in the world, is for the most part sparsely populated. One third (11 of 33 million) of the total population lives in greater Buenos Aires. In such a society, a huge cover-up would be rather difficult (as was the supposed cover-up of the real number of disappearances). Over the last few years there has been increasing financial support from the Argentine government to families of the disappeared, which would be a very good incentive for previously unreported families to report, yet there has not been a significant number of such families coming forth.

So how would the official figure of 9,000 civilian casualties reflect on the military's dirty war campaign? Rather than using the military propaganda, I cite the information given by the heads of the guerrilla movements. Julio Santucho (the brother of ERP's leader, Roberto) estimates that at the time of the military coup, although the ERP was militarily incapacitated after the Monte Chingolo disaster, it had 1,000 members. This added to 3,000 PRT members and 1,000 members of the Guevarist Youth branch of PRT-ERP (juventud guevarista), gives a total of 5,000 people, of whom Santucho estimates 80 percent disappeared.

The Montoneros at the time of the coup had up to 15,000 generic members, of whom up to 10,000 were incorporated into the Montonero Army. The death toll given by the surviving Montoneros is around 5,000 of their
members.° Between the two organizations there is a figure of roughly 8,500 casualties, strikingly close to the official number of the disappeared.

What Were the Disappeared Guilty of?

The only real answer to this question probably lies in the suspected lists kept by the armed forces, since any such lists might have the reasons for an individual's disappearance. A logical choice for explanation of the reason for a disappearance lies in the family of the individual who disappeared, yet precise information from these families as to the nature of their child's activities is extremely difficult to obtain. I interviewed around twenty Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and almost all of the Mothers describe their children as simply "politically active", yet no Mother is willing to admit a direct link between its child and the Montoneros or PRT-ERP.° One of the National Commission on the Disappeared's (CONADEP) mistakes in its report, Nunca Mas (Never Again), was the complete absence of information on the activities of those who disappeared and those who testified as to being tortured in the clandestine camps. When National Commission on the Disappeared member Magdalena Ruiz Guinazu is asked about this oversight, she responded by saying that many of those testimonies were by survivors who had been wrongfully detained by just being in another prisoner's phone book.° Although in such a widespread operation as the military's clandestine campaign there are bound to be such cases, no Mother or
any other family members of the disappeared described to me the reason for their loved ones disappearance as mistaken identity.

Undoubtedly, not everyone who disappeared was a military threat to the state, as shown by the disappearance of 81 pregnant women and 152 youngsters under the age of 18. In one of the most infamous of such cases, the "night of the pencils" (la noche de los Lapices), in which thirteen teenagers who had signed a petition demanding a cut in bus fares in the city of La Plata were abducted in their homes and only one would ever re-appear. These youngsters were probably singled out because of their association with the ERP's Youth Branch, the Guevarist Youth (Juventud Guevarista).

At times the military's crackdown was aimed at those who, according to Nobel-prize winner, Alfredo Perez Equivel, were seen as "potential enemies" within the military national security doctrine. That the war was often directed at subversive or leftist ideology is evident in one of General Videla's few comments on the methods of the Dirty War: "A terrorist is not just someone with a gun or a bomb, he can also be someone who spreads ideas that are contrary to Western and Christian civilization." Although the exact number of disappearances by mistaken identity or for personal revenge or profit can never be found out, military personnel often ransacked a prisoner's home upon the capture, taking items for personal possession.

The military also had a habit of carrying out operations against the families...
of a subversive, but in talking to Omar Santucho, a brother of the armed forces most-wanted subversive, Roberto Santucho, a relatively different picture is given of the degree of random violence carried out by the military. Omar, who kept his distance from his brother's activities and had not seen him during the last five years of Roberto's life (1971-1976), describes no bad experience with the army troops stationed in Santiago Del Estero. The only inconvenience was a quiet watch placed on Omar's house, which after Robert's death in July of 1976 was completely removed. Of the many other Santucho relatives who also disappeared, Omar describes them as "involved with Robi's cause."

A key military mistake in attempting to legitimize its illegal campaign was the decision made on April 22, 1976 to ban all news of the Dirty War from the media. This ban included any mention of subversive attacks. The outside world came to see this as a brutal one-sided campaign by the military, since those Montoneros who had managed to escape from Argentina, had set up an international solidarity program which centered on distributing the news of human rights abuses taking place in Argentina to foreign governments and press. This would lead to a great deal of pressure put on the junta by the American government under Jimmy Carter (1977-81).

The international solidarity campaign is also what made the Navy Mechanics School, ESMA (Escuela de Mecanica de la Armada) in Buenos Aires, the most notorious of all detention centers, since the great majority of prisoners
there were Montoneros. The few who managed to leave ESMA alive spoke out about the terrible torture and the death flights in which prisoners would be thrown from airplanes into the sea while still alive (although unconscious from an injection).

The Massera-Montonero Connection

A key part of the theory of the Montoneros being secretly backed by the armed forces (dating back to the Aramburu kidnapping) revolves around the speculation about a secret meeting in Paris toward the end of 1977 between Admiral Massera and the Montonero hierarchy in exile. In 1995, Massera stated that "The Argentine Ambassador in Paris at that time, who's no friend of mine, can tell you that when I was in Paris, Firmenich was in Sweden," while adding "if the meeting had been proposed to me, I would have accepted, after all we were at war."

All signs, however, point to a failed meeting. Massera at that time had two big reasons for working out an agreement with the Montoneros, one being his political ambitions in forming his own party and winning an eventual democratic election. Massera had already put many of the Montonero prisoners at ESMA on duty to help his political future by collecting information from of newspapers, and he would have greatly benefitted from the still abundant Montonero money overseas.
The second reason for a Massera-Montonero meeting would be working out a cease fire for the upcoming 1978 World Cup, when the eyes of the world would be on Argentina. Massera was unsuccessful on both counts, as his political party never got off the ground and during the 1978 World Cup there were dozens of RPG rocket attacks by the Montoneros in Argentina.\(^\text{120}\)

The most troubling indication of this secret meeting is the abduction and murder of Elena Holmberg, an Argentine diplomat in Paris who was apparently about to go public in revealing the meeting. Earlier in 1977 there had been a similar abduction of Hector Hidalgo Sola, the Argentine Ambassador to Venezuela, who allegedly was about to start his own party and was being considered by Videla as an interim president in the case of the military stepping down.\(^\text{121}\)

The World Cup attacks by the Montoneros would be their last real campaign against the military. By 1979 the so-called Montonero army, which three years earlier was capable of at least two attacks every day, had disappeared, mostly due to guerrilla cells with 20 to 25 members being destroyed through confessions under torture by a single captured guerrilla. The much awaited Montonero offensive from exile was completely crushed in 1979 as most members who were executed trying to cross into Argentina were caught at the border and executed, thus ending the Dirty War.\(^\text{122}\)
Table 3: Figures of Subversive Actions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overview of Subversive Operations According to the Argentine Armed Forces 1970-1979</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of AttacksAttributed to Subversives</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Number of Armed Forces Deaths Attributed to Subversion</td>
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<td>Total Number of Deaths Attributed to Subversion</td>
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CONCLUSION

AFTERMATH: THE MILITARY'S OVERAMBITION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

In hindsight, 1979 is not only significant because it marked the end of the Dirty War, but because decisions made by the military government would eventually discredit the whole process of wiping out subversion by the armed forces as a self-serving genocide.

The most important development was the decision not to start a transition back to democracy. Although no definite timetable was given by the military upon taking power, the general sentiment was for a gradual transition starting with municipal elections in three to four years and eventually culminating in presidential elections. This timeline would allow Martinez de Hoz the full five years his economic plan required.

By the end of 1978 the overall situation seemed perfect for the announcement of a transition plan; the Dirty War was winding down toward a complete victory for the military, the economy had made a significant turnaround, especially for the middle class who, with a very favorable peso-to-dollar exchange rate, were able to indulge in foreign vacations and buying sprees.
Admiral Massera, for one, was apparently convinced of a relatively imminent change in government, as upon retiring from the ruling junta in 1978 he put all his attention into heading a new political party. The leading figures of the Perónist party were also beginning to be released from prison. Yet apparently the leading military figures took all the positive developments as a mandate for their ability to govern the nation.

From that point on the military seemed to have no intention whatsoever of relinquishing power. In 1981, when General Roberto Viola took over the presidency from Videla, he was regarded as being receptive to a return to democracy, yet as his drastic overhaul of the economy (engineered by Martinez del Hoz) and the subsequent palace coup which brought General Leopoldo Galitieri (long considered an ambitious hardliner) into power showed that the military still had long-term plans.

The most important aspect of the post-1979 (Dirty War) era is the fact that the disappearances continued in steady decline while public opposition to the military government rose in terms of strikes and public protests. (See Table 2). This is a strong indication that the military's repression was not on the basis of complete self-interest, as by 1982 the strikes and protests had reached such a level that the military government was to a certain extent backed into a corner.

The decision taken by the junta to occupy the long disputed Falklands/Malvinas Islands off the coast of Argentina by force on April 2, 1982
had many different motives. Possibly the most important motive was to attempt to revitalize *El Proceso*. Moreover, Galtieri may have sought to gain maximum support from the public for his candidacy in a democratic election to be scheduled as soon as the conflict was over and the issue of the Islands finally settled in Argentina's favor.

Instead, after British troops managed to re-occupy the Islands by June 1982 following a short yet bloody war, the military government was left in the precarious position of being defeated both militarily and politically, and what has followed has been an unprecedented series of events as far as civil-military relations, not only in Argentina but in all of Latin America. Since the interim government was in no position to work out an amnesty agreement for acts committed by military personnel during the Dirty War (which would have been a certainty in 1979-80), not only were dozens of rank and file military personnel prosecuted and jailed, even the junta members faced trial and the key figures (Massera, Videla) would serve 5 years of a life sentence (1985-90) in jail. In 1995, the current heads of each branch of the Argentine armed forces issued their own respective *autocriticas* (self criticisms) regarding their branches' actions during the Dirty War.

As outlined earlier, much critical information regarding the Dirty War (mostly facts and figures) remains unknown, in doubt, or disputed, yet as far as the Argentine armed forces are concerned, or at least those involved directly in
the Dirty War, the major source of their difficulties seems to lie in overambitiousness. No matter how terrible their acts were, no major consequences would have likely resulted from their anti-subversive campaign, as was the case in other Latin American conflicts with extensive human rights violations by the armed forces, with minor exceptions, had they known when to leave power once the real agendas of the national reorganization undertaken by the *El Proceso* were completed during the years 1979-1980.
NOTES


2Bolivia has had more combined years under military rule in the twentieth century than Argentina.


4Perón was already seen at this time as the real power holder.

5For more biographical information on both Juan and Eva Perón see Eduardo Crawley, A House Divided, (London: C. Hurst and Company, 1984).


7Rock, Ibid, 314.

8This was particularly significant due to the fact that 92 percent of Argentines are Catholic.

9Crawley, op. cit, 160-62.

10Rock, op. cit, 317.


12Perón got a hold of the corpse in 1970 when he was still in exile in Spain.


14Perón started exile in Paraguay, but eventually would also spent time in Panama, the Dominican Republic and Spain.

15The term Junta has a literal meaning of joint, in this case the joint leadership of the Naseacr nation by the heads of the different branches of the armed forces.
\footnote{Rock, op. cit, 344.}
\footnote{Rock, op. cit, 345.}
\footnote{Moyano, op. cit, 16.}
\footnote{Moyano, op. cit, 18-19.}
\footnote{Rock, op. cit, 348.}
\footnote{These were the official government casualty figures. Many believe the real number to be much higher.}
\footnote{Hodges, op. cit., 126.}
\footnote{The Uturuncos took their name from the Quechua Indian language, meaning "Tigermen".}
\footnote{Jose Maria Moyano, Argentina's lost patrol, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1995) 21.}
\footnote{Moyano, Ibid, 22.}
\footnote{The Vandor assassination was the first violent act attributed to "subversion" in the military's list of subversive actions, based on personal interviews all former members of guerilla organizations denied any involvement in this assassination.}
\footnote{The Montoneros took their name from a group of gauchos, who had fought against Spain for Argentina's independence in the nineteenth century.}
\footnote{Mario Firmenich, Norma Arrosito, Carlos Ramus and Chief Fernando Abal Medina.}
\footnote{For more information on Montonero origins see Richard Gillespie, Montoneros, Soldiers of Perón, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982) Chapter 2.}
\footnote{Maria Seonae, Todo o Nada: La Historica Publica del Jefe Guerrilero Mario Roberto Santucho, (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1991), 30.}
\footnote{Seoane, Ibid at 54.}
\footnote{La Nacion (Buenos Aires) May 3, 1995, 12.}
33 Personal interview in Buenos Aires, August 1995.

34 Seoane, supra note 9, at 131-32.

35 La Nacion, supra note 11.

36 Seoane, Supra note 9, at 166.


38 Seoane, Ibid, supra note 9, at Chapter 5.

39 Ibid, at 81, and Donald C. Hodges, Argentina's Dirty War, (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1991) 112.

40 The following are some of the guerrillas' noteworthy operations in their first two years of existence, 1970-1972:

1/23/71 The kidnapping of Stanley Ferrer Sylvester, the head of the Swift factory in the city of Rosario and also the honorary consul of Great Britain in that city. Sylvester was released for a ransom of 25 million pesos to be distributed in the poorer parts of Rosario by the ERP.

1/31/72 The robbing of 400 million Pesos ($40,000) from the National Bank of Development (Banco Nacional de Desarrollo) in downtown Buenos Aires by the ERP.

3/21/72 The kidnapping of the head of Fiat, Oberdan Sallustro, in Buenos Aires, and his subsequent execution by the ERP.

41 FAR and FAP eventually merged with the Montoneros (Seoane, supra note 9, at 350).

42 Seoane, Ibid, at 149.


44 Seoane, supra note 9, at 166.


46 Gorriaran Merlo revealed in 1995 that a guard at the prison was involved in
smuggling arms to the guerrillas in exchange for cash.

47Seoane, supra note 9, at 181-83.

48Crawley, supra note 5, at 379.

49Seoane, supra note 9, at Chapter 10.

50Mario Firmenich put the Montonero death count at 182. Hodges, supra note 13, at 173.

51The best source as far as the Triple-A's activities is the book by Ignacio Gonzalez Janzen, La Triple-A, (Buenos Aires: Editorial Contra Punta, 1986).


53Ibid., Chapter 3.

54Gillespie, supra note 8, at 148.

55Seoane, supra note 9, at 234.

56Janzen, supra note 29, at 107, 142.

57Details of the meeting from supra note 6.

58The term porteno is reserved for the residents of the Capital (Buenos Aires).


61Pagina 12/, supra note 15.


64 Andersen, supra at note 37.

65 The term Osario in Step 5 signifies a mass burial place of unidentified bones.

66 Dr. Clyde Snow compiled all the figures used in this paper during his two year stay in Argentina (1984-86) while working on the identification of the bones of the disappeared.

67 Seoane, supra note 9, at 275.

68 Supra note 6.


70 *La Nacion*. supra note 11.

71 This was the largest ransom ever officially paid out worldwide to that date.

72 Diaz Bessone, supra note 40, at 292-94.

73 Crawley, supra note 6, at 416.

74 Seoane, supra note 9, at 248.

75 See Andersen, supra note 37, at epilogues.

76 Diaz Bessone, supra note 40, at Chapter 8.


78 Luder was the first of 833 witnesses during the trial, for more information see Sergio Ciancaglini and Martin Granovsky, *Nada Mas que La Verdad*, (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1995).

79 Seoane, supra note 9, at 285.


81 Fraga, supra note 30, at 252.
62

Fraga, supra note 30, at 242-43.


Gillespie, supra note 8, at 225.

Personal interview in Buenos Aires, June 1995.

Simpson and Bennet, supra note 57.


Andersen, supra note 37, at epilogue.

Simpson and Bennet, supra note 57, at 35.


Personal interview in Buenos Aires, August 1995.

Figures from Lista de los Detenidos - Desaparecidos Registrados in la Asamblea Permanente por los Derechos Humanos,4 (1985). Students rated second on the list (33 percent).

Hodges, supra note 17, at Chapter 8.

For more information on economic repression see Dr. David Pion-Berlin, The Ideology of State Terror: Economic Doctrine and Political Repression in Peru and Argentina, (Boulder: Rienner Publishers, 1989) Chapters 4 and 5.

According to the files given to the Human Rights Assembly the last subversive attack took place on 11/13/79.

Crawley, supra note 5, at 433.

All figures from Las Cifras de la Guerra Sucia, (Buenos Aires, 1985).
The commission appointed by the new democratic president Raul Alfonsin was composed of public figures in different fields. It was headed by the writer Ernesto Sabato. For all of National Commission on the Disappeared's findings see Nunca Mas, Buenos Aires (1984).


Information on Tucuman from various local personal interviews; Clarin, The New List of Disappeared (Buenos Aires) April 1, 1995, 1-5.


And more than 80 percent are urban dwellers.


Interviews conducted throughout Argentina from January until September, 1995.

Personal interview in Buenos Aires, April 1995.

Supra note 17.

Personal interview with Pablo Diaz (the lone survivor) in La Plata, August 1995.

Quote from personal interview in Buenos Aires, July 1995.

Simpson and Bennet, supra note 57, at 81.


Personal interview in Santiago Del Estero, August 1995.

Details of the Montonero solidarity program from supra note 6.

Interview with former ESMA prisoner Ana Testa, Buenos Aires, June 25, 1995.


120 Ibid, at 257-58.

121 For more information on these cases see Claudio Uriarte, *Almirante Cero*, (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1992).


124 See Jordan, *supra* note 64, at Chapter 9.

125 See Jordan, *supra* note 64, at Chapter 14.

126 See Hodges, *supra* note 17.

127 There were nearly 2,500 cases pending in a year after Alfonsin took power (1984). The *Punto Final* and Due Obedience laws eliminated the great majority of these cases. Three different Army uprisings in protest of the prosecution of military personnel was instrumental in getting Alfonsin to introduce these laws to Congress. In December of 1990 all the remaining Dirty War figures in prison (including Videla, Massera and Firmenich) were given a pardon by President Menem.

128 *Pagina 12*/, (Buenos Aires), April 26, 1995, 2-3.
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