Spring 2023

When the Silenced Became the Voice: Argentina's Military Dictatorship and the Fight for Memory and Justice

Brigid McEvoy
Providence College

When the Silenced Became the Voice:

Argentina's Military Dictatorship and the Fight for Memory and Justice

by
Brigid Elizabeth McEvoy
Honors Thesis in History

Department of History & Classics
Providence College
Spring 2023

Primary Advisor: Fr. David Orique, O.P. Ph.D.
Secondary Advisor: Dr. Javier Mocarquer

When the Silenced Became the Voice:
Argentina's Military Dictatorship and the Fight for Memory and Justice

Brigid McEvoy

From 1976-1983, Argentina fell under the terror of an oppressive military regime, setting out to destroy what they perceived to be Marxist subversion. Under the direction of President Jorge Videla, this military dictatorship established a political machine to persecute alleged enemies. This elaborate plan of government surveillance was defined by its systematic operation to "disappear" individuals. Most commonly university students, those affiliated with Peronist organizations, and Jewish Argentines, these *desaparecidos* (the disappeared) were subjected to violent dehumanization in clandestine detention centers, facing interrogation, torture, and extermination. Moreover, the military government uprooted society by enacting a culture of silence in which individuals were unable to speak out against human rights abuses without jeopardizing their own safety. This obligatory silence traumatized Argentines, forcing them to choose between protecting their own lives or defending their fellow citizens. With dictatorial collapse through the democratic election of President Raúl Alfonsín in 1983, Argentinian society was at a critical point of transition. The demise of military rule gave life to two competing narratives of historical memory, one which cried out against military oppression, and one which upheld state-induced silence. This dichotomy fueled a polarized society in which justice, truth, and reparations were not guaranteed, but instead produced a battle between those who fought for government accountability and those who denied the human rights abuses that ensued.

Chapter 1 of this project focuses on the dictatorial years, specifically how tactics of government surveillance, censorship, and terror created a paranoid society that abandoned moral culpability. By exploring life both inside and outside the concentration camps, this chapter reveals how state-enforced silence transformed society and terrorized the innocent. Though some resisted military rule, many acquiesced to dictatorial authority either out of fear or for personal benefit. Chapter 2 discusses the construct of historical memory in the post-dictatorial years, specifically how the condition of survivorship is influenced by years of totalitarian violence. By examining emerging historical memory accounts, it becomes evident how diverging narratives of the past hinder the ability to identify an objective truth. The efforts of activists and survivors to fight for answers and memorialize their murdered loves ones is juxtaposed against flagrant government denial and ignorance. Chapter 3 seeks to explore how the deeply divided society of post-dictatorial Argentina had serious ramifications for the pursuit of justice. Though justice is often understood in its legal sense, this chapter argues that there are both literal mechanisms of justice—compensation, social activism, and indictments—as well as symbolic manifestations that seek to provide individuals with closure.

This investigation draws on an array of primary sources, most significantly the testimonies of dictatorial survivors, newspaper excerpts, photographs, and artwork that convey dictatorial horrors. The secondary sources aid in the development of the theoretical concepts that are discussed in this work, such as identity formation, survivorship, and human nature. Overall, this thesis argues that the culture of mandated silence under years of totalitarian rule in Argentina directly catalyzed competing narratives of memory and the delay of tangible justice in the post-dictatorial society.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As I stand here today at twenty-two years old reflecting on the incredible experience of writing my thesis, I am suddenly reminded of my eight-year-old self, sitting at my elementary school desk. Though I always loved going to school and learning something new, it was my third-grade teacher, Mrs. Russo, who truly instilled in me a love for learning. She taught me three important lessons that I will never forget: to read as many books as you can, to give every task your maximum effort, and to walk through life with a smile on your face. Though she will not see this, she will always hold a special place in my heart.

Undertaking such an extensive research project would not have been possible without the support I have received from the brilliant faculty at Providence College. I want to thank the Liberal Arts Honors Program for challenging me to think critically, especially Dr. Patrick Reid. I am extremely grateful for the undergraduate projects that I conducted with Dr. Steven Smith, Dr. Robert Stretter, and Dr. Edgar Mejía, teaching me how to conduct creative research. I am thankful for the faculty that have supported me as both a history and Spanish double major: Dr. Ana Cecilia Iraheta, Dr. Alex Orquiza, and Dr. Monica Simal. Thank you to Dr. Adrian Weimer, who brought my research to a new level and taught me to go beyond my comfort zone. To my advisor, Dr. Karen Holland, I am personally grateful for the kindness, guidance, and knowledge you have shown me both as a professor and a mentor. I am especially thankful to Dr. Osama Siddiqui, who has helped me to develop my project throughout this past year, offering feedback, advice, and encouragement. Finally, a special thank you to Dr. Richard Grace, who reminded me how much I love to learn. I will miss our conversations in your office.

This project would not have been possible without the dedication and support from my advisors, Fr. David Orique and Dr. Javier Mocarquer. These two brilliant minds helped me to identify a topic for which I was passionate and to explore it as deeply as possible. Your constant feedback, assistance, and reassurance helped me get to where I am today. Thank you for dedicating so much time and energy to help my project become a success. It has been a joy and a privilege to work with both of you and I am eternally grateful for your mentorship.

While this academic journey has been both challenging and rewarding, what I will remember most about my time at PC are the people who made it so special. To my friends, there are not enough words to thank you: Allie, Ava, Care, Mackenzie, and Tory. To Alyssa, Faith, and Nicole, thank you for having supported me since the beginning. I am thankful for my roommates, Caroline and Kate, for your unwavering support and for always standing by me. I am especially grateful for Kyle, who has been my rock and has helped me to believe in myself. Though there are too many to name, thank you to my fellow intramural sports enthusiasts, PC Irish Dance, and those who cheered on the Friars with me in the student section; you have made these past four years more than fun. An additional thank you to Fr. Justin Bolger, who has always lent a listening ear and has been transformative in my time at PC.

Lastly, a thank you to my family, who have taught me to never give up and to seek adventure: Mom, Dad, Ryan, Nanny and Pop-Pop, Grandma and Pop-Paul, Ba and Aunt Danielle, Francis and Joe, Aunt Carmel and Lisa, Uncle Frank, Doug, and Murphy. You are the reason I am the person I am today.

This work is dedicated to my grandmother, Diana, who taught me to cherish every moment:

May the road rise to meet you,
May the wind be always at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face,
the rains fall soft upon your fields.
And until we meet again,
May God hold you in the palm of His hand.

-- Traditional Irish Blessing

Introduction

When Jorge Rafael Videla seized power in Argentina on March 24, 1976, he promised that the new military government would uphold the rights of its citizens.[1] The coup d'état was essential to restoring economic stability and national security in Argentina, so he said—a society that he and his counterparts felt had fallen into chaos. Though they assured a restoration of order while protecting its citizens, Videla also swore that "subversive delinquency in all its forms" would be fought "until it is completely annihilated."[2] And so began the troubling paradoxes that would dominate military rule in Argentina from its installment in 1976 until its collapse in 1983. In the public eye, Videla vowed to create peace and prosperity, but his plan to eliminate "subversive delinquency" would transcend any conception of the value of human rights.

Videla and his military compatriots launched this coup against the government of President Isabel Perón, President from July 1974 to March 1976. This seizure of power was not an isolated incident: it was part of a much more expansive plan known as "Operation Condor." Beginning on November 28, 1975, Operation Condor was born in Santiago, Chile in partnership with political leaders from Argentina, Bolivia, Uruguay, and Paraguay.[3] These five countries, and informally Brazil, orchestrated a plan to target subversion and eliminate particular political groups through brutal methods of persecution. What cannot be overlooked is the involvement of the United States government in the formation and pursuit of Operation Condor. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) played an integral role in assisting these South American countries in their "fight" against leftist enemies. The CIA helped formulate an extensive database containing

---

[1] Juan de Onis, "Argentine Chief Urges Sacrifice," *New York Times*, March 31, 1976, https://www.nytimes.com/1976/03/31/archives/argentine-chief-urges-sacrifice-videla-declares-austerity-is-the.html.

[2] Ibid.

[3] "1. Coordinated Repression," Operation Condor: A criminal conspiracy to forcibly disappear people, Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS), accessed March 28, 2023, https://www.cels.org.ar/especiales/plancondor/en/#.

detailed information of those considered politically dangerous and a threat to nationalist rule. U.S. involvement in Latin American affairs was a recurring theme of the twentieth century. First, the U.S. championed the belief that Latin American countries could not lead themselves and, therefore, often necessitated American intervention. Second, U.S. assistance with Operation Condor was part of a fervent commitment to contain the spread of communism in the greater Cold War context. U.S. support for military coups that overthrew democratically elected governments and their aid in identifying and eliminating subversives enabled them to use Latin American countries as a playground for their personal fight with the Soviet Union.

External political forces exacerbated already existing ideological dissension in Argentina. Though Argentina had experienced relative peace and stability for the first part of the twentieth century, by the year 1940 its society had divulged into significant division and the emergence of new political thought. Argentina began seeking a new type of political leadership that would contribute to its transition to a modern world. This growing sentiment toward change gave rise to Juan Domingo Perón, serving as President from 1946-1955 and later from 1973 until his death in 1974. What historians have universally noted was Perón's capacity to become a popular leader in an effort to unite the Argentinian people. With his widely admired first wife, Eva or "Evita," Perón promulgated the ideology of "Peronism," in which their leadership was not just a political entity, but more significantly, intended to become a way of life, or an attitude that Argentines should embrace. What Peronism sought to accomplish was to distinguish Juan and Eva from previous rulers. For example, they positioned themselves as leaders for workers, women, and other historically marginalized groups. Through propaganda and indoctrination in schools, Perón

strategically situated himself as an advocate for the people, gaining widespread support and affection.[4]

Though quite a popular leader, Perón's increasingly authoritarian rule, economic crisis, and the death of his beloved wife, Eva, led to growing discontent and shifted political support. These tensions came to a head in September of 1955, when the military forced Perón into exile in Paraguay. Following the end of Perón's presidency was a frequent turnover of government leadership, with the installment of several presidents until he resumed power in 1973. The rise of Peronist thinking sparked reactions from both ends of the political spectrum. During Perón's exile, several political groups entered Argentinian society, one of which would become known as the *Montoneros*. The *Montoneros* were ardent supporters of Juan Perón, outraged by his expulsion from Argentina. They advocated for the rights of workers and were inspired by the 1959 Cuban Revolution.[5] Though the *Montoneros* considered themselves justified in their commitment to Perón and avenging his exile, their reactions were oftentimes brutal and violent. For example, in 1970, the founders of the *Montoneros* kidnapped and assassinated former President Eugenio Aramburu, one of the principal participants in the coup that overthrew Perón in 1955.[6] Through tactics of guerilla warfare, the *Montoneros* carried out similar acts against Peronist opposition, gaining a problematic reputation. At the same time, however, they earned the support and affection of many university students, workers, and union members, drawn to their cause of fighting for Perón's return and advancing a socialist agenda.[7]

---

[4] Mariano Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón: A Cultural History of Perón's Argentina* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2003), 109.

[5] Arya Bardo Kazemi, "Political Violence in Argentina During the 1970s," *UNLV Retrospective Theses & Dissertations,* 3330, 15.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., 17.

After years of military rule in Argentina and conflict with the *Montoneros*, Perón finally returned to Argentina in 1973. Though many were glad to have seen the end of military government and the restoration of democratic elections, violence between Peronist-supporters and the military did not cease.[8] For many, the resumption of Perón's presidency signaled Argentina's sympathy with growing Marxist influence, fearing that what occurred in Cuba might take place in their own country. By 1976, ideological differences and political violence only grew deeper. Military supporters viewed the actions of the *Montoneros* and other Peronist-affiliated organizations as "terrorism" that would cause Argentinian society to descend into chaos. For these individuals, military rule was the only solution to restoring order to society and controlling the rise of socialism.

While the 1976 coup d'état may have been led under the façade of returning peace to a chaotic and polarized Argentinian society, Operation Condor and the proceeding years illustrated that its purpose was much deeper than that. Uniting Argentina did not mean working through ideological disagreements and finding a common ground. Instead, a united, nationalist Argentina meant exterminating those who disagreed with military rule and supporters of "Marxist" thought. Though there had been military governments in place prior to that of Videla's 1976 dictatorship, the repression that would ensue was unprecedented in nature. The sheer cost of human life would devastate Argentinian society. Never before had Argentina witnessed a flagrant violation of human rights and abandonment of all moral culpability to this degree. Though part of a greater plan to remove Communism from the Western Hemisphere, Operation Condor's manifestation in Argentina was simultaneously deeply rooted in years of ideological conflict at home.

[8] Ibid., 21.

Los desaparecidos would become a word synonymous to dictatorial violence in Argentina. Beginning in 1976 until its demise in 1983 with the restoration of democratic rule, the Argentinian military dictatorship set out to "disappear" political enemies. This period of time would become known as the "Dirty War," as the government truly viewed these years of mass repression as a "war" against terrorist leftist groups. With assistance from the CIA's database, the military government was able to track down those that they considered to be potential terrorists. The government formulated lists of these "subversives," not only confining information to the specific individual, but also gathering intel on their friends and family. In broad daylight on the street or in the middle of the night, the military government would locate these wanted individuals and kidnap them. They were then brought to clandestine detention centers throughout Argentina's cities, subjected to interrogation, heinous methods of torture, and frequent extermination. It was this routine process that gave these individuals the name *los desaparecidos*, or "the disappeared." The military government deemed human life as expendable, justifying these brutal assaults on human rights by arguing that they were protecting Argentina from terrorism. By eliminating threats to military rule and any lingering Peronist ideology, the military believed that Argentina would enter a period of glory and what they deemed as stability. Thus, the peace that Videla had promised in his inaugural speech would indicate nothing of the mass political oppression that would dominate Argentinian society for nearly a decade.

What equally separated this period of Argentinian political leadership from previous years was the overwhelming culture of silence that transformed the function of society. Through the threat of repression and death, the government launched its society into a state of constant fear and terror. Argentines could not speak out against government repression, nor could they

discuss *los desaparecidos*, without fear of themselves becoming the next disappeared person. People essentially had to turn their heads from violence in order to survive. Though some remained silent to protect their own lives and the safety of their families, others willfully chose to ignore the human rights abuses occurring around them. Some gratefully welcomed military rule, such as upper-class, wealthier citizens, as it benefited their financial and political interests. Nevertheless, the military completely undermined normal social interactions by demanding this deafening silence. People became so conditioned to such violence and repression that it almost became commonplace, causing a complete rejection of moral accountability.

By the end of military rule, the number of murdered *los desaparecidos* is estimated to have exceeded thirty thousand. These numbers have been complicated due to the disposal of physical evidence by Argentinian officials and the government censorship which lied about the true numbers. Regardless of the exact number, what was certainly evident was the drastic cost of human life waged in the Dirty War. However, despite the obvious and blatant crimes against humanity, the post-dictatorial years would reveal that the pursuit of any form of justice would be a long and hard battle. While justice may have appeared an essential and inseparable part of Argentina's transition to democracy, corruption, pardons, and denial would prove that adequate legal justice would require significant political activism and the demand for truth. Though the dictatorship's crimes were objectively unjustifiable acts of violence against the human person, many considered the search for justice, truth, and reparations to be an extension of the ideological conflict that they felt caused dictatorial rule in the first place. Thus, the pursuit of justice became another political battlefield where dictatorial silence was transformed into denial.

There has been significant scholarship on Argentina's military dictatorship. One of the chief purposes of this thesis was to uncover a new perspective from which to analyze the

dictatorial years. What this thesis strives to reveal is that history and anthropology cannot be separated. With this in mind, it is a necessity to analyze the years of dictatorial violence from the lens of the human experience. For years, Argentines were subjected to institutionalized terror, unable to properly voice their anger or confront their emotions due to the prevailing culture of silence. Such a constrain on everyday life would have dramatic consequences in the post-dictatorial years. The critical element of silence under years of authoritarian rule complicated the quest to identify an objective truth in the post-dictatorial years. As a result, diverging and opposing memory narratives arose in the wake of dictatorial collapse. While some individuals were committed to holding the military government accountable and seeking justice for *los desaparecidos*, others completely denied the events of the dictatorial years. For society to grapple with its past, an acknowledgement of the suffering that had ensued and the grave dictatorial crimes was essential, yet many simply wanted to move on. These competing accounts of memory would have tangible repercussions in the pursuit of justice, as totalitarian silence continued to manifest itself in conflicting ideologies, where one side fought for decades for restitution while another established barriers to justice.

What this thesis argues, therefore, is that the years of obligatory silence under the totalitarian terror of the military dictatorship catalyzed conflicts of memory and the hindrance of justice in the post-dictatorial years. More significantly, however, is the objective to uncover the core of the human experience under an authoritarian and violent regime. This thesis seeks to not only discuss the events of the military dictatorship and the post-dictatorial years, but more importantly, to investigate their impact on the human person. Such extremes of violence demand sociopolitical questions regarding what makes human beings behave in a way that is so averse to human flourishing. Furthermore, by looking at how a culture of silence impacts human emotions

and relationships, the polarized society of the post-dictatorial years and the delay of justice becomes much more evident. Moreover, this thesis underscores the nature of survivorship, and the difficulties associated with confronting a traumatic history. Finally, it strives to highlight the complexities of justice, and how human beings cope with justice when it is not necessarily delivered.

This thesis afforded me the opportunity to work with a plethora of sources, ranging from personal testimonies to contemporary films, fictionalized memoirs to secondary scholarship, photographs to artwork. Many of these sources were written in Spanish, allowing me to preserve the original language and authenticity of works in this discussion. Quotations or references to Spanish words are accompanied by English translations. I produced these translations with the help of online resources and in consultation with Dr. Javier Mocarquer. It was a rewarding experience working with multilingual sources, enabling a breadth of perspectives and allowing me to better grasp the underlying nuances of these powerful works.

The first chapter of this thesis will focus specifically on the dictatorial years, honing in on the profound element of silence. By looking at the literal silences, such as individuals being unable to speak in the detention centers, as well as the more symbolic silences, such as passive compliance to military repression and overt government denial, this chapter paints an image of how silence is manifested under totalitarian terror. More significantly, it explores how society was disrupted with the installment of military rule, drastically impacting fundamental human interactions and the relationship of the individual to the state. The second chapter pivots to look at the post-dictatorial years in Argentina's transition to democracy. Its principal objective is to theorize the concepts of survivorship, historical memory, and identity formation in the context of survivors of totalitarian terror. By drawing comparisons to other modern dictatorships, this

chapter reveals the complex aftermath of the demise of dictatorial rule. By eliciting concrete examples from Argentina's dictatorship, it unveils how these concepts manifested themselves in actual human beings, analyzing how humans respond to and grapple with violent, traumatizing history. Finally, the third chapter seeks to evaluate the tangible consequences of dictatorial rule in terms of the fight for justice. Though legal justice is integral to this discussion, this aspect of the thesis strives to debunk misconceptions surrounding justice that it is only to be understood in its punitive capabilities, offering commentary on other, more symbolic forms of justice which victims used to receive closure from dictatorial violence. Through these chapters, it will become clear that the years of totalitarian silence and dictatorial atrocities directly contributed to the painful fight for truth in the post-dictatorial years, a battle that persists to this day.

Chapter One:
"They Silently Laughed":
The Culture of Silence Under the Argentinian Military Dictatorship

Introduction

Authoritarian regimes derive their power from placing their citizens in a constant state of fear. The Argentinian military dictatorship exemplified this power dynamic, in which the government dictated all facets of everyday life and consequently placed Argentines in a condition of anxiety, panic, and total surveillance. Like other totalitarian dictatorships of the twentieth century, what enabled the Argentinian military to enact mass repression and violence was a system of institutionalized fear and terror. Furthermore, state-enforced silence forced individuals into a utilitarian mindset in which obligation to the state pressured them to choose between their own lives and the lives of others. Argentines were required to ignore the unjustified repression around them, unable to voice their true concerns or speak out on behalf of others without grave consequences. This obligatory silence in the dictatorial years not only strove to create a single Argentinian nationalist mentality where "leftist" opinion was prohibited, but also allowed human rights abuses to persist without reparation or answers. This chapter will argue that the Argentinian military dictatorship used mechanisms of terror, surveillance, and censorship to create a culture of silence that not only placed individuals in a state of paranoia, but also undermined and redefined the function of society.

"Please, I Don't Want Them to Come": Torture and Dehumanization in the Camps

> Where is he?
> I don't hear him.
> I heard him leave.
> Could we talk?
> I guess so, we're really close, he can't hear us.
> The sound of water helps to conceal our voices. . .

> It feels like we're paying each other a social visit.
> They silently laughed. . .[9]

Alicia Partnoy and María Elena: two *desaparecidas* detained in the Argentinian military detention center, "*La Escuelita*" ("The Little School"). Though partially fictionalized in Partnoy's novel, *The Little School*, conversations such as these were not uncommon at this notorious Argentinian torture center. It did not matter if you were held in the same room as a friend, or if you just wanted to converse with a fellow prisoner: silence was demanded at all times. Even laughter was quieted. After two days of dreadful silence, Alicia and María Elena took the chance to speak.[10] For those two days, the only thing that was shared by these women was the unsanitary air and their desperate condition. This conversation was an outlet, a way for them to preserve sanity. They talked about the physical toll the torture had taken on their bodies, while sharing anxieties about what had happened to their significant others.[11]

In the midst of their conversation, Alicia found that María Elena stopped responding. All she heard was that "Silence."[12] Alicia knew such abrupt silence all too well. Peine, one of the vicious camp guards, caught the women in their "social visit."[13] Alicia knew the consequences of her offense. She was taken by Peine to the kitchen, subjected to complete dehumanization. As if the deafening silence was not enough, she was forced to stand completely naked under a leak in the roof, while the guards ridiculed her.[14] This process was called the "Chinese torture method," in which an individual stood under dripping water, creating an unsettling environment.[15] Alicia's blindfold became soaked with water, fostering feelings of anxiety and pain. Yet, she was not

---

[9] Alicia Partnoy, *The Little School* (San Francisco: Midnight Editions, 1986), 69.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid., 70-71.
[12] Ibid., 71.
[13] Ibid., 69, 71.
[14] Ibid., 72.
[15] Ibid.

defeated. Though the violence shattered her body, she preserved her dignity because "in spite of the blows and restraints, in spite of the filth and torture, both women had had that long and warm conversation under the rain."[16] For Alicia and María Elena, having this conversation was not just a way to feel some form of human connection during their painful isolation, but was also a way to maintain their humanity while enduring total dehumanization.

The only noise breaking the painful silence in *La Escuelita* was that of military officers shouting orders or the sounds of innocent individuals being tortured: "No, please, I don't want them to come. I'm not an animal . . . Don't make me believe I'm an animal. But that's not my scream; that's an animal's scream."[17] This scene from Partnoy's novel depicts the torture that her husband endured while he was detained. She notes how the prisoners were constantly surrounded by the screams of individuals being tortured by the guards. While prisoners were forced to remain silent unless the guards instructed them otherwise, the only other moments without silence were those of horrifying screeches of torture sessions. In this account, Partnoy's husband does not even recognize his own yells and cries anymore. By comparing her husband's condition to that of an "animal," she underscores their dehumanizing plight in which they were degraded and subjected to total suffering.

Another facet of this dehumanization was the use of blindfolds in dictatorial camps. *Los desaparecidos* spent all of their days blindfolded in the horrid conditions of the concentration camps, unable to see fellow prisoners, the guards, or their surrounding locations.[18] If a guard discovered that a prisoner's blindfold was not tight enough, or if the prisoner was able to see even a little of the surrounding area, the prisoner was beaten into submission.[19] Blindfolds served

[16] Ibid., 73.
[17] Ibid., 94.
[18] Ibid., 15.
[19] Ibid., 32.

two main purposes for subverting detainees. First, by hindering *los desaparecidos* from seeing their surroundings, they were put into a further state of paralyzing fear. As shown in the conversation between Alicia and María Elena, Alicia could not see Peine enter the room, which is why she continued speaking despite his presence. Suddenly, "She felt a hand like a hook on her shoulder," realizing that Peine was there.[20] Alicia knew that the consequences would be drastic because they were caught violating one of the camp's strictest policies. Thus, due to being blindfolded, prisoners never knew when guards were approaching, forcing them to be constantly afraid and alert. Similarly, because victims could not see during torture sessions, they were placed in debilitating panic about what horrible fate they would be subjected to next.

The second motivation for using blindfolds was to protect the military's "secrets" from pervading public life. If *los desaparecidos* were released and had been able to see their location or the faces of guards, the military ran the risk of the clandestine camps being exposed or victims identifying assailants. Therefore, by blindfolding prisoners, the military not only placed their victims in a state of constant discomfort and distress, but also consequently protected this system of forced disappearances, torture, and killings. However, one of the indirect positive outcomes of the use of blindfolds was that the remaining senses, specifically hearing, became stronger and valuable assets for prisoners. While unable to see, captives resorted to listening closely for key words, names, dates, and locations not only to predict what was happening to them, but to also use this information against their repressors. Partnoy and other former *desaparecidos/as* who published fictionalized memoirs were able to construct these works solely based off what they heard. Because of their amplified sense of hearing, they brought to life these gruesome realities for readers. It is ironic to think that in a machine of systematic silence, *hearing* would be the

[20] Ibid., 71.

most important sense for these prisoners. However, by silencing victims through blindfolds, hoping that detainees would never be able to identify their assailants or their places of captivity, the military effectively empowered their victims to take advantage of the senses that they *did* have, allowing them to share their stories with the public in the post-dictatorial years. By inhibiting prisoners from seeing their surroundings, dictatorial devices for silencing victims ultimately backfired. For example, Partnoy was able to remember the names of these violent guards, including specific details about them, just from what she had heard and experienced.[21] She never had to see Peine to be able to relay his brutality to her reader, showing how in an effort to silence *los desaparecidos*, the dictatorship indirectly afforded them resources to later speak out against these abuses of human rights.

The silence within the Argentinian concentration camps during the military dictatorship also manifested itself in the inability for prisoners to speak with their families and friends outside of the camps. Based on real events of her husband's torture, Partnoy envisions her husband crying out for their infant daughter, Ruth. Neither Partnoy nor her husband were able to communicate with Ruth during their detainment, creating anxiety about their daughter's safety. The *desaparecida* imagines her husband saying, "Daughter, dear, my tongue hurts and I can't say *rib-bit rib-bit*; even if I could, you wouldn't hear me."[22] Because of the seemingly endless torture that he received daily, ranging from the electric prod to beatings, Partnoy's husband could not find the strength to speak.[23] Although silence was required, her husband was too physically and mentally exhausted to speak regardless, displaying the magnitude of this violence. Moreover, this imaginary conversation between her husband and Ruth illustrates the silence that

[21] Ibid., 133.
[22] Ibid., 93.
[23] Ibid., 94.

existed from inside the concentration camp walls to the outside world. The pain from torture placed Partnoy's husband in a condition where he was forced to be silent, yet "even if" he had been physically able to speak, his daughter "wouldn't hear" him.[24] The process of disappearing "subversives" fostered a dreadful silence between them and those they loved in which they could maintain no form of communication or connection.

Pilar Calveiro, a former *desaparecida* of the "*Escuela Mecánica de la Armada*" (*ESMA*) concentration camp, explores the element of power within this process of disappearance, detainment, torture, and extermination. She explains how the practice of disappearing individuals and bringing them to concentration camps for systematic torture reflected a unique expression of power, different from other forms of violence.[25] She explores how this was only made possible through a government and military that inserted itself into all aspects of society and routine life, facilitating a sense of anxiety through persistent reminders of dictatorial authority.[26] Calveiro argues that the torture mechanisms and systematic killings in the concentration camps were made possible due to the dictatorship presenting subversives as "*menos que hombres*," or sub-humans, that did not deserve humane treatment.[27] Through this, the dictatorship essentially produced a doctrine that redefined the integral essence of human life, where *los desaparecidos* were deemed expendable. Because killing became so routine and another one of the guards' duties, they did not view prisoners as humans, and therefore, disassociated with the reality of what was occurring. Calveiro argues that by normalizing this systematic extermination in the concentration camps, the dictatorship wiped these victims of their true human identities and reduced them to

---

[24] Ibid., 93.

[25] Pilar Calveiro, *Poder y desaparición: los campos de concentración en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 2004), Retrieved from https://www.comisionporlamemoria.org/archivos/jovenesymemoria/bibliografia_web/dictadura/Calveiro.pdf, 15.

[26] Ibid., 13.

[27] Ibid., 22.

just another number on a list of those who had been killed.[28] Calveiro does not believe that the young soldiers who carried out these practices of torture were intrinsically evil, but rather, were conditioned to treat death as a necessity for eliminating subversion, and thus, absolved themselves of guilt or remorse.[29] This institutionalized practice of isolating death from any human attachment or sentiment was itself a form of silence. Instead of acknowledging that they were torturing and murdering human beings—somebody's husband, somebody's daughter, somebody's friend—the guards were trained to destroy these "terrorists." This silence about the true nature of dictatorial power—in its most gruesome, horrifying manifestations—created a culture in which guards were not only comfortable with institutionalized torture, but also believed that what they were doing was necessary and beneficial for society.

In addition to positioning *los desaparecidos* as unworthy of humane treatment, the dictatorship also fostered a group mentality among the guards that encouraged violent behavior. By designating different roles—those who carried out surveillance tactics, those who kidnapped subversives, those who tortured, and those who exterminated—the government aimed to "*ensuciar las manos de todo*s" (dirty everyone's hands) so that this process of repressing individuals became a group effort.[30] Not only did this help to reduce personal feelings of accountability, but it also enabled these tactics of repression to be carried out on a greater scale. Guards were less inclined to reflect on the nature of human rights when their fellow officers were committing similar atrocities to these "sub-human criminals." This rationalization for undue violence effectively absolved soldiers of individual responsibility, illustrating how Videla's dictatorship designed a political "*máquina de destrucción*" (machine of destruction).[31] This

[28] Ibid., 19.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid., 6.

"machine" created a uniform, passive attitude toward violence that encouraged aggressive mechanisms of domination. Group mentality in its true spirit encourages silence because people are less motivated to speak out against injustice if everyone is conforming to this culture of excessive violence. Calveiro argues that this herd mentality toward subversives and human rights not only existed within the torture camps, but also infiltrated the whole of society, allowing the dictatorship to effectively orchestrate its tactics of subjugation.[32]

"No Place to Hide": Institutionalized Terror Outside the Concentration Camps

The silence that existed in the microcosm of detention centers like *La Escuelita* echoed in the macrocosm of the entire Argentinian nation under dictatorial rule. In *A Single, Numberless Death*, a former *desaparecida*, Nora Strejilevich, recalls the day when she was abducted in broad daylight by the military:

> On the sidewalk, you kick and scream against a nameless fate in some mass grave. I hurl my name with every last fiber—with lungs, with guts, with legs, with arms, with rage. My name flails wildly on the edge of defeat .... They push me. I land on the floor of a car. Blows rain on me: 'Take that for screaming in Jewish, and this for kicking.'[33]

Given that abductions were public, it is hard to fathom how a culture of silence prevailed in Argentina during the military dictatorship. Strejilevich, in a desperate attempt for someone to help her, or at least, for someone to know that she was being taken, screamed her name into this atmosphere of silence. Although she tried, "on the edge of defeat," she knew it was a hopeless attempt, for no one would dare to defy the orders of the military.[34] Screaming and resisting arrest by the military was punishable by force and torture, showing the risk that she took in defending herself by yelling her name in public.

---

[32] Ibid., 16.
[33] Nora Strejilevich, *A Single, Numberless Death* (University of Virginia Press, 2002), 4.
[34] Ibid.

Not only does the act of screaming her name defy this silence that the government orchestrated, but it displays the evident relationship between her name and her place in Argentinian society. Jewish individuals were "a key target" of government repression, and the overt antisemitism does not go unnoticed in Strejilevich's story of her time as a *desaparecida.*[35] The men who arrested her were not just beating her for screaming in public and drawing attention to her disappearance, but also punishing her for her Jewish identity. They continued assaulting her with antisemitic slurs: "You Yid piece of shit, we're gonna make soap out of you."[36] Such vile comments were not uncommon from military guards. David Sheinin describes how "Cases were reported of efforts to carve Stars of David or crosses onto the bodies of Jewish prisoners. Swastikas and anti-Semitic slogans were routinely painted on the walls in detention centers."[37] In an interview, Strejilevich describes how her "understanding of [herself] as a Jewish woman came from the very moment [she] was kidnapped," as the dictatorship was determined to intimidate and eliminate Jewish Argentines.[38]

Strejilevich, taken from her home at "two in the afternoon," epitomized a routine operation in Argentina under Videla's reign.[39] "Subversives" could be taken at any moment: their homes invaded, possessions destroyed, friends and family having to stand by and watch. The dictatorship violated the integral human right to privacy. "In the Buenos Aires of 1977 there is no place to hide," Strejilevich writes.[40] Intense government surveillance meant that Argentines were always being watched. The *Muro de la Memoria* (Wall of Memory), organized by *El*

---

[35] David M. K. Sheinin, *Consent of the Damned: Ordinary Argentinians in the Dirty War* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 69.

[36] Strejilevich, *A Single, Numberless Death,* 4.

[37] Sheinin, *Consent of the Damned,* 72.

[38] Monica Szurmuk, "One Single Countless Death: An Interview with Nora Strejilevich," *Bridges: A Jewish Feminist Journal* 8 nos. 1-2 (date unavailable): 5. Accessed September 20, 2022.

[39] Strejilevich, *A Single, Numberless Death,* 4.

[40] Ibid., 21.

Proyecto Desaparecidos (Project Disappeared), tells the stories of individuals haphazardly kidnapped from their homes. One couple, José Abdala and Susana Falabella, were abducted on March 16, 1977, leaving behind their toddler son, José Sabino, and an infant that they looked after, María Eugenia:

> La familia fue secuestrada el 16/3/77 a las 12:30 de la mañana, mientras se encontraban comiendo el almuerzo, en su domicilio en la calle 6 y 167 del barrio Los Hornos. Personal vestido de civil y militar rodeó la manzana. Golpearon a José, lo encapucharon y lo introdujeron en el baúl de un auto. A Susana la pusieron en el asiento de atrás de otro auto, junto a Sabino y María Eugenia. Luego del secuestro saquearon la casa y se llevaron todas las pertenencias.[41]
>
> [The family was kidnapped on March 3rd, 1977 at 12:30 in the morning, while they were eating lunch at home on Street 6 and 167 in the Los Hornos neighborhood. Civil and military personnel surrounded the block. They beat José, hooded him and put him in the trunk of a car. They put Susana in the back of a different car with Sabino and María Eugenia. After the kidnapping, the military plundered their house and took all of their belongings].

The "crime" of these individuals: their political affiliation. José and Susana were members of *La Juventud Trabajadora Peronista* (*JTP*), a Peronist youth group, which the military actively repressed.[42] This scene of chaos and senseless violence conveys Strejilevich's characterization of 1977 Argentina, a place where no one could evade the rath of the military. José and Susana's political beliefs cost them their right to their family and their child, the right to have a meal in their own home, and the right to their freedom.

A very thin line existed between being considered innocent or guilty during the Dirty War. David Sheinin explains how "military intelligence officers could not see the difference between innocuous public protest (which the Argentine Constitution protected as a free speech right) and what might, in fact, be an effort by an Argentine guerrilla group."[43] The essence and

---

[41] "José Abdala, Susana Falabella de Abdala," Muro de la Memoria, *El Proyecto Desaparecidos* (Project Disappeared), accessed September 10, 2022, http://www.desaparecidos.org/arg/victimas/a/abdalaj/.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Sheinin, *Consent of the Damned*, 67.

purpose of "free speech" was not applicable to the society of the Argentinian dictatorship. Protests, such as by individuals who were questioning the disappearances, were met with harsh repression. Although the Argentinian government claimed to uphold the constitutional rights of its citizens, in reality, free speech was considered the antithesis of the national silence that the dictatorship strictly enforced.[44] Criticism toward the dictatorship was viewed as a danger to national unity, restricting people from speaking freely and breaking the political silence.

The normalcy of public abductions placed Argentines in a condition of immense vulnerability. Not only could they possibly be taken at any time, but they were also expected to remain quiet even when witnessing atrocities. One famous photograph from the regime depicts a

man being arrested by the military.[45] This individual was dragged on the sidewalk by four military officers, all heavily armed with machine guns. His limbs were stretched in all different directions, forcibly removing him from the street. What is startling about this image is the sense of routine and normalcy. Pedestrians in the image background continued walking, showing no signs of distress or shock. The military officers were not struggling with this individual, which suggests that they had conducted similar arrests before. Cars passed by and life seemed to go on. Such a public display of the military's authority and tactics of repression contributed to the prevalence of silence. No one would try to defend this man because the military had found him

[44] Ibid., 34.

[45] Daniel Garcia (AFP), "Argentina-Military," 1982, digital photograph, Getty Images, https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/picture-taken-30-march-1982-of-a-worker-who-is-being-news-photo/496009132.

"guilty." Even if people disagreed with the "verdict," they were forced to weigh the cost of their own life against the life of a stranger. Thus, people continued moving, going about their days, and driving past, for this state-induced silence required them to keep their opinions to themselves and to look the other way.

Strejilevich reflects on this dilemma of the ordinary individual, where Argentines knew the truth about the military and their treatment toward detainees, but they avoided speaking up because they needed to protect themselves and their families. In *A Single, Numberless Death*, as Strejilevich is taken away by the military, she imagines those around her, thinking to themselves, "She hasn't done anything, neither has he," yet despite the opinions of an ordinary bystander, "you are here, on this side."[46] This silence and inability to defend those around you fostered agonizing isolation. Her neighbors knew that she was innocent, and they might have wanted to defend her, but they could not do so without jeopardizing their own safety. Therefore, Strejilevich was left "on this side," or the other side of society.[47] She found herself on the side of the victim, while spectators watched from the side of silence, keeping their thoughts to themselves as this young woman's freedom was shattered in an instant.

The clandestine nature of the concentration camps augmented day-to-day fear under the dictatorship. Although Argentines knew that the camps existed, many were not aware of exact locations. The concealed camp sites created a paralyzing anxiety in which people could be living next door to a torture center and not have any awareness of it. For example, one man who worked for the *Comisión Nacional de Energía Atómica* (National Atomic Energy Commission) described how "during the dictatorship he had no idea that the navy was operating the most notorious clandestine detention center in the nation—the *Escuela Mecánica de la Armada*

[46] Strejilevich, *A Single, Numberless Death*, 4.
[47] Ibid.

(*ESMA*)—directly across the street from where he worked every day."[48] Having secret detention centers enabled the government to instill a greater sense of paranoia in Argentinian society, for people knew they were always being watched and could be abducted at any given moment.

One of the more complex elements of the forced abductions and disappearances involves understanding how silence could prevail, despite government oppression being so overt. Mark Osiel describes this "paradox" of government "efforts to keep their most repressive policies secret" while "such policies nevertheless became publicly known," and, furthermore, why they would invent "a spectacle of an abduction" only to later refute such accusations.[49] The military demanded silence from both political prisoners and innocent bystanders: if you saw something, no you did not, and if you did, never tell a soul. Strejilevich describes this as a world of "What do I know? I only know that I know nothing," where people were expected to disassociate themselves with the reality around them and keep their sentiments private.[50] Despite this, these abductions were conducted in the public sphere for all to see.[51] Osiel wrestles with this conversation of why a government under pressure from human rights organizations would make forced disappearances so known. The reasoning stems from the desire to instill fear in citizens at all times: "Their citizens must know there are secrets so terrible they must be kept secret, even while these states make it publicly known that secrets exist."[52] Argentines knew that at any day or any hour, they could be the next person "disappeared" by the government. Public disappearances in the middle of the day served as a reminder to Argentines that any opposition to Videla's government would be met with the most severe consequences. The culture of silence

---

[48] Sheinin, *Consent of the Damned*, 32.

[49] Mark J. Osiel, "Constructing Subversion in Argentina's Dirty War," *Representations* 75, no. 1 (Summer 2001): 124.

[50] Strejilevich, *A Single, Numberless Death,* 48.

[51] Osiel, "Constructing Subversion," 124.

[52] Ibid.

was fueled by this "climate of fear and paralysis," where people remained silent because of this public display of the military's unchallenged and ruthless authority.[53]

"It's Everyone for Himself": Disrupting and Remaking Society Under the Dictatorship

Under a totalitarian regime, violence is not limited to its physical manifestations—assault, abduction, torture, murder—but also involves a complete restructuring of society. An individual existing in such a society is required to rethink their social norms, their relationships with each other and the government, and their sense of self. In *Genocide as Social Practice: Reorganizing Society Under the Nazis and Argentina's Military Juntas*, Daniel Feierstein challenges the typical conceptions of "genocide" and "war" by situating them within a sociopolitical context.[54] For example, Feierstein discusses the 1975 Operation Independence, one of the earliest actions of the Argentinian military to crush subversion.[55] Under the leadership of Brigadier General Acdel Vilas, the military attacked the People's Revolutionary Army, a left-leaning "guerrilla group" in Tucumán, Argentina, who they feared were going to undermine their military rule through a "revolution."[56] What was unique about Operation Independence, however, was that it redefined the military's purpose. Feierstein poses this idea of "genocidal social practices," which "meant replacing a predominantly military social practice—war—with an eminently political one—the destruction of social relations in the civilian population."[57] Arguably, Operation Independence was one of the early turning points in which the military transitioned from its wartime role of fighting an enemy to completely uprooting society. The

---

[53] Ibid.

[54] Daniel Feierstein, *Genocide as Social Practice: Reorganizing Society Under the Nazis and Argentina's Military Juntas* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 133.

[55] Ibid., 132.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid., 131,133.

goal of the Argentinian military was no longer just to commit acts of violence against the enemy, but to "set up mechanisms to persecute the population and undermine solidarity."[58] In the traditional understanding of war, two opposing forces battle one another until one reaches the point of defeat. In Feierstein's approach to warfare as a social development, however, the military achieves victory by manipulating its citizens into rethinking routine social practices. Furthermore, through disrupting social relations and the framework of society, the Argentinian military strove to "win the hearts and minds" of Argentines, creating a relationship where the government becomes feared to the point that it would simultaneously be respected and trusted.[59] The dictatorship's definition of power, therefore, contained a rather Machiavellian slant in which power rested on the integral element of fear. However, according to military leaders like Vilas, this fear was a catalyst for a paternal relationship, in which subjects became so engrossed and afraid of dictatorial power that they simultaneously became conditioned to trust, to support, and to legitimize this rule. Thus, by destroying the function of normal society, the military secured total control and drove its offenders into submission.

Feierstein's argument furthers this understanding of how Argentines perceived themselves in dictatorial society. He defines genocide as a phenomenon that not only involves the torture and extermination of innocent civilians, but also a "social process" with the intention to "destroy the broader fabric of social relations."[60] These "genocidal social practices" are part of the reason why a culture of silence prevailed in Argentina under Videla's rule. Strejilevich writes how under the dictatorship, "It's everyone for himself."[61] The "National Reorganization Process"—the military's plan to restructure the government and society under totalitarian rule—

[58] Ibid., 133.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid., 144.
[61] Strejilevich, *A Single, Numberless Death*, 21.

strove to create a utilitarian climate in which individuals had to make decisions that best served them and their own lives. As Feierstein explains, the military's strategies for diminishing "solidarity" between citizens fueled an environment in which people chose either to ignore or to remain silent about what transpired.[62]

Strejilevich depicts the magnitude of this silence in her novel. Writing from the perspective of 1977, she illustrates the corruption that ensued: "Several scientists have been kidnapped, yet the director doesn't feel the slightest need to report it. He's a senior admiral, and senior admirals are men of few words."[63] Strejilevich's use of satirical language is powerful in expressing how the culture of silence could not be separated from the function of social relationships. Her goal is not to depict this man as quiet—a characterization typically associated with someone who is "of few words"—but rather, she underscores how this man *willingly* did not inquire about his employees, adhering to the dictatorial norm of silence. Because this man is a "senior admiral," the reader can infer that he did not report his missing employees because he did not want to jeopardize his own standing in this *new* society, a society where people do not have a moral obligation to their fellow man, but rather, only a responsibility to comply with military orders.

In this model of totalitarian rule, loyalty to the government surpassed any personal sentiment. In another instance, Strejilevich describes how dictatorial silence pervaded university life. Using impactful satire, she portrays the perspective of a professor under the dictatorship:

> Señora, I assure you this kind of work has its drawbacks. You can't imagine how hard it was for me when my very best student confessed his sympathy for socialism. I was his history professor but still my first obligation was to the Army. And so I had to inform them, as is expected of us. They took him away; it was a real pity. Doing the right thing isn't always easy.[64]

---

[62] Feierstein, *Genocide as Social Practice*, 133.
[63] Strejilevich, *A Single, Numberless Death*, 21.
[64] Ibid., 50.

Historically, universities were established with the purpose of not only creating an environment for learning, but also expressing thoughts, discussing different opinions, and engaging in debate. However, in a society like that of the military dictatorship, there was no room for disagreement. The only "opinion" to be had was one that coincided with dictatorial values. University students frequently fell victim to dictatorial repression for writing "controversial" essays or expressing beliefs that were viewed as "Marxist." Although a fictional account, Strejilevich displays a reality about the dictatorship in which professors, entrusted to guide their students, were obligated to report any potential "subversive" behavior from pupils. What is also significant about Strejilevich's description is how the professor felt it was "the right thing" to do in the situation, since his duty to his students fell second to his devotion to the state.[65]

The Argentinian military dictatorship uprooted society by placing the most vulnerable at risk of repression. The impact of state-induced silence on children is explored in the 2013 film, *Infancia clandestina* (Clandestine Childhood). The totalitarian oppression caused by the dictatorship directly juxtaposed the essence of childhood innocence. In this movie, two wanted *Montoneros*, Horacio and Cristina, were exiled to Cuba after openly challenging dictatorial rule. However, they decide that their moral duty to defend *los desaparecidos* and other repressed victims must take precedence over personal fear, and thus, return to Argentina to continue fighting the dictatorship. However, this return requires strict secrecy, in which their entire family must adopt new identities to maintain their safety. This has the strongest impact on Horacio and Cristina's son, Juan, a twelve-year-old who must pretend to be "Ernesto" to attend school without danger. As the family prepares to send "Ernesto" to school, they ensure that he has a full understanding of his new persona. One pertinent issue with protecting their identities is that Juan

[65] Ibid., 46.

continues to speak with a Cuban accent and lexicon. His uncle fears that Juan's "Cuban accent will get [them] killed."[66] While the family makes jokes that Juan does not speak like the rest of them, his lack of Argentinian accent poses a legitimate threat to their safety. The family requires Juan to practice a Córdoba accent, which presents less complications for him than the Buenos Aires accent, and to learn common Argentinian phrases. Juan must not only be silent about his real identity, but he also must literally transform the way he speaks to blend in with his peers.

While Juan initially views his double-life as "Ernesto" as an exciting adventure, maintaining this covert identity becomes extremely complex and begins to disrupt his sense of childhood normalcy. For example, in one scene of the film, Juan's classmates start singing "Happy Birthday," yet he has no idea that they are singing to him since he has a new birthday as "Ernesto." The young boy comes home from school in a panic because his classmates asked him when he was throwing his birthday party. To avoid suspicion, Juan told them that his birthday party would be on the upcoming Saturday, to which his mother replies, "Dammit! Couldn't you have said something else?"[67] His mother is panicked because she fears that throwing a birthday party will attract unwanted attention as her and Horacio hide from the government. Juan's experience demonstrates the ways that dilemmas of speech and silence transformed relatively commonplace societal routines. For many children, birthday parties are a source of joy and excitement, celebrating their lives, yet for Juan and his family, this birthday party is a source of anxiety as it could ultimately mean the difference between life and death. His *Montonero* mother wishes that he "said something else," or kept *silent*, yet the complex reality is that children

[66] *Infancia clandestina*, directed by Benjamín Ávila (2011; Buenos Aires, Argentina: Historias Cinematograficas, 2013), Vudu.

[67] Ibid.

should not have to rigorously monitor their words and actions. However, under dictatorial directive, even the youth were subjected to obliging the culture of silence.

Juan's childhood innocence was especially interrupted in his ability to have normal friendships and relationships. While attending school, the son of the *Montoneros* develops a crush on one of his classmates, Maria. Initially, Juan spends much time with Maria and the two grow quite close. However, his life radically changes when his Uncle Beto is shot and killed by the police, forcing his family to go into hiding. The young boy is not only devastated at the loss of his uncle, but he also ponders what will happen to his relationship with Maria if he cannot return to school. Fearing that he will lose the girl that he loves, Juan calls her from their home telephone, something forbidden as it could jeopardize his family's underground location. Juan must whisper to communicate with her, furthering this silence that he was already feeling from their physical distance. When Juan's mother finds him on the phone, she reprimands him quite harshly, something unprecedented in their relationship. After he tells his mother that he was on the phone with his girlfriend, his mother tells him to "cut the crap!" and his father says, "What's wrong with you?" and to "suck it up like a man."[68] Calling a friend from school would typically be considered an ordinary interaction for children, yet due to the overwhelming fear and surveillance under the dictatorship, Juan cannot behave like the other children. Instead of speaking freely and openly, he must be silent, even as a child, to protect his parents' lives. His *Montonero* parents are strict with him because of their debilitating fear of becoming *desaparecidos*. He is not sheltered from the reality around him, but rather, his parents force him to grow up and grapple with a terrifying world, displaying how totalitarian authority can change traditional courses of life.

---

[68] Ibid.

“Blurring Reality”: Government Censorship and the Denial of Truth

Another integral way in which the Argentinian government was able to foster a culture of silence was through strict censorship. Sheinin describes this process as an “exercise in blurring reality.”[69] In military reports from 1979, for example, the government claimed “that more prisoners had been released than the number that was currently detained” and “ignored altogether executions and disappearances.”[70] Using false statistics allowed the government to present the situation as less grave than people suspected. When individuals inquired about disappeared relatives and friends, the dictatorship “simply denied the accusations.”[71] In some cases, when individuals demanded answers, the dictatorship responded with the possibility that the “‘disappeared’ person had simply not been in contact with family members.”[72] Through calculated manipulation, the dictatorship promulgated silence through the form of lies, claiming that flagrant human rights abuses did not exist.

Not only did the dictatorship deny allegations of human rights atrocities, but its leaders more significantly presented themselves as actually saving humanity. In a 1980 interview by the *Televisión Pública Argentina* (*TPA*), President Videla described how the dictatorship’s leaders, “*quieran estar colocar* [sic] *orden en el desorden, autoridad en la anarquía*” (want to place order in the disorder, authority in the anarchy).[73] In order to win public support and to distract from dictatorial tyranny, Videla positioned the dictatorship as Argentina’s savior, restoring order to the chaos that was created by Perón and left-leaning politicians. Under pressure from *La Comisión de Derechos Humanos de la Organización de los Estados Americanos* (The Human

---

[69] Sheinin, *Consent of the Damned*, 31.
[70] Ibid., 43.
[71] Ibid., 44.
[72] Ibid., 47.
[73] Jorge Rafael Videla, 1980, interview by Televisión Pública, retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfESiQI_cYA&t=308s.

Rights Commission of the Organization of the American States), Videla was determined to underscore the dictatorship as a protector of its people, delivering them from the perils of Peronism and bringing Argentina into a state of international glory. One of the most effective ways for Videla to propagate this message was through a public, nationally accepted television network, where Argentines could listen to dictatorial fabrications as official news. Censorship of the media allowed the dictatorship to create a streamlined system in which the public only received carefully selected information, disabling room for varying opinion.

In this interview, Videla described how the dictatorship actually created "*paz en la violencia*" (peace in the violence).[74] This "peace" that Videla described was in actuality state-sponsored terror, in which individuals could not leave their homes without fear of being detained and tortured, displaying the evident hypocrisy. In this broadcast, Videla explained how the dictatorship was in "*una etapa de creatividad política*" (a stage of political creativity).[75] What Videla did not mention was that this "creativity" consisted of implementing state-wide surveillance and state-sponsored terrorism where individuals were constantly being watched. The clandestine detention centers, for example, epitomized these extreme government strategies to place individuals under constant surveillance and to repress opposition. "Political creativity" demanded unopposed, totalitarian views, in which people who held other beliefs would be dealt with in a way that the military saw fit. One of the most glaring examples of silence in this interview was Videla's statement that the dictatorship would bring Argentina to "*una democracia auténtica*" (an authentic democracy).[76] While an "authentic democracy" is typically

[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.

associated with freedom and inalienable human rights, Videla's democracy consisted of a deafening silence, in which their authority went unchallenged and innocent lives were destroyed.

The military dictatorship censored national events as a mechanism for disseminating political silence. June 1978: the Estadio Monumental roared with excitement: fans cheering, laughing, screaming, "Goooooooal" as Argentina defeated the Netherlands 3-1.[77] While celebrations filled the streets of Argentina, President Videla reveled in the display of Argentinian

national pride and glory. A photograph of him smiling, giving a "thumbs-up" to some of the team's star players displayed his satisfaction with their first FIFA title.[78] However, not all Argentines remember this June day as one of celebration and excitement:

> The guards switched the radio to the 1978 World Cup final, tinny speakers blasting full volume. . .. Political prisoners twisted and fidgeted in the shadows. Norberto Liwski, one of them, struggled to get comfortable . . .. The air stank. Men and women slumped, shoulder to shoulder, stewing in their own urine and feces . . .. Some prisoners wanted Argentina to win. They'd cheered for the blue-and-white all their lives. Others, like Liwski, felt rage and sorrow hearing the dictators use the team as another weapon in the war on their own people.[79]

For many Argentines, *fútbol* (soccer) was more than just a game, but rather, a uniting factor in their identity as Argentines. They came together to praise Mario Kempes, Osvaldo Adriles, and

---

[77] Wright Thompson, "While the World Watched," ESPN The Magazine & ESPNFC.com, ESPN, published June 9, 2014, https://www.espn.com/espn/feature/story/_/id/11036214/while-world-watched-world-cup-brings-back-memories-argentina-dirty-war.

[78] "President Jorge Videla (center) gives a thumbs-up to Osvaldo Ardiles (right) and captain Daniel Passarella (left) following the World Cup final between Argentina and Netherlands," accessed October 15, 2022, digital photograph, "While the World Watched," ESPN The Magazine & ESPNFC.com, ESPN, courtesy of AP Photo, https://www.espn.com/espn/feature/story/_/id/11036214/while-world-watched-world-cup-brings-back-memories-argentina-dirty-war.

[79] Thompson, "While the World Watched."

Daniel Passarella as they led the team to victory, while sharing a sense of cultural pride and honor. Yet for *desaparecido* Norberto Liwski, this game served the purpose of "another weapon" in the dictatorship's arsenal for committing disgraceful human rights abuses.[80]

Silence is not just the physical absence of truth, but can also be understood in terms of the dictatorial measures to distract from the heinous reality that ensued. Simultaneous to the June 25th match was the heightened global awareness of the disappearances in Argentina. Videla not only longed for an Argentinian victory to display the nation's "prosperity," but more significantly, he wanted to disseminate the message that the government was seemingly untouchable. The Argentinian slogan for the '78 World Cup was "We are human and we are right," as an attempt to diminish criticism from human rights organizations.[81] This slogan, and the Argentinian victory, was a slap in the face to "the international community fighting the kidnapping and torture of political enemies," in that while innocent people were brutalized and murdered, the world only saw the splendor and happiness of a soccer victory.[82]

One of the dangers of a culture of silence is that when horrifying realities are suppressed, dismissed, or ignored for so long, there is a potent risk of that reality being forgotten. On the day of the Argentinian victory over the Netherlands, Miriam Lewin and Graciela Daleo, two *desaparecidas,* were escorted out of their detention center and driven through crowds of people.[83] The guards' purpose in presenting these women in public served as a form of mental manipulation. The guards forced Lewin and Daleo to witness firsthand the extravagant World Cup celebrations to remind them of their desperate state, for as their fellow Argentines enjoyed parties and freedom, these women were confined to an unimaginable plight. While fans

[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.

screamed "Argen-tina! Argen-tina!", Lewin remembers feeling anxiety about her potential extermination.[84] The military officers forced Lewin to look at the celebrations, mocking her by saying "Who remembers you?"[85] For many, Argentina's first FIFA title took precedence over concern for *los desaparecidos*. On a day of such national pride, the dictatorship's atrocities were pushed to the back burner. When Daleo requested that she place her head outside the car to receive some air, "The people looked right through her. Nobody knew she was disappeared, the single most important detail of her life, which meant that she didn't exist to them."[86] This climate of silence was so severe that political prisoners could be reintroduced into the public eye, yet people either did not notice their presence or they chose to ignore them, two situations in which *los desaparecidos* were utterly isolated from the concern of society.

Lewin recalled how the officers took her and Daleo to a restaurant: "The torturers ordered beer and pizza and shared them with young women they'd raped with a cattle prod. Lewin looked around, feeling pale and skinny, like an alien, as the place exploded with joy and noise. People danced right next to her, right in her face."[87] Although it seems counterintuitive to discuss silence while analyzing a day filled with cheer and parties, these celebrations served as a mirror image to this stifling silence. These innocent women—abducted, raped, and victimized solely for their political views—were forced to share a meal with their violators, while many Argentines simply stood by and continued their celebrations.[88] These women could not reach out for help, as their silence was obligatory at risk of their own deaths. They could not turn to a patron of the restaurant and voice their identities or stories. At the same time, however, whether or not people

[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.

knew that Lewin and Daleo were *desaparecidas*, many Argentines did not hesitate to celebrate despite knowing the truth of the regime's crimes. June 25, 1978 would become an infamous day when many chose to forget those who had been forcibly vanished from Argentina.

The idea of "celebrating," or a society exploding with relatively collective joy over a victory, demonstrated the power of dictatorial censorship as well as its flagrant contradictions. Although many Argentines—even some prisoners—were genuinely enthused that their nation had finally won the coveted trophy, those who felt differently could not publicly express their opinion. It was permissible to revel in joy, even shout, about the greatness of Argentina, Videla, and the dictatorship, but people were forced to remain quiet about the truth. Lewin recalled how her and Daleo were coerced by the guards into displaying excitement over the victory: "If you weren't happy . . . you were heading straight to the death flight."[89] These two *desaparecidas* were forced to glorify the Argentinian national soccer team and pretend to enjoy the celebrations for the sake of protecting their own lives. In another example, former *desaparecido* Mario Villani recalled being forced to watch the match in the hallway of the concentration camp: "Guards pressured the prisoners to scream 'Goooooooal!' during the game. No one dared turn away, or close his eyes. Not cheering loud enough could get a prisoner listed for the next transfer."[90] The guards received sadistic pleasure from watching the prisoners cheer in their time of distress and suffering. As shown in Alicia Partnoy and Nora Strejilevich's novels, the camps were usually filled with painful silence, aside from the screams emitted from torture sessions. However, on this day of Argentinian victory, the prisoners were compelled to break the routine silence and cheer for the nation that had betrayed them.

[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid.

Frustrated by this hypocritical spectacle of partying and joy, Daleo went to the restaurant bathroom and "took out the tube of lipstick a guard had given her . . . and for a few minutes, she scribbled feverish messages on the walls, calling the dictators murderers, messages of support for the guerrillas still free and fighting."[91] The atmosphere of silence and repression inhibited Daleo from vocalizing her desolation. However, she used any mechanism that she had—in this case, the lipstick—to rupture the demanded silence and to release her frustrations. She knew that "If a guard asked for the lipstick back, or went to check the women's room, she'd die tonight," yet disturbed by this scornful display of Argentina's nationalism, she believed that it was important for people to know the truth, even if it was only in the form of writing on a bathroom wall.[92] Any outlet to break the cycle of lies and propaganda empowered prisoners in their time of isolation and fear. Through writing with an atypical weapon—lipstick—Daleo broke the wall of silence and reclaimed her voice.

"The Whispers": Fighting the Culture of Silence and the Consequences of Dissent

Although the government worked tirelessly to defend its national image and to deny allegations of human rights abuses, not everyone acquiesced to the culture of silence. Robert Cox is a British journalist who was editor of the *Buenos Aires Herald* during the height of dictatorial power, until forced to seek refuge in the United States in 1979. In the forward to his son's biographical account, Cox describes how "the press obliged" the expectation of silence "by not reporting what was going on."[93] The press was an extension of this political performance, where newspapers lied about the disappearances so as to position the government in a positive light.

---

[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid.
[93] David Cox, *Dirty Secrets, Dirty War* (Charleston: Evening Post Publishing Company, 2008), 13.

Cox describes how the *Herald* was in the fortunate position to not adhere to the culture of silence because it was privately owned, allowing the journalists to report accurately and honestly.[94] While the newspapers of "the mainline Argentine press" were controlled by the government, and therefore, were "accomplices of the dictatorship," the *Herald* took action to admonish the dictatorship's abuses of power and to rupture the culture of silence.[95]

Cox became a trustworthy individual in the eyes of Argentine victims because they knew that he would take their stories seriously and would work to find answers about disappeared relatives and friends. He conducted numerous interviews with families of *los desaparecidos*. For Cox, hearing the stories of those who were suffering enabled him to notify the public and the greater international community of dictatorial atrocities. In one 1977 editorial, he wrote, "The government must take steps to end the nightmare some of these women have been living for more than a year and a half . . .. Their relatives have vanished into thin air. This situation can only be ignored at the government's peril."[96] His bold action in publicly critiquing the dictatorship was an anomaly in Argentinian media. Newspapers, radio shows, and television programs received strict instructions on what could be reported: *los desaparecidos* were not to be mentioned unless in the context of refuting "misconceptions," and the dictatorship was never to be cast in a negative light. In this editorial, Cox not only explicitly discussed the disappearances, but he also outwardly blamed the dictatorship for these crimes. This journalist demanded that Videla's government take action to correct these wrongs and to provide answers for the mothers of victims who had been seeking refuge in the *Herald's* publications. The use of such strong language, such as describing life in Videla's Argentina as a "nightmare," served as a direct

[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid., 107.

contrast to the silence that left so many individuals in the dark. Cox illuminated the truth for the public and undermined the expectation of loyalty to the dictatorship in order to advocate for victims and potentially save their lives.

Cox's publications directly challenged dictatorial efforts to censor the information that Argentines and the international community were receiving. In 1977, he published an article entitled "Other Terrorism." His motive in using this title did not go unnoticed: while the government claimed that the Dirty War was a battle against leftist "terrorists" who were going to overthrow society, Cox argued that the real terror was coming directly from government headquarters. This editorial describes how "The past disappearances of people such as Mr. Serrat who are above any suspicion of any involvement with terrorism remain total mysteries. It is not impossible that they are all connected."[97] These lines hold significant weight given the context of the Argentinian state at the time. First, Cox underscored how the disappeared Mr. Serrat was undoubtedly innocent of dictatorial accusations of terrorist or subversive activities. Second, he ensured that the reader was aware that there were still no answers about such disappearances, rendering them "mysteries." This illustrated the nature of the dictatorship and how innocent people could be abducted at any moment, with no government accountability to provide individuals with answers. Finally, he alluded to the government's involvement in criminal activity by arguing that these disappearances were interrelated and certainly not occurring randomly. Cox's lack of conformity to the culture of silence pressured the government, for he validated the struggles of victims and brought them into the public eye while the dictatorship simultaneously fabricated narratives of peace and unity.

[97] Ibid., 110.

Frustrated by the normalcy of silence in Argentina, Cox became committed to reporting the truth. On June 6, 1979, he published a piece entitled, "Coming to Terms with History," in which he argued that people were "being driven mad by the most terrible torture of all. Not knowing."[98] For this journalist, the culture of lies and denial was an additional form of violence toward Argentines. People demanded answers about the whereabouts and safety of their friends and families, but the dictatorship continued to hide its secrets, leaving victimized individuals with nothing but this silence. Cox frequently met with government leaders, reproaching them for repression and necessitating restitution. In a meeting with General Harguindeguy, for example, the general expressed the government's disappointment with the *Herald's* critical articles.[99] When the British journalist explained that "Sixty journalists are missing," the general not only denied his allegations, but also called him "very sentimental."[100] Instead of providing the newspaper reporter with legitimate information, Harguindeguy denied the magnitude of the human rights abuses and ignored Cox's concern. Even more noteworthy was the military leader's passive attitude toward this grave situation. He refuted the accusations regarding *los desaparecidos* by referencing "a document supposedly listing the names of all who had been killed."[101] Cox, knowing this was a censored document with inaccurate data, demanded the truth, to which the general said that he could not make "Lazarus get up and walk," alluding to bringing back the exterminated *desaparecidos*.[102] While activists like Cox worked to obtain answers for victims and their families, leaders like Harguindeguy were committed to their pact of silence in which they not only denied human rights abuses, but also showed no vocal signs of remorse.

---

[98] Ibid., 168.
[99] Ibid., 171.
[100] Ibid., 171.
[101] Ibid., 172.
[102] Ibid., 172.

The arguably most significant aspect of Cox's story as editor of the *Herald* was the risk that he took in deviating from this standard of silence that had been immersed in 1970s Argentinian society. Although the *Herald* did not fall under government jurisdiction, the editor was confronted with dictatorial backlash and pressure because of his controversial editorials. Leaders like Antonio Llamas—charged with monitoring the media—often requested meetings with Cox to discuss his literary portrayal of the government.[103] As tensions escalated between the *Herald* editor and the government, he became increasingly aware that "a noose was slowly tightening around his neck" and began compiling "as many notes and details as he could in case something terrible happened to him."[104] The culture of silence under the Argentinian military dictatorship created an atmosphere of fear, and thus, by breaking this normalized silence and exposing government crimes, Cox put himself and his family at risk of terror. When the government warned Cox that he would be held accountable for his editorials and for betraying the dictatorship, he expressed that "The fear he somehow managed to keep under control for more than three years had reached his soul."[105] His commitment to helping the families of victims came at the cost of his personal safety, as well as his own personal sanity, for he and his family were under constant government surveillance. Cox was arrested and exiled, his family received threats to their home, and fellow journalists were also under attack. He was so dedicated to his activism for human rights that he would not abandon his fight, while the government was so committed to silence that they forbade Cox from publishing "treasonous" articles.

When the threat to Cox's life became imminent as the *Herald* editor became a target of government assassination, his family was forced to depart from Argentina and seek refuge in the

[103] Ibid., 163.
[104] Ibid., 163.
[105] Ibid., 169.

United States.[106] Despite having to leave, the magnitude of Cox's work became extraordinarily recognized and appreciated by many Argentines. Jorge Fontevecchia, a disappeared journalist, wrote, "I personally owe my life to Robert Cox," whose articles led to Fontevecchia's freedom.[107] When the British reporter left for the United States, one Mother of the Plaza de Mayo encouraged him to "Continue publishing stories about us" and that "With [his] departure a piece of [their] heart leaves as well."[108] Cox touched the lives of ordinary people struggling to fight against dictatorial repression. Many people could not stand up to the dictatorship out of fear, yet Cox had a different kind of weapon: a pen to break the silence. One the *Herald's* supporters described how this journalist "fundamentally fought for a society free from fear."[109] The dictatorship attempted to transform Argentinian society into a totalitarian state with no deviating or varying opinion, yet Cox's actions led to tangible change while also demanding an end to the pervasive silence. Even one colonel broke the pact of silence and disclosed to Cox, "Perhaps I shouldn't say this, but I admire you and respect you for the stand you have taken."[110] A member of the military openly admitting that he supported Cox's cause demonstrates how other military officers might also have disagreed with the violation of human rights, yet most did not defend innocent individuals due to this compulsory silence. A herald is someone who announces, and as editor of the *Buenos Aires Herald*, Cox not only announced the news but publicized the unadulterated truth. The British journalist epitomized how the destruction of toxic silence in a totalitarian regime could lead to transformative change.

[106] Ibid., 189.
[107] Ibid., 162.
[108] Ibid., 195.
[109] Ibid., 196.
[110] Ibid., 193.

Nora Strejilevich encapsulates this rejection of dictatorial rule by invoking the symbolism of "whispers."[111] Strejilevich uses the term "whisper" to describe actions or people that undermined dictatorial power and advocated for freedom. She describes how 1970s Argentina was under a façade: life seemed normal, but the "whispers" embodied the truth. At her university, "During the day students act like students: they go up and down halls, attend classes, answer questions" and "Professors act like professors: they arrive late, forget their notes, improvise," yet while all of this was occurring, the "whispers" challenged this false projection of reality through "petitions, denunciations, accusations."[112] "Whispers" manifested themselves as individuals who "scream and scramble to escape" and most significantly, "disappear."[113] Strejilevich associates these rejections of dictatorial power with "whispers" because people could do nothing but "whisper," or act quietly and secretly, in this state of complete silence. She illustrates how "what is whispered by night refutes what goes on during the day."[114] The "whispers" existed in a paradox with the culture of silence: people could not speak the truth, so they had to "whisper," or keep any anti-government activities a secret, while simultaneously "screaming" as they ran for their lives when the government found them.[115] Whereas someone like Robert Cox was in a better position to fight the government due to his role at the *Herald*, the "whispers" did not necessarily have the same professional resources and unique circumstances as a journalist. The "whispers" had to take a more secretive approach, required to fight the dictatorship through more underground, covert efforts and, most notably, *quietly*. Though the

[111] Strejilevich, *A Single Numberless Death*, 48.
[112] Ibid., 48-49.
[113] Ibid., 49.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Ibid., 49.

"whispers" faced tremendous personal risk, even someone with a more advantageous position like Cox could not escape dictatorial repression and silencing.

To "Win the Hearts and Minds": Supporting and Legitimizing Dictatorial Rule

Jeffrey Knudson explores this choice between silence and truth that dominated Argentinian society, specifically in relation to those who supported and legitimized dictatorial rule. In the case of the press, Knudson argues that "most of the Argentine press remained silent out of sheer self-interest."[116] Although people may have argued that they were unaware of dictatorial violence, Knudson states that "Few in Argentina could claim to be unaware that something was happening."[117] While many individuals did adhere to the culture of silence to protect their lives, there was also another element of protecting one's social status and reputation in society. Many middle and upper-class individuals did not want to be seen as leftist sympathizers, and therefore, celebrated the dictatorship. Through this, those who supported the dictatorship strove to preserve "the social structure of which they were a part."[118] Referring back to Daniel Feierstein's theory of genocidal social practices, under a totalitarian state, the government sets out to completely dismantle the society to which people are accustomed. This is established in everyday interactions, such as people fearing trips to the store knowing that they might be kidnapped at any second. However, for those not directly under government scrutiny, namely these wealthier individuals who outwardly supported the dictatorship, their lives remained largely unchanged. Thus, preserving silence was not only a form of acquiescence, but more significantly, was an act of protecting their own interests. For those not affected by human

[116] Jerry W. Knudson, "Veil of Silence: The Argentine Press and the Dirty War, 1976-1983," *Latin American Perspectives* 24, no. 6 (November 1997), 95.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid.

rights abuses, their focus was to sustain the social structure that they most benefited from in terms of political and economic power.

One of the most notorious of these "benefits" of supporting the dictatorship was the infamous process of secret adoptions in Argentina. If pregnant women gave birth while in detention centers, their babies were often given up for adoption to military families or supporters of the dictatorship. In other instances, when the military kidnapped individuals and found children with them, they would give these children up for adoption. This horrifying reality happened to Jorgelina Paula Molina Planas, daughter of Cristina Isabel Planas and José María Molina. Jorgelina's father was shot and killed by the military in 1974, and her mother became a *desaparecida* in May of 1977.[119] The military handed the four-year-old Jorgelina over to the Sala family, in which she was renamed Carolina María.[120] Aided by members of the institutional Catholic Church, the Sala family partook in this system of unlawful adoptions.[121] By placing children like Jorgelina up for adoption and assigning them new names and identities, the dictatorship hoped to avoid any evidenced connection between themselves and the murders of *los desaparecidos*.

This process of systematic adoptions promulgated the culture of silence by denying these children access to their real identities and families. Jorgelina's grandmother, Ana, was forced into signing the adoption papers because she could not prove the biological relation between herself and Jorgelina with physical evidence. More significantly, Ana feared that Jorgelina's life and future would be jeopardized if she was associated with her biological parents, individuals

---

[119] "Resolved Cases: Jorgelina Paula Molina Planas," Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, courtesy of Perry Willig, 2020, accessed October 24, 2022, https://abuelas.org.ar/idiomas/english/cases/resueltos/025-molina-planas-jorgelina-paula.htm.

[120] Tone Sutterud, "I'm a Child of Argentina's 'Disappeared'," *The Guardian*, December 27, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/dec/27/child-argentinas-disappeared-new-family-identity.

[121] Ibid.

that were considered criminals under the dictatorship.[122] Although Jorgelina's true identity was discovered in 1984, relatively early in comparison to other kidnapped children, her grandmother was unable to obtain custody.[123] Ana described how she once witnessed Jorgelina with her adoptive mother, but was prohibited from speaking to her biological granddaughter, an experience "so painful" that Ana was "paralysed" with sadness.[124] Ana was effectively required to remain silent because the Salas did not want Jorgelina (Carolina) to associate with her biological relatives. Dictatorial lies and denial of reality transcended the integral human right to one's family. Under this regime, a grandmother could not interact with her biological granddaughter—not even allowed to *speak* to her—because they were under a compulsory rule to deny the truth.

This systematic injustice of claiming and re-distributing children without regard for their biological families fostered an identity crisis for a whole generation. Jorgelina explained how she was old enough to remember that she had parents prior to the Salas, but her adoptive mother and father told her that her biological parents had abandoned her, lying to this young girl about her parents' identities.[125] The Salas told Jorgelina that her parents were "terrorists," displaying their support for dictatorial methods of repression.[126] Thus, this young girl was raised under the notion that not only were her biological parents criminals, but that they also did not care for her nor love her, when the reality was that they were murdered and denied the right to raise their own child. It was not until 2010 that "Carolina" decided to come to terms with her true identity as "Jorgelina." Somewhere in her memory of her toddler years, Jorgelina recalled the sound of her name coming

[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid.

out of her biological mother's mouth.[127] No matter how hard the Salas and her adoptive relatives tried to silence the truth about her adoption, Jorgelina could not quiet the overwhelming feeling that she had been denied of her authentic identity. The sound of her mother's voice broke the silence that had been established by her adoptive family. When Jorgelina told her adoptive father that she wanted to be called by her birth name, he renounced all ties between him and his daughter.[128] Her adoptive father sacrificed his relationship with his only child because he would not admit that they had partaken in the forced adoption of someone else's child and grandchild. More importantly, he preferred to maintain the culture of silence more than three decades later, prioritizing his personal pride over his relationship with his daughter. As a staunch supporter of the dictatorship, he could not understand why his daughter, approximately thirty years later, would rather be associated with parents that she never knew, parents that he considered to be the antithesis of good people. As more children of *los desaparecidos* are identified due to DNA testing and the work of organizations like *Las Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* (The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo), they experience similar ramifications of this silence. While struggling to understand their true selves, they suffer from continued lies and denial that force them to choose between their dual identities and double consciousness. As a result of paralyzing political silence, these children find themselves between two families, two worlds, and two identities, posing a complicating and oftentimes distressing reality.

Conclusion

Dictatorial methods of repression completely displaced a sense of normalcy and security in Argentinian society. To establish a system of authoritarian rule, the military dictatorship did

[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid.

not just inflict mass violence, but they strategically altered the individual's perception of society. To achieve support from its people while also designing a machine of mass fear, dictatorial leaders created a society that did not have room for opinion, but rather, any person, idea, or construct that undermined dictatorial values was crushed with the most ruthless consequences. Yet what defined this decade of military repression was the systematic silence which functioned to enable the normalization of violence. Someone might say good morning to their beloved neighbor, and then hours later watch men in uniform kick down their neighbor's door, drag them into the trunk of a car, take the screaming child away in another, and "disappear" that person without a trace. The observer was forced to carry on with their day, pretend that they saw nothing, and forget any personal attachment to the neighbor that they admired. Argentines watched in horror as loved one's were disappeared and exterminated, never receiving answers during these years of totalitarian reign. They watched television programs, heard radio broadcasts, and read newspaper editorials about the grandeur of Argentinian nationalism under President Videla, knowing that people were suffering behind the scenes. Some chose to speak out, only to be threatened at the expense of their own life. Many chose to ignore these public displays of senseless violence, for what was not happening to them did not concern them. Others welcomed dictatorial rule, hoping for a destruction of Communist ideology that they believed threatened their well-being. Some spent years on a decrepit jail floor, raped and brutalized. Many never made it home to see their families. Others never got the chance to meet their parents.

These conditions set the stage for the explosion of political protest after the demise of the dictatorship. When individuals are forced to be quiet about flagrant abuses of power for years, the question then involves how humans respond to the abandonment of silence. What is unique about Argentina is that despite years of state-induced silence and obligatory indifference, the

collapse of the dictatorship brought an instant attempt to invert that silence. The following chapters will explore how not only traumatized *individuals*, but survivors of a traumatized *society,* grapple with the aftermath of a culture of silence. This thesis will pivot to analyze how a decade of silence, fear, and terror affected the social memorialization of this historical atrocity.

Chapter Two:
The "Vanquished and Victors":
Historical Memory Narratives in the Post-Dictatorial Years

Introduction

"It was like that for you, too? Then that confirms it, yes, it was so, it must have been, I wasn't imagining things."[129]

With the 1976 coup d'état that overthrew Isabel Perón, the military dictatorship set out to complete one goal: dismember the framework of society to install a regime legitimized by terror. Whether by choice, fear, or mere indifference, Argentines were confronted with the decision to acknowledge the horrors around them, or to silence any moral obligation to their fellow citizen. This passive compliance with a culture of denial not only functioned to permit the existence of violent human rights abuses, but also yielded a complete distortion of reality. Through censorship and propaganda, complex apparatuses of torture and murder, and the general promulgation of myth, the Argentinian government set out to desensitize its population to both flagrant violence and the ability to distinguish truth from falsehood and fabrication. However, when the walls of silence came down with the election of President Raúl Alfonsín in 1983 and the demise of totalitarian rule, survivors were immediately faced with the process of memory making. Questions such as, "It was like that for you, too?", epitomize the nature of a survivor emerging from unspeakable horror and trauma. Not only does this survivor grapple with the physical and mental wounds of the dictatorship, but they can wrestle with this gruesome and contentious past without the barriers of silence.

This chapter seeks to accomplish two main purposes: one theoretical and one exemplar. The first part of this chapter theorizes the rather ambiguous concepts of survivorship as well as

[129] Antonius C. G. M. Robben, "How Traumatized Societies Remember: The Aftermath of Argentina's Dirty War," *Cultural Critique*, no. 5 (Winter 2005), 120.

historical memory and identity formation. By placing these concepts in conversation with one another, it will become evident how the dictatorial culture of silence shaped and influenced these phenomena. On a general level, this discussion of surviving a traumatic event will explore critical anthropological dilemmas: how do survivors respond to pain, how and why do human beings remember history in the ways that they do, and how do national scars haunt individual identities? The second part of this chapter will pivot to explore these concepts with concrete examples from Argentinian society in the post-dictatorial world: *Las Madres y Las Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo* (The Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo), artistic expression, the intergenerational exchange of history, and government and military denial. Both purposes of this chapter will expose the heart of historical memory in Argentina's transition to democracy: a polarized society of those who wanted to rupture the culture of silence against those who want to maintain the culture of silence. While some continued to deny the truth of the dictatorial crimes and wanted to suppress these negative memories, others were committed to avenging those who were killed and bringing some form of peace to Argentinian society. Overall, this chapter will address how the nature of totalitarian regimes, specifically their prevalent cultures of silence and the denial of truth, impact human response to traumatic history.

PART I

"True Witnesses": The Condition of Surviving Totalitarian Rule

Survivorship takes on a unique nature in the context of a totalitarian state. History depends on eyewitness accounts and testimonies of a given time and place, demanding to know the truth about events. Yet for the survivor of a traumatized age, it is not so simple to testify to their experience. The soldier returning from war, the prisoner upon release, the child who

witnessed unspeakable horrors: recalling their experiences reopens wounds that are often too painful to explain. Holocaust survivor Primo Levi reflects on this problematic approach to historicizing modern atrocities. Levi explains how human beings are inclined to confine their experiences to identifiable constructs. Humans label individuals as "we and they," "vanquished and victors," and "winners and losers" because it makes sense to us and allows us to understand seemingly incomprehensible events.[130] We categorize events, people, moments, and feelings to make it easier for the modern reader, or more specifically, for the people who did not live through a certain experience and cannot relate to any of its parts. However, when discussing an unprecedented tragedy like the Holocaust, it is a disservice to engage in this process of "simplification" when the moment itself cannot be simplified.[131] Levi explains how when an innocent Jew entered the unimaginable world of Auschwitz, nothing of the outside world could have mirrored or elucidated the horrors that this person would endure.[132] There were no words in any language to encapsulate the realities of Nazi concentration camps: the pain that they felt was beyond any pain of the outside world, the dehumanization that they endured was worse than the treatment of animals, and the feelings of shame, anger, rage, and loss too could not yield any appropriate descriptions.[133] Just as these survivors could not accurately or perfectly convey their trauma to someone that had never known the Holocaust firsthand, so too is modern history faced with the dilemma of understanding and explaining the evils of a murderous regime.

Another fundamental issue with surviving and remembering an objectively terrifying and scarring moment of history is the overwhelming sense of survivor's guilt: why was I saved while others were taken? The title of Levi's work, *The Drowned and the Saved*, suggests this painful

---

[130] Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 26.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Ibid., 27.
[133] Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 123.

dichotomy that arises under totalitarian violence. The oppressors, whether the Nazis in Germany or the Videlistas in Argentina, decided who was allowed to be saved, drowning those that they deemed as a threat, inferior, sub-human, or unworthy. What Levi focuses on even further is those who were intended to be part of the "drowned"—those who these regimes tried to destroy—but managed to survive, himself included. Whereas liberation should have been something joyous and beautiful, Levi only recalls the feelings of defeat and "shame."[134] Those who miraculously survived to tell their story were debilitated with guilt that they were allowed to live while loved ones and friends were taken so senselessly. Some people felt a sense of culpability that they should have done something to prevent the devastating outcome of Nazi rule.[135] Others could not immediately process the utter state of dehumanization that they endured and saw no silver lining in their freedom.[136] Levi explains how those who lived to see liberation entered a state of self-deprecation, faulting themselves for having withstood the horrors and violence while others succumbed to the hands of an evil fate.[137] The demise of injustice should have been a moment of celebration and peace, but most dictatorial survivors could not shed the pain of memory.

A third and critical point that Levi presents on the nature of survivorship is this idea of "true witnesses," or the people who can truly testify to the horrors and reality of dictatorial violence.[138] Levi explains how although he witnessed Holocaust realities firsthand, even he cannot perfectly describe the truth of the experience: only those who were killed could do that.[139] According to Levi, only those who saw the "bottom" of the experience—those who suffered the absolute worst plight of death—could truthfully and accurately convey the magnitude of such

---

[134] Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved,* 57.
[135] Ibid., 63.
[136] Ibid., 64.
[137] Ibid., 68.
[138] Ibid., 70.
[139] Ibid.

trauma.[140] Yet Levi highlights how even if the dead were able to speak, write, and communicate to the world their sufferings, they would not have voluntarily done so because their earthly beings possessed no will to share such horrors with the world.[141] Levi's point is crucial: only those who suffered the worst of Nazi rule truly embody that experience, and thus, it is the responsibility of the survivors to illustrate that experience—without simplification, without shielding the truth, and without forgetting the legacy of the dead.

Although Levi was writing in the context of the Holocaust, his characterization and understanding of survivorship in the context of totalitarian violence can be applied to other modern dictatorships, specifically the Argentinian military government that possessed strong roots in Nazi ideology. What isolates the case of Argentina from other dictatorships was the urgency in which its survivors grappled with its nation's problematic past. The aftermath of the Holocaust, for instance, presented a significant trend toward denial of what had occurred.[142] Furthermore, traumatized survivors generally repressed the painful emotions and memories associated with the Holocaust.[143] There was a delay in addressing trauma due in part to denial about the severity of the Holocaust, but also because many survivors of the camps suppressed these horrors to cope with its reality.[144] Psychologists have examined this trait of survivor trauma, where scarred individuals do not instantly address their emotions and horrifying experiences so that they have time to process what occurred.[145] The past cannot be understood until its brutal reality seems more distant. However, survivorship in Argentina manifested itself in a much different form. Antonius Robben has noted this factor of immediacy in Argentina.[146]

---

[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Robben, "How Traumatized Societies Remember," 122.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Ibid.

With the end of the dictatorship, Argentinian society experienced a sense of urgency to grapple with the scars of an antidemocratic political system. One factor that might have caused such immediacy was due to the hope that *los desaparecidos* might be alive. The demise of the Holocaust concentration camps in Europe exposed the painful truth that few survivors remained. However, the fact that Argentines were "disappeared" and not necessarily exterminated rendered the possibility that people's loved ones might perhaps still be alive, prompting the call to action.

"*Períodos de crisis*": Historical Memory and Identity Formation

Understanding and addressing problematic historical moments naturally invokes the human process of remembering. In recent years, historians have paid close attention to this seemingly straightforward practice of memory. The recollection of moments is integral to human existence: individuals retain positive memories that bring them joy, they try to erase memories that are too painful to relive, and they inherently forget less significant or impactful events. Remembering is intuitive to the discipline of history. Interviews with eyewitnesses enable historians to piece together what truly occurred at a given moment. Commemorations, memorials, and days of remembrance encourage active engagement with a specific historical period, possibly to honor individuals, or possibly as a warning to prevent history from repeating itself. Regardless of the motive, human beings are consistently engaging with personal and collective memories.

Tackling history from the perspective of memory begs the question, how do we remember traumatizing, painful, violent, and shameful moments in history? Beginning in the 1980s and still very much alive in the present-day, Argentines have been forced to confront the crimes and legacy of Videla's military dictatorship. The transition to democracy demanded a

societal fight with the past, not only to receive answers and retribution, but to also comprehend how such crimes against humanity were able to persist. All nations arising from a period of turmoil and violence are faced with such questions. Yet what presented a unique situation in Argentina was the overwhelming culture of silence that plagued society under the dictatorship. For years, individuals were forbidden from addressing the truth around them. Individuals disappearing was considered the norm, and no one was allowed to ask questions. Many Argentines were conditioned to ignore the truth and suppress any ill-feelings toward the dictatorship. Such conscious, collective silence about something so opposed to human flourishing would have a significant impact on historical memory. Because denial was so widespread under the dictatorship, its collapse did not necessitate the demise of such feelings. The dictatorial leaders established a political machine that created almost no distinction between myth and reality, forcing people to try to reconcile the two in the post-dictatorial years. Finally, the unanswered questions, "Where is my daughter?", "Have you seen my brother?", "Is my mother alive?", fueled a political atmosphere of active remembrance and grappling with history.

Elizabeth Jelin has explored this somewhat relative construct of historical memory in relation to the modern political movements of the Southern Cone, including Argentina. Jelin investigates the underlying complications of remembering a historical event that invokes feelings of trauma and pain. She positions memory as the distinction between "*períodos calmos*" and "*períodos de crisis*" (calm periods and crisis periods).[147] As noted earlier, memory is an instinctive and habitual human process. According to Jelin, "calm periods" are when humans find their memories agreeable to their emotions, as memories are driven by emotions.[148] If a

[147] Elizabeth Jelin, *Los trabajos de la memoria* (Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno de España Editores, S. A., 2002), 25.

[148] Ibid., 27.

memory is particularly enjoyable, or humans place a certain trust in the reliability of that memory, there is a feeling of stability. However, when a specific memory is not so intuitive, perhaps because it causes feelings of suffering or places an individual in discomfort, this person's process of remembering is in a state of crisis. Because this memory triggers a negative reaction in the individual, the person feels threatened. They may not want to revisit the memory because it is too painful. However, necessity often demands that survivors engage with even the most traumatizing memories. These individuals become committed to understanding why this memory exists or how it ever occurred in the first place since it is almost too difficult to fathom. From Jelin's thinking, it can be argued that individual Argentines encountered a crisis period when the dictatorial years ended, but what is equally interesting, is that Argentinian society as a whole seemed to enter a collective crisis period of remembrance. The horrors of the dictatorial years—killings, rapes, mass disappearances, silence—were too painful a reality for people to accept. They could not move forward until they received these answers and grappled with these memories. This crisis would launch the political activism of late-twentieth century Argentina that demanded some form of resolution.

One of the principal reasons why human beings are particularly fixated on memories is because memory allows humans to create some form of meaning. Jelin underscores how because of the strong relationship between emotions and memory-formation, human beings use memory as an outlet for this emotional expression.[149] Some realities are so painful and so unimaginable that humans strive to find some form of explanation, justification, rationalization for moments that are so senseless. Jelin argues that the psychological impact of trauma effectively disturbs natural memory processes because humans cannot engage with these memories in the same way

[149] Ibid., 26-27.

as they would with positive ones.[150] The more that Argentines, for example, addressed the brutal history of the dictatorship, the less it seemed to make sense. Humans intuitively block negative emotions and repress pain to protect themselves from perceived danger. Such biological, natural responses to trauma impact the formation of memories, but more specifically, the confrontation of memories.

One of the most difficult components of surviving a historical trauma and remembering such pain, especially in the case of Argentina, is the overwhelming issue of silence and denial. The dictatorial years were marked with a culture of lies and denial. Cover-ups, media fabrications, and overall ignorance created a terrifying reality and left a horrifying legacy. One of the hallmarks of the post-dictatorial years was rupturing these silences and allowing truth to prevail. However, something seemingly straightforward was disturbed by the clashing historical memory narratives, or the stories and accounts of history that exist on both individual and collective levels. Jelin discusses the power of the "*narrativa*" (narrative).[151] Human beings tell stories to communicate personal truths: fears, desires, pain, and joy. However, there is an inherent problem with recalling and memorializing a historical event when memory narratives do not align. Antonius Robben has investigated these critical nuances in remembering a traumatized history. Robben argues that post-dictatorial societies, namely Argentina, experienced conflicting reactions to memory formation due to the painful history that they endured.[152] What type of conflict occurs when some people had supported the dictatorship, despite the flagrant violence, while others had fought against it? How is the transition to democracy limited when there was such a distortion of fact from fiction? How is the pursuit of justice corrupted when some want to

[150] Ibid., 28.
[151] Ibid., 27.
[152] Robben, "How Traumatized Societies Remember," 122.

maintain dictatorial silences, while others are seeking restitution and answers? In a similar vein, Jelin notes how the traumatized societies of the Southern Cone, such as Argentina, wrestled with these questions by creating "*los encuadramientos sociales*" (social frameworks), such as public memorials or political protests, to destroy these silences and try to establish a more objective memory narrative that encompasses truth and justice.[153]

The condition of being a survivor and struggling with historical memory also invokes the complexities of identity. Identity is both an individual and collective phenomenon. Human beings draw on their specific, unique experiences to form an understanding of their self-identity, but they are also impacted by collective influences: herd mentality, group association, societal expectations, and cultural stories. In the context of Argentina, post-dictatorial identity formation occurred on both a personal and societal level. First, individuals wanted answers to their personal questions and had a necessity to address their own unique traumas. Second, on a national level, Argentinian activists who survived the dictatorship were committed to breaking the silences that the military government had promulgated in order for their national society to heal and move forward.

Jelin notes how memory shapes our self-awareness and influences our reactions to the world around us. For example, people "s*elecciona ciertos hitos, ciertas memorias que lo ponen en relación con «otros»*" (select certain landmarks, certain memories that put them in relation with others).[154] One of the consequences of remembering, therefore, is better defining identities. This type of identity formation can manifest itself on an individual level. For instance, a certain monument may invoke personal emotions if the observer suffered a personal, familial loss from whatever event is being remembered. Simultaneously, there is a potent, collective element.

---

[153] Jelin, *Los trabajos de la memoria*, 27.
[154] Ibid., 25.

Parades, for example, are group celebrations for a certain people, culture, or society to come together and revel in joy. Thus, Jelin argues that memory allows us to set "p*arámetros de identidad*" (identity parameters) which impact our worldviews.[155] Jelin also suggests that identity boundaries and delineations enable individuals to either conform to a particular group or disassociate with certain people. In the Argentinian reality, this type of identity development was critical in fostering a polarized society, captivated with the question of silence. While some wanted to forget the dictatorship in all of its horrors, others were committed to holding their nation accountable for its history. These activists were vigilant in breaking the culture of silence and sought to create meaning in a dark situation. Most importantly, they were dedicated to ensuring that the deaths of their loved ones would not have been in vain.

PART II

"*¿Dónde están*?": The Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo[156]

The year is 1977. The city, Buenos Aires. University students are disappearing in the night. Political activists are being kidnapped in broad daylight. The government: silent. People are demanding answers: where are our children? The government: "are you sure they didn't just run away?" The victims' neighbors have not seen or heard anything either, so they say. This is a society plagued by terror, with no one able to speak out, or no one choosing to speak out at risk of their own life. Yet a fact that seems to be timeless holds true in 1977 Argentina: there is almost nothing that a mother will not do for her child.

Azucena Villaflor. Seen as an ordinary, hardworking housewife prior to dictatorial rule, Villaflor would become one of the most influential figures in investigating the cases of *los*

[155] Ibid.
[156] "¿Dónde están?" means "Where are they?" in Spanish. Translated by the author.

desaparecidos. At her core, Villaflor was a mother. She had no prior interest in politics, and she had received minimal formal education.[157] However, this wife and mother's life changed on November 30, 1976, when her beloved son, Néstor de Vicente, was disappeared by the government at twenty-four years old. Néstor was targeted by the military for his Peronist beliefs and association with Argentina's *Partido Justicialista (*Justicialist Party), deemed a subversive group.[158] Upon discovering her son's disappearance, Villaflor instantly sought answers. She went to government offices and questioned military leaders but was repeatedly denied.[159] There was a tremendous sentiment of helplessness. For mothers like Villaflor, they were not gaining confirmation one way or the other. There was no definitive of whether their children were dead or alive; they were solely in this limbo of "disappearance," leaving the mothers somewhere between a state of hope and despair.

Initially, most of the disappeared individuals' mothers had believed that the kidnappings were isolated instances.[160] At first glance, there was no reason to think that the disappearances were part of a greater political machine set out with the intent to detain, torture, and murder their children. However, the amount of mothers appearing at local hospitals and government buildings was

[157] Sam McFarland, "Azucena Villaflor, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and Struggle to End Disappearances," *International Journal of Leadership and Change* 6, no. 1 (June 2018), 57.
[158] Ibid.
[159] Ibid.
[160] Ibid., 58.

quickly increasing, and the women soon realized that they were not alone in this grim situation. In this paralyzed climate of fear, the mothers began violating the "sacred silence" of the dictatorship and shared their stories with one another.[161] A collective spirit, and more importantly, collective mission to uncover the whereabouts of their missing children soon formed and gave rise to what would become known as *Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo* (The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo).

Instead of investigating each case individually, the Mothers saw the power of strength in numbers.[162] Under the fearless leadership of Villaflor, the Mothers decided to take their campaign public. With the Plaza de Mayo—the city center and home of the presidential palace—as their meeting point, they began publicly protesting, demanding that the government either return their children or reveal their whereabouts.[163] One question became integral to their mission: *¿Dónde están?* (Where are they?). Such a commonplace, routine question would seem to offer such a simple solution. Yet despite their efforts, the government would not answer, leaving these women in the dark. In one exception, Videla publicly addressed these women on a television broadcast, saying, "They are neither alive or dead. They are disappeared," alluding to the government's hand in the kidnappings and murders but refusing to help these women find closure.[164]

Yet they were not discouraged. These women were committed to bringing to light the horrors of the regime and pursuing justice for their children. The Mothers continued gathering and marching at the Plaza de Mayo, holding signs and photographs of their *desaparecidos*.

---

[161] Ibid., 59.

[162] "History of Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo," accessed January 13, 2023, digital photograph, Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, https://abuelas.org.ar/idiomas/english/history.htm.

[163] Ibid., 60.

[164] Patrick McDonnell, "Argentines Remember a Mother Who Joined the 'Disappeared'," *Los Angeles Times,* March 24, 2006, *https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2006-mar-24-fg-dirtywar24-story.html*.

Villaflor soon gave the Mothers a uniform: white scarves for their heads. These were worn not only so that the women could recognize each other at the Plaza and distinguish themselves, but they were also emblematic of the Mothers' solidarity with one another.[165] The women wrote letters and petitions, despite not receiving much reply. Although efforts seemed somewhat futile, the Mothers began receiving more traction in the international media, raising awareness to their cause and drawing attention from global human rights movements. At the same time that the Mothers were gaining more of a public voice, a concurrent movement began to grow: *Las Abuelas* (Grandmothers) of the Plaza de Mayo. As many of *las desaparecidas* were pregnant upon detainment, the grandparents of these babies called for action.[166] Although they pursued similar efforts as the Mothers, the Grandmothers had the unique role of locating adoption records to uncover the identities of the missing babies.[167] Together, these organizations, empowered and led by determined women, spent the majority of the dictatorial years on a quest to find answers, often with no end in sight.

Because of her commitment to the Mothers' cause, Azucena Villaflor made the ultimate sacrifice. On December 10, 1977, she was kidnapped and brought to the *ESMA* concentration camp.[168] To silence the outspoken and dedicated Villaflor, Navy officers tortured and dehumanized her. As part of the dictatorship's "death flights," a routine practice where *los desaparecidos* were drugged and pushed from planes into the Atlantic Ocean among other places, Villaflor was exterminated. Despite the loss of their esteemed and beloved leader, the Mothers vowed to continue her mission and fight against dictatorial silence. Throughout the 70s and 80s, the Mothers and Grandmothers continued advocating for their disappeared children and

[165] McFarland, "Azucena Villaflor," 60.
[166] Ibid.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Ibid., 61.

grandchildren, meeting with world leaders and organizations, such as the United Nations, gaining global attention. During the infamous 1978 World Cup, the Mothers continued their demonstrations, receiving public support from the visiting European nations and ensuring media coverage.[169]

Despite working tirelessly to raise attention to the human rights abuses in Argentina, the Mothers' demands were frequently ignored and dismissed by the government. Unfortunately, this culture of denial would persist in the post-dictatorial years, as efforts to protect the dictatorship's Dirty War crimes strove to silence the Mothers and prolong any tangible justice. However, despite resistance, the Mothers and Grandmothers continue their advocacy to this day, gathering evidence and testimonies of the disappearances to not only build legal cases, but to also give a voice to those who were murdered at the hands of the regime. The Grandmothers explain how they "still need the whole truth" which can only be made possible when "the pacts of silence end."[170] Thus, their commitment to seeking truth and remembering the victims did not end with the collapse of the dictatorship, but was instead strengthened by their determination to rupture the silence that characterized the dictatorial years. The Mothers, for example, continue protesting and demonstrating, recently having commemorated their forty-fifth year of activism. They continue traveling across the world, speaking on behalf of human rights and defending the need for justice. Similarly, the Grandmothers' organization still fights for answers to the whereabouts of the missing grandchildren. With the more recent accessibility of DNA testing and genealogy tracing, many families who were tragically separated by dictatorial violence are being both introduced and reunited. On their website, the Grandmothers maintain a list of all of

---

[169] Ibid.

[170] "Never Again to Silence," Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, March 29, 2021, https://www.abuelas.org.ar/noticia/nunca-mls-al-silencio-1441.

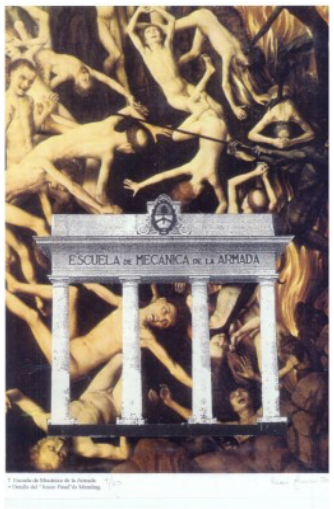
the children who were born in the detention centers, those who never returned home, and those who they have reconnected with, an active process of remembering those who died and fighting for those who may still be alive.[171]

The organizations of the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo epitomize how the culture of silence shaped survivor memory in the post-dictatorial years. The silence of the dictatorship created a society where public protest and critique of the military were considered treasonous and subversive. Due to such overt denial and flagrant violations of human rights, the Mothers and Grandmothers were determined to break the silence and fight for justice. The state-induced silence enabled these women to find solidarity in their shared experiences. When fighting on their own proved ineffective, they quickly banded together, promising that the disappearances and deaths of their loved ones would not have been for nothing. The unique nature of their survivorship as mothers and grandmothers—blood relatives of the victims—empowered them to create their own memory narrative, in spite of opposition from the government. As dictatorial silence tried to erase the stories of *los desaparecidos,* the Mothers and Grandmothers ensured that the voices of survivors would be brought to light through political advocacy. The fact that these organizations continue their work today, even as decades have passed, illustrates the potency of their mission and their commitment to truth. As survivors of traumatic history, they chose to speak on behalf of those who could not, rather than let the dictatorial legacy determine historical memory.

[171] "Children Born in Captivity," Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, accessed February 12, 2023, https://abuelas.org.ar/idiomas/english/cases/listado_cautiverio.htm.

Looking Through the "Eye of Memory": Memorializing Through Art

While integral to the pursuit of justice in the post-dictatorial years, political protests and demonstrations were not the only forms of engagement with historical memory and grappling with dictatorial crimes. Artistic expression served as an outlet for survivors to cope with trauma. It also gave more recent artists a medium to address these sociopolitical issues in the public sphere, preserving memory and encouraging dialogue. The *Museo de la Memoria* (Museum of Memory) in Rosario, Argentina houses artistic collections from recent decades with the purpose of raising political awareness to the human rights abuses of the military dictatorship. Artists contribute their works to open political dialogue, using art as a medium for activism.



Many of the artists depict dictatorial atrocities within their works in order to bring these grim realities to light. For example, León Ferrari's 1995 collage, *Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada + Detalle del Juicio Final de Hans Memling* (Navy Mechanics School + Detail of the Last Judgement by Hans Memling), combines Memling's triptych of Christian Judgment Day with the gates to the *ESMA* detention center.[172] Ferrari's selection of these two images is critical to his message. When Videla's military dictatorship implemented systematic disappearances and extermination of its citizens, it essentially decided who was worthy of life and who deserved cruel torture. The dictatorship "played God" in a sense, as they determined the fate of its people. By positioning the Final Judgment beyond the archway of the *ESMA* torture center, Ferrari conveys that the naval officers made the final decision regarding the lives of these

[172] León Ferrari, *Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada + Detalle del Juicio Final de Hans Memling,* 1995, collage in laser printing, 42 x 29.5 cm, Museo de la Memoria, Rosario, Argentina, https://www.museodelamemoria.gob.ar/page/obra/id/76/Ferrari%2C-Le%C3%B3n/Escuela-de-Mec%C3%A1nica-de-la-Armada-%2B-Detalle-del--Juicio-Final--de-Hans-Memling.

innocent individuals, condemning them to a living hell. Through this work, therefore, Ferrari not only depicts the brutality of the dictatorship, but also contributes to the conversation regarding the nature of dictatorial power and how it influenced the lives of Argentines. Moreover, artistic representation is a function of survivor memory that encourages the recollection of traumatic events with the purpose of discussing their consequences.

When analyzing constructs like historical memory, it is worth noting that while remembering is often a sub-conscious activity, the survivors of Argentina's dictatorship became keenly in tune with the significance of memory in social activism. For instance, *El ojo de la memoria (The Eye of Memory)* by Betiana Bradas, is 2010 work that captures the essence of memory in post-dictatorial Argentina.[173] This image depicts a reddish-pink eye peering through the dark night. There is no sense of joy or peace in this image, but rather, overwhelming sadness and pain. By entitling her work *The Eye of Memory*, Bradas argues that the eye is not looking backward on a positive moment, but rather, is recalling a traumatizing and painful event. The human attached to this eye has seen horrifying realities, but still looks backward despite the despair. Thus, Bradas conveys that remembering the horrors of the military dictatorship is neither a simple nor peaceful task, as the eye is weighed down by fear and sorrow. Despite the trauma, however, the "eye"— emblematic of dictatorial survivors—still recalls these memories in order to confront the past. Public art not only served to bring to light the critical issues

[173] Betiana Bradas, *El ojo de la memoria*, 2010, mixed medium painting, 90 x 90, Museo de la Memoria, Rosario, Argentina, https://www.museodelamemoria.gob.ar/page/obra/id/134/Bradas%2C-Betiana/El-ojo-de-la-memoria.

surrounding the collapse of dictatorial power, but also determined how these historical events would be commemorated in society.

One prevalent example of historical memory through art is Argentina's *Parque de la Memoria* (Park of Memory). This public site was created in 1998 in Buenos Aires to remember those who were senselessly disappeared and killed at the hands of government repression.[174] Furthermore, the park was expanded in November 2007 with the addition of the *Monumento a las Víctimas del Terrorismo de Estado* (Monument to the Victims of State Terror), a remarkable structure dedicated to remembering the victims of the dictatorship. Approximately nine-thousand of the thirty-thousand plaques are engraved with the names of those who were disappeared or died from 1969-1983, making special note of women who had been pregnant upon their kidnapping or murder.[175] The organizations and leaders behind the wall's construction underscore that a memorial does not compensate for the losses that Argentines suffered, nor does it address or solve the issues at hand. What the wall does do, however, is offer Argentines a public place to grapple with their past and remember those who were killed. Moreover, the monument epitomizes how historical memory in the post-dictatorial years broke the painful silence surrounding totalitarian repression. Between 1976-1983, Argentines had no space to publicly commemorate *los desaparecidos* without posing a risk to their safety, thus forced into isolating silence. The collapse of authoritarian violence, however, enabled Argentines to speak about these issues and to demand change. The Monument to the Victims of State Terror

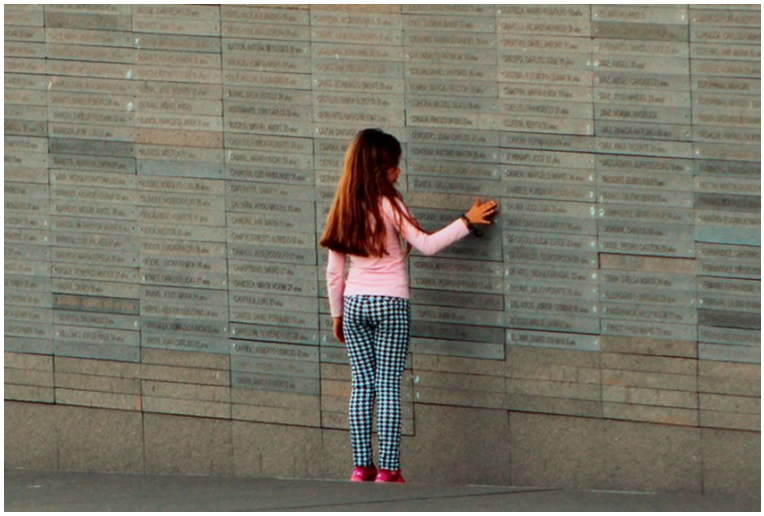
[174] Parque de la Memoria (Park of Memory), Buenos Aires, Argentina, accessed online, https://parquedelamemoria.org.ar/en/park/.

[175] "Monumento a las victimas del terrorismo de estado" (Monument to the Victims of State Terror), Parque de la Memoria (Park of Memory), Buenos Aires, Argentina, accessed online, https://parquedelamemoria.org.ar/en/monument/.

illustrates the transformation that took place upon the transition to democracy, in which individuals no longer had to remember their loved ones in fear and silence.

It "Could Have Happened to Anyone": Intergenerational Transmission of History

As the Park of Memory creates a space for survivors to reflect and remember the past, it simultaneously serves to inform the public about what occurred during the years of terror. One of the project's missions was for "future generations that visit the site to become aware of the horror perpetrated by the State and . . . ensure that similar acts will NEVER AGAIN occur."[176] In an effort to break the silence that the dictatorship manifested, projects such as these not only aimed to commemorate events, but to also safeguard that the survivors' progeny would be aware of Argentina's past. For survivors, it is not enough that they recall the trauma of the dictatorship, but rather, by bringing their painful memories to light and diffusing them to younger generations, they can work to ensure that such horrors will never be repeated.



Scholars have investigated the problem of generational gaps within history.[177] As time passes and younger generations are less in touch with events from decades prior, society has an obligation to maintain the memory of these historical moments. Claudia Feld and Victoria Furio conducted a study to better understand intergenerational transmission of historical events, arguing that television has significant

[176] Parque de la Memoria.

[177] "Monument to the Victims of State Terrorism." Accessed February 19, 2023. Digital photograph. Parque de la Memoria, Buenos Aires, Argentina, https://parquedelamemoria.org.ar/en/monument/.

potential to inform and shape the minds of younger generations. Whether children were too young to remember dictatorial atrocities or were born after its reign, television allows children to engage with the past in their own way, forming thoughts, opinions, and reactions to these events.[178] A 2000 study interviewed students from Buenos Aires, born between 1976 and 1979 under Videla's rule.[179] Thus, these individuals were alive for the dictatorship but too young to have vivid memories of government repression and violence. This study strove to examine the influence of TV on these young adults in forming their opinions toward Argentina's dictatorship. The subjects were asked a variety of questions pertaining to the dictatorship, offering their personal reactions to its brutality and legacy.

Something particularly noteworthy were the generalizations that interviewees made regarding *los desaparecidos*. Many interviewees could not provide specific details as to why people were disappeared. For instance, one interviewee said that the disappeared were potentially those "in the wrong place at the wrong time," not necessarily addressing the systematic and planned nature of the kidnappings.[180] Several interviewees underscored the political climate of the time, specifically how *los desaparecidos* were those who had different political opinions: "what a crazy thing, how can they do all those things to someone because they think differently?"[181] Although not always providing specific details, interviewees were aware that the political situation of the dictatorship created a society in which people were afraid to express political opinion and could be punished for possessing nonconformist views. What is specifically striking was the recurring sentiment among the subjects that government repression

[178] Claudia Feld and Victoria J. Furio, "Constructing Memory through Television in Argentina," *Latin American Perspectives* 43, no. 5 (2016), 36.
[179] Ibid., 35.
[180] Ibid., 36.
[181] Ibid.

"could have happened to anyone."[182] Feld and Furio argue that such reactions allowed the interviewees to relate to the events of the 70s.[183] Although somewhat removed from the dictatorship in the year 2000, the students strove to empathize with the victims and imagine if they had been subjected to the same fate. Several participants highlighted how they were around the same age as many of the victims and were also university students, forging connections with a historical event that they cannot personally remember but with which they feel a personal tie.

What is distinctly impactful about media platforms like television is the way that they transform memory formation, even for those who cannot personally remember an event. For example, Feld and Furio explain how for the young students that were interviewed, television is a "trigger for memories."[184] When shown a television program with testimonies from former *desaparecidos*, interviewees were reminded not only of previous programs that they had watched or stories that they were told, but also recalled interactions with family members that involved discussing the history. One interviewee, Abel, explained how the television clip in the interview reminded him of another story that he had heard of a *desaparecido*, showing how these memories became increasingly intertwined and invoked strong emotions from the students.[185] Watching programs with family members and discussing the events of Argentina's dictatorship allowed younger generations to actively engage with history and form their own memories of the past. Thus, memory formation is not just conducted by those who survived an event, but it is also greatly shaped by future generations that bear the task of understanding and engaging with a seemingly distant history.

---

[182] Ibid.
[183] Ibid.
[184] Ibid., 37.
[185] Ibid.

Although this study specifically focused on the potency of television, all media platforms that disseminate information into the public eye have the capacity to influence individual and collective memory. For these young students, there is a difficulty to relate to the events of the dictatorship because time has created a barrier between the tangibility of history and the palpable present day. At the same time, however, there is a yearning and desire to understand and connect with the past because these students had technically witnessed the dictatorial years and feel attached to the events as Argentines. Thus, commemoration in the public sphere serves a tremendous purpose in affording future generations the opportunity to access the distant past. As Feld and Furio note, the images that were most recalled by interviewees were those that most frequently appeared on television. For example, the subjects consistently referenced Videla, as his face appeared on television as emblematic of dictatorial terror.[186] Similarly, watching testimonies had a significant emotional impact on the students, explaining how they found the stories "shocking."[187] As memories are directly correlated with emotional response, although the students did not witness firsthand dictatorial brutality, societal commemoration allowed them to form some type of memory of their nation's history. Although not as vivid as the memory of a survivor, these younger generations forged memories based on conversations and media representations, allowing the past to become part of their identity—an identity that is shared with their own families and ancestors. Such intergenerational transmission is integral to social memory because as elder generations pass on, memories are at risk of being lost or forgotten. By giving younger generations the means to connect with their past and identify with it to some degree, historical memory can persist, and society can continue to learn from historical mistakes.

[186] Ibid., 38.
[187] Ibid., 37.

"The Number May be as Low as 9,000": The Post-Dictatorial Culture of Denial and Myth

To discuss the rupture of silence in the post-dictatorial years would be impossible without calling attention to the issue of denial. In recent decades, Argentines have tried to make sense of the dictatorship's legacy on society. While some survivors and activists have been committed to the fight for human rights and denouncing dictatorial atrocities, there has been a concurrent tendency to downplay the violence that ensued. Argentina's contemporary government has expressed sentiments of the latter, diminishing the magnitude of the crimes. For example, in 2016, former president of Argentina Mauricio Macri declared that he was unaware of the exact number of deaths under the dictatorship and that "the number may be as low as 9,000"—a number that is completely unfounded.[188] Another government official and former dictatorial soldier, Juan Gomez Centurion—given the position of Head of Customs by President Macri—argued that the numbers and scale of dictatorial violence had been blown out of proportion by activists. Gomez Centurion claimed that what occurred under Videla's dictatorship was a "chaotic plan, not a systematic one."[189] Moreover, he explained that "Systematic was Auschwitz," whereas dictatorial repression was the result of government unrest.[190] Through such comments, this government leader attempted to undermine arguments that the dictatorship organized a systematic plan to disappear, torture, and kill political enemies—arguments weighted in historical evidence and developed through years of political activism and protest. With their own president and government leaders asserting that the dictatorial reality was not as severe as "alleged" by human rights organizations, Argentines have become increasingly aware

[188] Mary Jo McConahay, "Argentina's Past Dictatorship: Moving Toward Denial?," *The National Catholic Reporter*, May 12, 2017, https://www.ncronline.org/argentinas-past-dictatorship-moving-toward-denial.

[189] "There Was Genocide Here: Argentines Activists Slam Macri Gov't for Erasing History," *teleSUR*, January 31, 2017, https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Argentine-Activists-Slam-Govt-for-Erasing-Dictatorship-History-20170131-0006.html.

[190] Ibid.

of the culture of denial that hinders social justice. This denial and ignorance are biproducts of years of state-induced silence under the dictatorship: many survivors do not want to acknowledge the truth as it casts shame on their nation's past. Moreover, such diverging accounts of what happened create competing memory narratives in which society becomes deeply polarized and further away from identifying any coherent truth.[191]

The post-dictatorial culture of denial stemmed directly from the years of silence that plagued Argentinian society. As activists and family members of *los desaparecidos* fought to uncover truth and achieve restitution, the government and military maintained this strict silence. However, this changed in 1995 when Adolfo Francisco Scilingo, former naval Captain in the Argentinian military, came forward and aired the dark secrets of the dictatorship. Through a series of interviews with Argentinian journalist Horacio Verbitsky, Scilingo discussed the orders that he was given and described extermination methods in painful detail. Although the truth of the atrocities had been known prior to Scilingo's confessions, his interview was the first time that a military officer had publicly corroborated the allegations. Moreover, Scilingo's testimony not only confirmed what was already known of the dictatorship, but also exposed the intensity of the violence.

What became particularly significant about Scilingo's confessions was his disclosure of the military's use of "death flights." As mentioned earlier, Azucena Villaflor was exterminated through this method of being thrown—while still alive—from an airplane above the Atlantic Ocean. Scilingo explained to Verbitsky that the naval officers referred to prisoners condemned to this fate as those "who were going to fly," as if this were something positive or voluntary.[192]

---

[191] Robben, "How Traumatized Societies Remember," 122.

[192] Horacio Verbitsky, *The Flight: Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior* (New York: The New Press, 1996), 21.

Giving Verbitsky an outline of the routine, Scilingo described how those who were to be killed were brought to the basement of the *ESMA* torture center. They were told that they had to receive a "vaccination" because they were being "transferred" to a different prison.[193] This vaccination was in actuality an anesthetic, delivered by naval doctors. After their sedation, the prisoners were brought to the airport where a coast guard plane awaited them.[194] Because the prisoners were unconscious, the officers had to guide and carry them onto the planes. The prisoners received an additional injection to further their unconscious state and were stripped of their clothes. Once above the Atlantic, Scilingo disclosed that he was instructed to open the plane door and throw the unconscious and unaware detainees into the open ocean, while still alive[195] This operation became so routine that Scilingo explained for roughly two years, fifteen to twenty prisoners were murdered in this way once a week. The Argentinian government hoped that by disposing of *desaparecidos* in this way, there would be less physical evidence incriminating them of the tortures and murders that ensued for years.

While Scilingo's confessions exposed the systematic extermination tactics of the Argentinian government, he also underscored the complicity of a large portion of the institutional Catholic Church in dictatorial atrocities. Scilingo explained how the soldiers felt that this form of murder was legal and justifiable because it had been approved by some Church chaplains.[196] Not only did many chaplains and the military justify the death flights by claiming that the Dirty War was a "different kind" and thus demanded new types of "strategies," but they even went as far to develop a "Christian explanation" for tossing prisoners from planes.[197] These clergy members

[193] Ibid.
[194] Ibid.
[195] Ibid., 50-51.
[196] Ibid., 30.
[197] Ibid.

explained that the death flights offered a more peaceful death than other forms of extermination, such as shooting, which involved more suffering. Because the subversives were unaware of their impending fate and were sedated for the process, church leaders claimed that they "didn't suffer, because it wasn't traumatic."[198] Scilingo explained how this rationalization eased the concerns of soldiers who were uncomfortable with this method of disposing subversives, for not only was it "blessed" by the Catholic Church, but it was also presented as a better alternative for the victims. Furthermore, many of these chaplains compared the murder of the *desaparecidos* to the biblical imagery of "eliminating the weeds from the wheat field."[199] The prisoners, therefore, were analogous to weeds, depicted as sub-humans who were detrimental to the health of the Argentinian nation. Through their disposal, the dictatorship and implicated Church officials argued, the Argentinian nation would be in a better position to prosper and thrive. Thus, naval officers were consoled by the fact that they were "helping" their nation and making the ultimate sacrifice by killing these people.

Scilingo's decision to confess raised the question as to why a military officer, uncharged with crimes, would come forward decades after dictatorial rule and break the inviolable military pact of silence. There are two contending possibilities for why Scilingo discussed these crimes. The first is an altruistic motivation, which assumes that he felt genuinely guilty about the dictatorial horrors and wanted to make amends. The former naval captain himself claimed that this was his intention for speaking out. He explained how he was ridden with post-traumatic stress disorder and experienced unrelenting nightmares of the death flights.[200] Moreover, he disclosed that the military refused him appropriate psychiatric assistance in the post-dictatorial

[198] Ibid.
[199] Ibid.
[200] Robben, "How Traumatized Societies Remember," 121.

years.[201] Scilingo felt that his condition was exacerbated by the lack of tangible justice. Feeling ashamed of what the officers had done in the past, he claimed, there was a necessity for "telling" the truth.[202] He stated, "For me, the declaration that Videla made when he was released from prison with the pardon was unacceptable. . . . once and for all this had to be brought to light. . . . [it was] unacceptable to me."[203] Thus, Scilingo positioned himself as a veteran war criminal of the Dirty War whose crippling PTSD left him with no other option than to break the institutionalized silence and assist with the pursuit of justice.

Although Scilingo claimed that his motives were genuine and that he was truly disturbed by the history of the Argentinian dictatorship, there has been speculation regarding if this was simply an attempt for Scilingo to get revenge on his superior officers and to protect himself from prosecution. First, the military had coerced Scilingo into leaving the Navy due to his requests for treatment of his psychological disorders, causing personal tensions.[204] Second, others believe that Scilingo broke the silence due to his resentment toward the superior officers. In 1994, two of Scilingo's former naval comrades, Juan Carlos Rolón and Antonio Pernías, were ineligible for promotion as a result of allegations of human rights abuses.[205] In his confession to Verbitsky, Scilingo stated that this was "the greatest injustice": that his friends were penalized for their actions, while superior commanders like Videla enjoyed freedom.[206] Although Scilingo's motives may have been a combination of truly feeling guilty about his crimes as well as his strained relationships with military officials, his comments raise the question of why and how the

---

[201] Ibid.
[202] Verbitsky, *The Flight*, 35.
[203] Ibid.
[204] Robben, "How Traumatized Societies Remember," 121.
[205] Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) Staff, "Argentine Senate Rejects Promotions for Officers Accused of Rights Violations," Latin America Data Base News & Educational Services, University of New Mexico Digital Repository, November 4, 1994, https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=12712&context=notisur, 1.
[206] Verbitsky, *The Flight*, 35.

victors, villains, and abusers remember history in the way that they do. Whether or not Scilingo suffered from anxiety and nightmares of the death flights, his confessions expose his incensed reactions to his former friends not being promoted. Scilingo felt that holding the superior officers and government officials accountable for dictatorial crimes was significantly more pressing than punishing the petty officers who were "just following orders." Furthermore, to describe the lack of promotions as "the greatest injustice"—not the crimes themselves—suggests that his frustration lay more with military politics than with the dictatorial atrocities. Thus, while the families of victims were actively breaking silence in pursuit of truth and justice, someone like Scilingo had the liberty to come forward out of personal frustration and selfish desire.

Analyzing Scilingo's authenticity invokes the issue of denial that ran parallel to state-enforced silence. Something particularly indicative of his intentions is his inability to assume full responsibility for his actions. While he admitted that he participated in death flights and thus facilitated the deaths of *los desaparecidos*, he absolved himself by assigning blame to his superior officers and the greater mechanism of the dictatorship. He discussed the importance of following orders—a timeless justification of due obedience that removes moral culpability. The former military member stated, "It was an order and it was carried out. There was no doubt about it."[207] Whether or not officers disagreed with the military's strategies for handling subversives, members of the Navy did not resist because all orders were to be followed. A consistent marker of Scilingo's testimony was his determination to assign blame to the government and military officials, which albeit necessary, served the dual purpose of presenting himself as another victim of dictatorial violence. He addressed the inherent contradictions in the military's logic, for they claimed that the orders they were issuing were legal, but as of 1995, have not yet fully admitted

[207] Ibid., 19.

to their crimes. Scilingo asked, "If the orders were all legal, what are they hiding?"[208] Through this strategy of hindsight, he presented himself as an innocent soldier who was only following legal orders, rendering responsibility with the military to come forward in the present age and make amends. He argued that the soldiers did not necessarily believe that what they were doing was morally wrong, and if they did, they continued following orders. Thus, Scilingo intentionally positioned his confession as one where he admits personal culpability, but not by his own volition, as the military conditioned him to mistreat other humans and to exterminate them. Such attitudes serve as a significant contrast to the historical memory narratives of the activists fighting on behalf of human rights. Because Scilingo had personal sins to reckon with under dictatorial rule, he was obligated to distort the degree of truth in his confession. Moreover, memory for him was not necessarily a process of reconciling with a traumatic past, but to instead defend his individual crimes to self-pardon his actions.

Scilingo's purpose in breaking the culture of silence is directly juxtaposed with the work of human rights organizations like the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo. After his confession to Verbitsky was released, he stated that he would travel to Madrid, Spain and formally testify to Judge Baltasar Garzón, who orchestrated the cases of crimes against humanity that took place under the dictatorships of Videla (Argentina), Pinochet (Chile), and others.[209] Upon arrival in Madrid in 1997, he was arrested after making his confession to Garzón. Afterward, Scilingo denied the truth of his confessions, alleging that he fabricated what he claimed true of dictatorial abuses.[210] Clearly evident is that Scilingo thought that by coming forward, he might be offered a certain degree of protection by positioning himself as the Good

[208] Ibid., 20.
[209] Elizabeth Nash, "Argentinean Officer Jailed by Spain," Global Policy Forum, April 20, 2005, https://archive.globalpolicy.org/intljustice/universal/2005/0420scilingo.htm.
[210] Ibid.

Samaritan. He believed that by offering evidence to the legal system which incriminated the major dictatorial players, namely superior commanders such as Videla, he might be pardoned for his personal actions. However, once the former captain realized that he would still have to pay for his personal crimes, he retracted his statements. Such a bold change of heart invokes the question of what his true motivations were. Although Scilingo claimed he came forward due to his anxiety, feelings of guilt, and desire for public truth, once he was obligated to pay for his crimes and truly make reparative amends, he backed down and reinforced the culture of silence.[211] Such behavior illustrates the critical difference in historical memory and identity between former criminals and former victims. The Mothers and Grandmothers were willing to sacrifice everything—and some of them did—to seek answers and justice for their murdered loved ones. For them, they had already lost everything, so there was nothing that they would not do for their children and grandchildren. In a much different position, the evidence strongly suggests that Scilingo was more enraged by the lack of promotions—military politics—than the crimes that were committed, exposing the absence of genuine shame. In his confession, he explained how he viewed the Mothers as "enemies," furthering the "us versus them" dichotomy that fostered a polarized climate in post-dictatorial Argentina.[212] The Mothers clearly had different motives for rupturing silence, with one of their leaders Estela de Carlotto stating upon Scilingo's indictment in 2005, "I hope while Scilingo is behind bars his conscience softens" so that they can receive the full, unadulterated truth.[213]

Although Scilingo positioned himself as being driven by his conscience—feelings of guilt and rage—his retractions made clear that he was not an agent of his conscience, but rather,

[211] Ibid.
[212] Verbitsky, *The Flight*, 31.
[213] Nash, "Argentinean Officer Jailed by Spain."

was motivated by his ego. Despite the argument that military officers were conditioned by the dictatorship to be violent, Scilingo's inconsistency suggests an abandonment of moral consciousness. While this lack of moral awareness and concern characterized the years of dictatorial terror, the inability for the assailants to reconcile with this reality gave rise to the potent presence of denial in the post-dictatorial years. The military repudiating the dark reality of its history, and the activists and human rights organizations begging and demanding answers, gave rise to two completely different notions of historical memory and truth. Activists like the Mothers and Grandmothers fought for objective historical truth, giving them the agency to cope with their losses and to heal from the past. However, military leaders who refused to accept personal accountability were not concerned with this greater truth, but only sought individual gain and advantage.

Conclusion

The two diverging accounts of dictatorial rule—the account of denial that upheld totalitarian silence in the post-dictatorial years and the one which admonished silence in the pursuit of a meaningful truth—played a critical role in remembering and memorializing this grim period of Argentinian national history. As illustrated in this chapter, memory narratives—the accounts of what truly happened, why they happened, and how to recover from them—were rooted in the culture of silence that Videla created under his dictatorial machine. For years, people were unable to properly confront the truth without risk of losing their own lives. Once the political barriers and threats of violence were not as imminent, Argentines were left with the options to either rupture the culture of silence or to maintain it. While this decision influenced memory processes and grappling with the nation's past, it also had a serious impact on the

pursuit of tangible justice in the post-dictatorial years. Victims and survivors received some sort of comfort in public activism and memorials, but their most pressing goal was to see some form of physical restitution, so that the deaths of their loved ones would not have been in vain. Processes of historical memory can often be ambiguous, relative, and deeply individual, but the pursuit of legal justice offered victims a chance to deal with that past and ultimately receive some form of closure.

To this point, this thesis has explored how institutionalized silence under a totalitarian regime creates a society dictated by fear and terror. This element of silence does not cease when the physical dictatorship is removed, for survivors are traumatized from these years of ignorance and violence. Post-dictatorial years and a transition to democratic government offers survivors—and former perpetrators—the opportunity to either break or uphold silence, to either remember or to forget. This argument will now pivot to explore how these critical decisions involving political and societal silences, survivorship, historical memory, and identity are manifested in the pursuit of physical justice. This next chapter will discuss the different mechanisms for obtaining justice in post-dictatorial Argentina but will also explore the obstacles that delayed or denied tangible justice. Because the barriers of silence were still very much present in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century, survivors and victims often resorted to different outlets for justice, when punitive accountability was not always an option. Thus, while the confrontation of their nation's past largely consisted of these symbolic processes of memorialization, the struggle for justice represented the commitment to officially and formally deal with a complex history.

Chapter Three:
"Justice You Will Pursue":
The Post-Dictatorial Fight for Justice and Truth

Introduction

"The dead cannot cry out for justice. It is a duty of the living to do so for them."
- Lois McMaster Bujold

Primo Levi argued that only the dead could serve as true witnesses to the horrors of dictatorial and totalitarian violence, as they suffered the most destructive consequences of this terror. However, those who were killed could not testify to their experiences: that became the preoccupation of the living, the survivors. These individuals too suffered from dictatorial violence, but they lived to see a new day: a day with the promise of hope and the possibility for recovery. The previous chapter analyzed post-dictatorial methods of coping with traumatic history—efforts by survivors to confront the past in order to move forward. While activism, artistic commemoration, public memorialization, and testimony all functioned to break the silence surrounding Argentina's military dictatorship, there remains an integral piece to the transition to democracy and closure: justice, truth, and reparations. Although these efforts served the purpose of remembering the victims and ensuring that history would not repeat itself, survivors shared the ultimate goal of obtaining restitution for their losses. As society was overshadowed with lies and denial, these survivors were committed to bringing the assailants to justice and receiving a degree of solace for victims and their families.

This chapter seeks to evaluate justice in post-totalitarian Argentina and explore its multifaceted nature. First, an examination of compensatory justice will illustrate its limitations in providing comfort for survivors in their search for answers. Second, social justice will be explored in the context of the transition to democracy to underscore the on the ground efforts to heal a broken societal conscience. Third, the pursuit of legal justice as the principal objective for

dictatorial survivors will be analyzed, revealing the barriers and obstacles to punitive justice. This chapter will then pivot to analyze how hindrances to compensatory, social, and legal justice gave rise to alternative ways for survivors to find meaning in a senseless situation. The fourth type of justice that will be discussed is arguably the most ideal form of justice, restorative justice, which was seemingly unattainable as nothing compared to the value of a human life. The reality of unachievable restorative justice contributed to the fifth type of justice that will be treated in this study, namely the symbolic instances of justice that offered victimized Argentines an outlet to obtain some level of closure. This thesis's final analysis of the Argentinian military dictatorship will underscore both the tangible forms of restitution for survivors and the symbolic nuances that contributed to societal healing.

Studying the rise and fall of the Argentinian military dictatorship reveals a time of profoundly polarized dichotomies rooted in opposition and conflict. The installation of the military government, for instance, was an extremist reaction to years of ideological warfare. The right-wing military junta felt that disbanding what they perceived to be a Marxist government was the only way to safeguard Argentinian nationalism. The years of the dictatorship brought these political differences to fruition in the most violent manner, dehumanizing those who held diverging political beliefs and destroying alleged threats to Videla's government. This attitude of "us against them" and the fight against "the other" did not die with the end of military rule: the most palpable deterrent to properly confronting Argentina's past was the widespread denial that directly opposed political activism and the quest for truth. The necessity for justice, therefore, was not solely a mechanism for gaining resolution, but also to potentially uncover an unambiguous, cohesive narrative of truth. In this deeply divided society, the establishment of an objective truth seemed nearly impossible. A nation that had been conditioned by institutionalized

silence and engrained in overt denial opposed any unveiling of an honest response to dictatorial horrors. With this, Argentinian society entered a new war, that of justice fighting against what might be considered an anti-justice. Those who fought for justice strove to rupture years of state-induced silence that hindered the pursuit of truth. Simultaneously, those who actively fought against legal justice and retribution represented a different group, those committed to maintaining the silence that had long held Argentinian society hostage. Thus, the paradoxes and contrasts that had dominated the dictatorial years carried over into the transitional years, illustrating how the question of justice is intensely intertwined with the problem of silence.

Theorizing Models of Justice

When theorizing the rather broad construct of justice, it is the tendency to turn to archaic commentary on justice. Aristotle, for instance, argued for a justice by "proportionality."[214] This perspective toward justice advocates for ensuring a degree of equity and fairness. There should be an impartial treatment of crimes: if someone stole from someone else, then the item should be removed from the thief and returned to its proper owner, achieving that balance. Alongside other ancient thinkers, Aristotle's perspective of justice can appear rather black and white, or a timeless approach that can solve any legal dispute. What changed this understanding of justice, particularly in a modern context, was not necessarily its definition, but rather, the nature of the situations to which it would be applied. All societies have undergone traumatic histories and particularly violent events, yet the modern genocides and crimes against humanity of the twentieth century altered the role of justice in unprecedented, gravely senseless situations. The justice that would take place in post-dictatorial Argentina precisely revealed the gray areas that

[214] "Justice as a Virtue," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Stanford University, March 8, 2002, revised August 7, 2020, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/justice-virtue/.

other models of justice have overlooked. How, for example, can there be full and complete justice that adequately repairs the human rights abuses of torture and extermination? What occurs when society is divided and competing narratives dilute the promise of an objective truth? It was not so simple to present the facts of each case and receive an appropriate response; this fight for justice was complicated, messy, and oftentimes disappointing.

While historic models for justice offer a general theory on its function, modern events like the Argentinian military dictatorship gave way to complex and intricate expressions of finding truth. These expressions were not theories or schools of thought on justice, but were instead concrete manifestations of the pain and suffering that people had endured. The 2018 digital collage, *Justicia perseguirás (*Justice You Will Pursue), exemplifies this understanding of justice. In this work, Javier Armentano comments on this relationship between memory and justice.[215] The collage includes references to the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, certain films and books that commemorate these dark periods in history, and images and phrases associated with the transition from dictatorship to democracy. Through this powerful imagery, Armentano depicts these tangible movements in the pursuit of justice. By including important figures and

[215] Javier Armentano, *Justicia perseguirás*, 2018, digital collage, 590 x 360 cm, Museo de la Memoria, Rosario, Argentina, https://www.museodelamemoria.gob.ar/page/obra/id/131/Armentano%2C-Javier-/Justicia-perseguir%C3%A1s.

events, this work conveys how justice in the post-dictatorial world was not straightforward and easily accomplished but was truly a *fight* for truth. This justice was not immediately delivered to families in accordance with a greater moral responsibility or ethical obligation but was instead a struggle as a result of silence, denial, and myth. Consequentially, when silence persisted and punitive justice did not seem in sight, victims and their families sought alternative forms of addressing their trauma. Thus, while in theory the black and white model of retributive and restorative justice can be implemented in an ideal world, the post-dictatorial society of Argentina showed that justice would be dependent on both the concrete activism of survivors and the breaking of a deafening political silence.

"I want him to confess": Limitations of Compensatory Justice and the Pursuit of Truth

The fight for justice in post-dictatorial Argentina was motived by the desire to find answers in the painful silence that long devastated victims and their families. Silence intrinsically implies the impossibility of answers. However, human beings naturally seek responses and explanations for the events in their lives. In a chaotic, modern world, human beings long for answers to assign meaning in oftentimes senseless circumstances. What made answers particularly relevant for the survivors of Argentina's military dictatorship was the status of victims as "disappeared," a phrase that suggests uncertainty. Had the victims been declared alive or deceased, no matter the pain, the families would have had some sense of closure. However, the impediments to justice and the lack of answers under the culture of silence rendered survivors unable to find meaning in this state of limbo.

Ariel Dorfman's 1990 play, *La muerte y la doncella* (Death and the Maiden), exposes the complex and painful relationship between the individual and justice in a traumatized society.

Though the play suggests that it is in the context of post-dictatorial Chile, the nature of the Chilean and Argentinian military dictatorships shared several characteristics. Furthermore, its commentary on justice can be applied to Argentina's transition to democratic government, as well. The audience learns that the protagonist, Paulina, was a victim of dictatorial torture.[216] She was brutally raped and electrocuted in a Chilean detention center but lived to see another day. That new day, however, was not as liberating and hopeful as one might expect, for Paulina still waited for one thing: justice. The play traces a night between Paulina, her husband, Gerardo, and his friend, Dr. Roberto Miranda. As Paulina listens to Gerardo and Roberto's conversation, she becomes convinced that Roberto is the doctor who tortured her at the dictatorial detention center.[217] Scarred from the dictatorship and frustrated by the lack of justice thus far against the perpetrators, Paulina decides to take justice into her own hands: she holds Roberto hostage at gunpoint, demanding that he confess to the crimes that he committed against her.[218]

As Paulina attempts to coerce Roberto into a confession, her husband cannot fathom the behavior that she exhibits. For the first time, Gerardo has seen her behave violently, using explicit language and threatening a man's life. Both Gerardo and Roberto perceive her actions as lunacy, deeming her mentally insane. Gerardo calls her behavior "unrecognizable" and asks, "How can you possibly be this way?"[219] Dorfman's intention does not go unnoticed. There is a clear disconnect between Paulina's understanding of the situation and that of her counterparts. While they consider her to be a psychopath who is displaying irrational behavior, she only reacts in this way as a result of her trauma and lack of closure. She realizes that the two men view her

---

[216] Ariel Dorfman, *Death and the Maiden*, 1990, accessed online through Vanderbilt University, https://www.vanderbilt.edu/olli/class-materials/Death_and_the_Maiden_script.pdf, 25.

[217] Ibid., 17.

[218] Ibid., 29.

[219] Ibid., 20.

as ill: "Explain to my husband, Doctor Miranda, what you did to me so I would be this—crazy."[220] Paulina pleads with them—most specifically, her husband—to understand and empathize with what she went through in the detention center, but they can only see the extremities of her behavior. Dorfman's motive for juxtaposing Paulina to her husband is not necessarily to illustrate how they had vastly different experiences under the dictatorship, but also to identify the contrast in their reactions to post-dictatorial society and justice. For the audience, the purpose is not to see if Dr. Roberto Miranda was actually the doctor who inflicted harm on Paulina, but rather, to highlight a woman in incredible distress as a result of her trauma and suffering. Whether or not Roberto was in fact the doctor who had tortured her, Paulina simply wants an acknowledgement of her pain. The transition to democracy left many survivors feeling isolated since their loved ones, like Gerardo, could not relate to what they had experienced. Nevertheless, these individuals desired some form of accountability that not only brought guilty parties to justice, but also validated their personal suffering.

With this perspective in mind, it is imperative not to misconstrue Paulina's actions toward Roberto as a form of Hammurabi's "eye for an eye" justice—a retributive justice where Roberto would suffer in the way that she had suffered. Initially, Paulina expresses to her husband that "the only thing [she wants] is to have [Roberto] raped."[221] If Roberto was in the same state of dehumanization that Paulina endured, then he would adequately pay for his crimes. However, Paulina has a change of heart, for she realizes that she does not wish to inflict physical violence on Roberto. The "only thing I really want?", she asks, "I want him to confess."[222] Paulina, therefore, is not some madwoman who wants to kill another human being, but rather, she wants

[220] Ibid.
[221] Ibid., 28.
[222] Ibid., 29.

someone to respect her trauma and she wants some type of resolution. Had Paulina killed Roberto—which she does not do—it would have reduced her to the level of those who inflicted the dictatorial crimes, the true psychopaths who hurt human beings for no reason. However, Dorfman accentuates that Paulina's rage comes from a place of unresolved trauma and a need for justice. She knows that killing Roberto would not compensate for what she went through, but a confession would stand as an admission to the world that she is not crazy, that her behavior is not irrational, and that her suffering is seen by society.

The audience learns that Paulina's husband works for the Chilean truth commission, which investigates the dictatorial crimes in the hope of justice. However, Paulina is not as distraught by the lack of legal convictions as she is by the lack of accountability by both the individual assailants and the Chilean government as an entity. Frustrated by his wife's actions toward Roberto, and afraid that her behavior might jeopardize his new government position, Gerardo asks her, "Isn't it time we—?," suggesting that they move on from the dictatorship and leave those painful memories in the past.[223] Paulina, taken aback, says that Gerardo wants her "to forget," to which he replies, "Free yourself from them, Paulina."[224] While Gerardo positions this as only wanting his wife to heal, the reality is that Paulina cannot heal, nor move forward, because the government has yet to acknowledge her pain. As the night progresses, Gerardo begs that Paulina forgive, but not forget: "forgive so we can start again."[225] While the forgiveness is in reference to his abandonment of her during the dictatorship, this message serves a greater purpose for the play. Gerardo wants Paulina to move forward so that she does not continue wallowing in her trauma; however, she is incapable of starting a new life because she has not

[223] Ibid., 27.
[224] Ibid.
[225] Ibid., 38.

received concrete answers from the government. Human beings require some form of compensation for their scars, for their trauma, and for their losses. Without answers, Paulina is unable to leave the dictatorship in the past. Moreover, Gerardo's rather passive attitude toward the lack of tangible justice holds significant weight for the post-dictatorial climate. Although he understands the extent of the dictatorial atrocities, his commitment to moving forward rather than confronting Paulina's individual trauma suggests an acquiescence to the culture of denial that was found in both Chile and Argentina in their transitions to democracy.

Becoming President of Argentina on December 10, 1983, Raúl Alfonsín undertook several efforts to combat this culture of denial and restore Argentinian society from the perils of its national legacy. On December 15, 1983, he established the *Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas* (National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons), otherwise known as CONADEP, with the goal of delivering the answers that victims so desired. For approximately nine months, CONADEP investigated the cases of disappeared individuals.[226] As in other Latin American countries of the late-twentieth century, these commissions became more commonly known as "truth commissions." Under the reign of dictatorial violence, the truth was inhibited so that the government could maintain its power and enact repression. Yet the turn to democracy and pursuit of answers changed the narrative in Argentinian society, opening a greater dialogue about the abuses that ensued and how to grapple with the nation's past. By placing truth at the forefront of the fight for justice, Argentines strove to dismantle the barriers of silence that prevented restitution.

On September 20, 1984, CONADEP published a report detailing their findings and addressing dictatorial crimes, entitled *Nunca más* (Never Again). The language of the report was

[226] "Truth Commission: National Commission on the Disappeared," United States Institute of Peace, December 16, 1983, https://www.usip.org/publications/1983/12/truth-commission-argentina.

integral to coping with this extraordinarily sensitive past and promising that such atrocities would never again take place. The authors of the document emphasize the unprecedented nature of such violence in Argentina, making the details "hard to believe."[227] Although the Commission credits the shocking nature of the report to many Argentines having been unaware of dictatorial atrocities, the reality is that most individuals were to some degree aware of the systematic violence and its horrifying ramifications. What made *Nunca más* so essential, therefore, was that it would set the tone for the transition to democracy for their *own* nation. While foreign intervention and influence was a critical component of the 1976 coup d'état, the Dirty War was also an internal conflict—a government turning against its citizens. The authors underscore that "the tragedy took place on [their] soil," affirming the need to properly address this history on a national level.[228] Thus, the acknowledgement of truth was indispensable in confronting history and determining how Argentina would proceed as a nation.

The heart of the message of *Nunca más* message was not only that such violence would never again occur, but also a pledge of justice. The authors state that "those who insulted the history of our country . . . have yet to show by word or deed that they feel any remorse for what they have done."[229] As in Dorfman's *La muerte y la doncella*, the root of the issue is not solely the lack of punitive justice, but most impactfully, an absence of truth and the persistence of denial. While monetary reparations and legal indictments might temporarily comfort or alleviate the distress of the families of victims, it is the acceptance of truth that is invaluable for the pursuit of justice. The members of the truth commission argued that "murder, rape, torture, extortion, looting and other serious crimes went unpunished" while being carried out "within the

---

[227] CONADEP, *Nunca Más (*Never Again), El Proyecto Desaparecidos (Project Disappeared), 1985, http://www.desaparecidos.org/nuncamas/web/english/library/nevagain/nevagain_004.htm, Part I: The Repression.

[228] Ibid.

[229] Ibid.

framework of the [dictatorship's] political and ideological persecution."[230] Thus, in the atmosphere of confronting the nation's trauma while also aiming to recover as a society, truth and justice remained an inseparable part of this process. The promise to never allow a military dictatorship to take power and terrorize individuals was accompanied by a promise that perpetrators would pay for their crimes and that truth would prevail. People demanded answers, and it was the responsibility of both society and the government to pursue and deliver this closure.

"National Reconciliation": Social Justice in the Transition to Democratic Rule

Processes of memorialization and identity formation were hallmarks of post-dictatorial society, for ordinary individuals had been drastically impacted by extraordinary circumstances. On a deeply personal level, as well as grounded in the comradery of collective efforts, these activists were determined to not only seek answers, but to also ensure that their nation would reckon with its troubling past. While the previous chapter situated these movements in the context of intention and historical memory, the present discussion will analyze these efforts from the perspective of social and transitional justice. The political advocacy that dominated post-dictatorial Argentina was not solely a consequence of the necessity for truth but was also the struggle to heal a broken societal conscience. The habitual silence of authoritarian rule dismantled routine social interactions and transformed individual responses to violence. Thus, organizations like the Mothers and Grandmothers were both committed to recovering the lost identities of their progeny and to addressing the impact of totalitarian violence on society. Videla's dictatorship had implemented somewhat of a societal disease, in which people were

[230] Ibid.

restricted from engaging with their emotions and obtaining basic human rights. The social justice from the mid-1980s onward, therefore, was the fight to seek answers not only for personal closure, but also so that the whole of society could recover from these years of terror and move forward. Questions such as freedom of political opinion and transparency were integral to paving the way for democracy to prevail. Social and transitional justice cannot be discussed separately because it was the social movements that created a space and dialogue for Argentina to confront its history and transition to a more peaceful climate.

In their study on transitional justice throughout history, Laurel Fletcher, Harvey Weinstein, and Jamie Rowen explore the nature of rebuilding a society that has been disrupted by political turmoil, economic crises, war and violence, and other factors. More specifically, these authors discuss the limitations and restrictions on restoring a society that has been impacted by the aforementioned circumstances. However, they argue that by analyzing social turmoil in their respective historical contexts, nations can be better equipped for understanding social problems and the complexities of justice.[231] For Argentina, the social unrest that both catalyzed and defined the military dictatorship was a conflict rooted in ideological polarity.[232] The transition to democratic government in Argentina with the collapse of the dictatorship raised discussion about the social factors that led to such instability in the first place. “Reforms to strengthen the rule of law, non-violent protest, and the reduction of social stratification” were among movements to identify the heart of many of the problems that contributed to democratic breakdown.[233] Thus, while government intervention and military rule was not the answer to

[231] Laurel E. Fletcher, Harvey M. Weinstein, and Jamie Rowen, “Context, Timing and the Dynamics of Transitional Justice: A Historical Perspective,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (Feb., 2009), 169-170.
[232] Ibid., 171.
[233] Ibid., 172.

Argentina's political conflicts in the early 70s, these deep-rooted issues contributed to the collapse of social order that led to such a drastic solution.

The article proceeds to discuss the relationship between government acknowledgement of dictatorial violence and society's responses to national accountability. In Argentina, the transition to democracy was influenced by the former ruling military's interference, such as in the case of protective amnesty laws and hindrance of prosecutions.[234] In a different light, the authors also underscored the efforts to combat societal denial and seek justice for victims, such as the expansion of the government reparations program in 1994 as well as the advocacy for indictments.[235] Something important that these scholars note is that while individual Argentines and activists were persistent in their campaigns for justice and desire to expose human rights abuses, the government itself was largely "ambivalent toward or uncommitted to fully exposing the horrors of the past."[236] The lobbying by victims and their families, therefore, enabled some level of justice to come forth and rivaled this flagrant government denial.[237] What is perhaps most influential is that the transformations in social justice have played a critical role in diminishing the culture of silence, yet despite these changes, "the demands of victims" to this day are "not fully satisfied."[238] This points to the continual dichotomy between those longing to break the silence and those striving to maintain it. While government denial and military prominence disrupted national processes of transitional justice, the advocacy and protests by various groups paved the way for society to grapple with its moral consciousness.

---

[234] Ibid., 173.
[235] Ibid., 173-174.
[236] Ibid., 203.
[237] Ibid
[238] Ibid.

Transitional justice was complicated by the competing historical narratives that existed in post-dictatorial Argentina that pitted truth against denial. One of the principal reasons why the culture of denial—a natural extension of the culture of silence that corrupted fair governance—pervaded the struggle for justice was because the military dictatorship felt its actions were legally defensible. In their article on Argentina's move toward democracy, Valentina Salvi and Luis Alberto Hernández explain how military leaders believed "that having fought on behalf of the fatherland, peace, and democracy exempted them from having to offer any explanation to justice and society."[239] The military essentially absolved themselves of any remorse or accountability by arguing that their actions were not only justified but also legitimized by their "defense" of Argentina from subversive threats. This theme of abandoning moral culpability ran uninterrupted from the height of dictatorial power to the overt government denial in the post-dictatorial years. By defending human rights abuses as a biproduct of wartime necessity, the institution of the military did not feel an obligation to the truth or to justice. What is even more blatant was the military's insistence that their years of rule were the epitome of democracy. Salvi and Hernández discuss how these leaders saw themselves "as the true defenders of the democratic institutions against the Marxist threat" and "as saviors of the nation."[240] Thus, not only were the narratives of historical memory deeply polarized, but so too were the perspectives on transitional justice. In discussing the post-dictatorial years, this period is often labeled as a transitional period from authoritarian rule to democracy. However, this change was profoundly rooted in denial given that one side of this ideological conflict—the military—believed that Argentina had already been under democratic rule and that there was no necessity for reparation or amends. Thus, the

[239] Valentina Salvi and Luis Alberto Hernández, "'We're All Victims': Changes in the Narrative of 'National Reconciliation' in Argentina," *Latin American Perspectives* 42, no. 3 (May 2015): 42.

[240] Ibid., 43.

treatment of social consciousness that activists had hoped to bring to fruition was largely in conflict with individuals who felt that society had been better under the military dictatorship and did not need to change.

Such dismissive attitudes toward dictatorial human rights abuses sparked a fight for social justice and the empowerment of victims and their families. Salvi and Hernández make a unique contribution to the study of Argentina's process of post-dictatorial "national reconciliation" by underscoring how the assailants—the military government—presented themselves as the real victims of the conflicts of the 1970s and 80s.[241] Prior to 2000, the authors explain, the military leaders primarily portrayed themselves as defenders of the nation who triumphed in the Dirty War as "victors."[242] At the turn of the century, however, the institution changed its tone, and instead depicted itself as another victim of the situation, in the sense that *everyone* was a victim.[243] This served as a tactic to reduce individual responsibility in that by positioning themselves as victims of the Dirty War, there was no logical reason to hold each individual officer accountable.[244] This also points to the strongly hierarchical system of the military in which inferior officers could assign blame to their superiors, eluding their own responsibilities. What this effectively does is argue that the problem does not lie in the hands of dictatorial abuses of power, but instead stems from a deeper social problem in which both the military government and *los desaparecidos* were victims. This change in attitude at the turn of the century was not coincidental: both the Argentinian government and military leaders hoped that the new century would allow Argentina as a nation to move forward and somewhat forget about the problems of its past. By placing themselves on the same level as the actual victims, *los*

[241] Ibid., 48.
[242] Ibid.
[243] Ibid.
[244] Ibid.

desaparecidos, the government fostered a sentiment of "mutual forgiveness" in which both sides might let the past go and move forward.[245] There are several fundamental issues with this logic in the context of social and transitional justice. First, this attitude presupposes that *los desaparecidos* were just as guilty as the military government, and thus, both parties were at fault. Second, this "collective blame"—or presenting the Dirty War as Argentina's problem and not just the military government's fault—instigates a "universal complicity" in which all Argentines are required to apologize for their past, even those who were truly victimized by dictatorial rule.[246] Finally, this desire to forget the past and absolve everyone of culpability implies that no military officers should have to pay for their crimes. Thus, while activists and human rights organizations felt that justice was the key to a healed society and the transition to democracy, those in denial felt that justice was an impediment to national reconciliation and was virtually a moot point.

Despite this denial, victims and their families were not defeated. To this day, social justice is a hallmark of Argentina's struggle for unadulterated democratic rule—one that has reckoned with its historical sins and strives for truth and meaning. One example of such phenomena is Argentina's Day of Remembrance for Truth and Justice, an Argentinian holiday that allows for public remembrance of *los desaparecidos* and all those violently exterminated under dictatorial rule.[247] This holiday occurs on March 24th, the anniversary date of the coup d'état that overthrew democratic government and installed dictatorial rule. By using this date, human rights organizations bring a new meaning to a day that holds many scars for Argentines,

---

[245] Ibid.
[246] Ibid.
[247] "Argentina's Day of Remembrance for Truth and Justice," News, The Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities, accessed February 23, 2023, https://www.auschwitzinstitute.org/news/aipr-marks-arg-day-of-remembrance-for-truth-and-justice/.

allowing them to commemorate victims and continue the promise to never forget their nation's past. As the Mothers and Grandmothers return to the Plaza de Mayo each year to continue their advocacy and protest, this day equally serves as a reminder of their commitment to bringing justice to fruition.[248] They continue to raise awareness of new cases, legal developments, and impediments to justice and call out for tangible answers and retribution. With their voices, the deafening silence and conspicuous denial is gradually challenged and reduced.

"Impunity" would be "Monstrous": Legal Justice in Post-Dictatorial Argentina

Until this point, justice has been theorized in the context of social efforts to seek some form of truth and find meaning in a senseless situation. While truth commissions and commemorative processes played fundamental roles in the confrontation of Argentina's past, at the core of post-dictatorial debates was the fight for tangible, legal, punitive justice. Not only did victims and their families want the perpetrators of the military government to pay for their crimes, but their indictments and prosecutions would serve as a public display of Argentina taking accountability for dictatorial horrors. Moreover, punitive justice would set the precedent that vicious human rights abuses would not go unpunished. By prosecuting the dictatorial heads, such as Jorge Videla and Emilio Massera, who never had to answer for their crimes, the Argentinian judicial system would send the message that no one was above the law. For democracy to persist, there needed to be legitimate consequences for dictatorial atrocities, rather than simply forgiving and forgetting so as to dismiss victims and their families. Finally, legal justice—in whatever form—would ensure that the deaths of *los desaparecidos* had not been in vain and would have had an impact in preventing similar horrors from occurring again. This phase of justice in post-dictatorial society, however, was not as straightforward as it theoretically

[248] Ibid.

should have been, underscoring the complexities of rupturing the culture of silence and placing a powerful institution on trial.

The 2022 film, *Argentina, 1985*, details the work of attorney Julio Strassera in prosecuting the seemingly untouchable former military leaders, based on the true story of the 1985 Trial of the Juntas.[249] Along with his deputy prosecutor, Luis Moreno Ocampo, and a team of young, inexperienced lawyers, Strassera set out to accomplish what appeared impossible: the civil prosecution of Argentina's most ruthless government leaders. From April to December of 1985, these trials represented the first attempt to truly seek punitive justice for the victims who had suffered and to publicly expose dictatorial horrors. The defendants included Jorge Videla, Emilio Massera, Orlando Agosti, Roberto Viola, Armando Lambruschini, Leopolado Galtieri, Jorge Anaya, Basilio Lami Dozo, and Omar Graffigna.[250] Videla, as stated previously, reigned for the longest time as Argentina's dictator from the years 1976-1981. He was followed by Viola, who became President in March 1981 and remained as such until December 1981. Galtieri took power in 1981 and ruled until June 1982. The remaining defendants were all officers of the military, both serving in the Navy as well as in the Air Force. Despite their flagrant crimes against humanity, there was significant pressure to pardon these men, as many felt that these leaders were the victors of the Dirty War against subversive terrorists, and therefore, had not committed any wrongdoing. Nevertheless, with the restoration of democratic government under President Raúl Alfonsín, survivors of the military's horrors and relatives of *los desaparecidos*

[249] *Argentina, 1985,* directed by Santiago Mitre (2022; Culver City, California: Amazon Studios, 2022), Amazon Prime.

[250] "Juicio a las Juntas Militares," Cases, International Crimes Database, accessed February 6, 2023, https://www.internationalcrimesdatabase.org/Case/1118/Juicio-a-las-Juntas-Militares/.

begged for these criminals to be brought to justice, leading to the trial that would label prosecutor Julio Strassera a "national hero."[251]

The efforts of Strassera cannot be analyzed without paying particular attention to the risks that came with placing the military on trial. The film traces how Strassera himself is initially concerned when assigned to this monumental legal case. Although not a supporter of the dictatorship, Strassera hesitates to pursue the lead on this case due to the poor odds and the danger of going after these leaders. Throughout the film, Strassera and his team receive several death threats. In one instance, an assailant breaks into Strassera's home, leaving a bullet and a message that stated, "Mr. Strassera, we will execute you in 48 hours."[252] In another scene, Deputy Prosecutor Luis Ocampo is followed by men in a car, intimidating him as a warning. There are also threats made against witnesses, attempting to weaken the prosecution's case. Although intimidation tactics are not uncommon when prosecuting major criminals, what is significant about the Trial of the Juntas is that these threats were based in years of totalitarian violence and oppression. While Strassera and Ocampo continued building their case despite the threats to their lives, their knowledge of the military dictatorship's capacity for violence—even in the post-totalitarian democracy—rendered them in a state of inevitable paranoia. Despite Argentina legitimizing itself as a democracy, the criminals of the dictatorship did not cease to instill fear and terror in society. What is especially pronounced was the dictatorship's commitment to furthering the culture of silence in post-dictatorial Argentina. Through death threats, the defendants hoped that the prosecution and witnesses would be terrorized into choosing silence, abandoning their case so as to protect their lives. The dictatorship had

[251] Mitre, *Argentina, 1985.*
[252] Ibid.

established itself in society as ruthless, and the fear from the dictatorial years continued to permeate the transition to democracy and the pursuit of justice.

The determination to intimidate the prosecution was equally a reflection of dictatorial terror as it was denial on the part of Argentinian citizens, namely the upper classes. Ocampo's family is depicted in the film as emblematic of those who passively accepted and legitimized the dictatorship's rule from 1976-1983, as well as those who actively denied the allegations against the military in the post-dictatorial years. Ocampo's family was historically involved in the military, raising a conflict of interest for him in working on this case. Ocampo's mother, particularly, illustrates this pronounced ideological dissension. In *Argentina, 1985*, Ocampo reveals to Strassera that he and his mother have a particularly close relationship; however, she does not approve of his work and actively resents the cause for which he fights. Moreover, the film underscores the strong ties between Ocampo's family and the military government, such as his mother attending church with Videla every Sunday. In a conversation regarding the trials, Ocampo expresses reservations about their likelihood for success, as his mother constantly berates him for being part of an "anti-Argentina campaign" that will not defeat the military officers.[253] Frustrated by Ocampo consistently paying heed to his mother's comments, Strassera states, "We'll never convince people like your mom."[254] Such contention points to the polarized climate in Argentina's transition to democratic rule. While many were fighting for justice in the 1980s, the military government retained powerful support from families like the Ocampos. These families were convinced that the military government had done their nation a service in eliminating "subversion." Motivated by a fervent nationalist mindset, these individuals viewed the Dirty War as defending Argentina from terrorist leftists who tried to undermine the rule of

[253] Ibid.
[254] Ibid.

law. Furthermore, despite the augmented awareness of dictatorial crimes and atrocities, powerful, wealthy families like the Ocampos were committed to defending Videla and his associates, fostering a culture of denial and ignorance.

The persistence of such overt denial enabled corruption and myth to pose a direct threat to the pursuit of justice. For instance, in the film, Strassera consistently mentions how the prosecution could not turn to the police, as they had been firmly aligned with dictatorial rule. Moreover, he had struggled to find lawyers for his team due to the overwhelming majority of "Fascist" attorneys who did not believe it was justified to try the military in a civilian court.[255] Furthermore, Strassera and Ocampo were paranoid regarding potential spies that could infiltrate their circle and divulge their strategies prior to trial. However, while Videla's defense may have had deceit and intimidation on their side, there was something that the prosecution possessed which was evidently more integral to success: the testimonies of former *desaparecidos*. Strassera's team was able to compile the cases of approximately 700 individuals, with nearly 300 of these being presented at the Trial of the Juntas. Though a remarkable number, these testimonies only reflect roughly 1% of those kidnapped, tortured, and murdered by the dictatorship. Several factors complicated the process of assembling cases and witnesses. First, Strassera's team had limited access to many of the files detailing the crimes. Second, the unfortunate reality, as Primo Levi conveyed, was that many of the potential witnesses had been exterminated by the dictatorship, and thus, only survivors could testify. Finally, numerous witnesses declined to publicly testify after receiving threats to their lives, illustrating how the dictatorship's mechanisms for terror extended beyond its time in governmental leadership. Despite these obstacles, Strassera, Ocampo, and their team of young attorneys curated an

[255] Ibid.

arrangement of testimonies that left the courtroom, Argentina, and the greater global community in both shock and horror.

The first testimony of the trials was given by Adriana Calvo de Laborde, a university professor in Buenos Aires who was kidnapped in February 1977, and at the time, six months pregnant. In her testimony, Adriana described the day during her detainment where she was held in the backseat of a patrol car and went into labor.[256] After pleading with the officers to find her medical assistance and help her, they merely laughed and forced her to give birth in such horrendous conditions. Her baby was miraculously born, but the officers left the baby on the car floor, not allowing Adriana to hold her or tend to her. After dehumanizing her further, they finally allowed Adriana to hold her newborn daughter, and eventually the two were released. Given the system of kidnapping children of *los desaparecidos* and reassigning them to military families for adoption, it was a rare exception that Adriana was able to leave with her daughter in her hands. Her powerful testimony had a significant impact on the outcome of the trial. While all of the testimonies exposed horrifying realities and forms of torture, even dictatorial supporters could not justify the behavior toward Adriana Calvo. The film displays a remarkable shift in character on the part of Ocampo's mother. Despite being a fervent Fascist and supporter of Videla, Ocampo's mother was disgusted by Adriana's treatment and considered it a violent assault both on an individual, but more specifically, on the maternal right to give birth in appropriate conditions and to protect one's child. Adriana's story yielded a powerful degree of empathy from mothers across Argentina who were in disbelief at this form of torture. Thus, testimonies like Adriana's allowed Strassera's team to change the narrative that the culture of silence had set out to promulgate.

---

[256] Ibid.

One of the ultimate scenes of *Argentina*, *1985* displays Strassera's final effort to defend the victims of the dictatorship and present the military leaders as the criminals that they were: his closing statement. As the previous chapter analyzed, the collapse of the dictatorship brought both an instant call to action to defend human rights, as well as an immediate choice to deny Argentina's dark past. This political environment gave rise to two contending accounts of history, two opposing stances on bringing the military to justice. Strassera's closing statement offered one last opportunity to shape the narrative that he wanted to transmit, seeking tangible justice for the victims. The language that Strassera used was critical to closing the prosecution's case. For example, he refers to the Dirty War as a "genocide"—a word that had not been universally associated with the dictatorship or accepted by its supporters who believed that the military was completely justified in its tactics of repression.[257] His word choice was not only deliberate, but impactful in shaping public opinion. He states, "sadism is neither a political ideology, nor a war strategy, but a moral perversion," expressing how the abuses of the dictatorship had nothing to do with political opinion, but only with violating human rights and abandoning moral accountability. Furthermore, Strassera grounds his declaration in the necessity for punitive justice. He states that "impunity" and pardoning these men would be "monstrous."[258] Finally, he concludes his argument with declaring that this trial and verdict will establish the tone for remembering Argentina's history and moving forward, citing *Nunca Más*: "never again."[259]

The end of the film reveals the results of the Trial of the Juntas. Strassera is informed that Omar Graffigna, Jorge Anaya, Basilio Lami Dozo, and Leopoldo Galtieri were found not guilty. Orlando Agosti only received a sentence of four and a half months, and Armando Lambruschini

[257] Ibid.
[258] Ibid.
[259] Ibid.

was sentenced to eight years. Roberto Viola was given a longer sentence of seventeen years, and Emilio Massera and Jorge Videla were both sentenced to life in prison. Although not all of these men were found guilty of these crimes against humanity, many celebrated the life sentence of Videla and considered it justice for the families of the victims. However, Strassera was wholly disheartened by this verdict, deeming it a complete offence to justice and to the victims. The end of the film depicts his immediate continuation of his work, issuing appeals for the men who were acquitted and a commitment to seeking full justice. Thus, while some progress had been made in the dictatorship's most notorious leader being sentenced to life, the prosecution and the families of the victims knew that there was much work still to be done, and they were determined to bring all of the assailants to justice.

When discussing punitive retribution, it is essential to analyze the battle that ensued in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century to bring Jorge Videla to appropriate and complete justice. What seems like it would be a very obvious decision and verdict for Videla to receive adequate punishment for the crimes committed under his reign, there were several hindrances that delayed any form of tangible justice. Five years after the life sentence that he received in the Trial of the Juntas, Videla was given a pardon by President Carlos Menem—President of Argentina from 1989-1999.[260] In 1998, the pardon was overturned, but instead of returning to prison, Videla was placed on house arrest.[261] As more cases were being investigated and prosecuted in the early 2000s, Videla was detained again in 2008, imprisoned until his death in May 2017 in *Marcos Paz* prison. Despite his ruthlessness and clear incrimination in the human rights abuses of the dictatorship, Videla was offered pardons and protection throughout the years

[260] Hugh Bronstein, "Former Argentine dictator Videla dies in prison at age 87," *Reuters*, published May 17, 2013, *https*://www.reuters.com/article/uk-argentina-dictator/former-argentine-dictator-videla-dies-in-prison-at-age-87-idUKBRE94G0HP20130517.

[261] Ibid.

of the trials. It took decades after the dictatorship's collapse to obtain tangible, somewhat sufficient legal punishment. Despite the pleas of the Mothers and the Grandmothers, the testimonies of victims, and efforts of human rights organizations, the culture of denial that furthered the dictatorial message of silence was only solidified and legitimized by a delayed and limited process of justice.

One of the principal reasons why human rights organizations are still fighting for justice in the present day, and more specifically, the reason why justice has not yet fully been achieved is largely in part the result of the Amnesty Laws—the Full Stop Law and the Law of Due Obedience—that were passed by Argentinian Congress in the post-dictatorial years.[262] Passed in 1986, the Full Stop Law attempted to limit the trials of military officers by "creating a statute of limitations."[263] This was furthered by the Law of Due Obedience (1987) which essentially declared that subordinate officers could not be held personally responsible for their crimes under the dictatorship since they were behaving in accordance with military procedure and orders from superiors. Under President Alfonsín, the law declared that these inferior officers were "not punishable for [alleged crimes during military rule] by virtue of having been required to follow orders."[264] This law essentially absolved countless numbers of officers who had committed horrifying atrocities during the dictatorship. Although under direction of the military, as the testimonies of former *desaparecidos* revealed, these subordinate officers often took violence to an extreme level, not solely to subvert the "enemy," but to reduce them to a total state of psychological impairment and dehumanization. While many officers may have been afraid to disobey military order, the stories of witnesses and survivors indicate that officers often tortured,

---

[262] Gaspar Forteza, "Regarding Simón y otros: Accountability in Argentina and International Human Rights as Domestic Positive Law," *FIU Law Review* 3, no. 1 (Fall 2007), 187-188.

[263] Ibid., 198.

[264] Ibid., 199.

raped, and killed not because of any order, but for sadistic pleasure and entertainment. Thus, these laws worked in tandem to impede justice and acquiesce to dictatorial pressure to forget the crimes of the past and grant these criminals full freedom.

Yet with impunity and pardon lying in the foreground of Argentina's fight for justice, changes in political opinion and government leadership brought the possibility of hope. Despite the activism of human rights organizations, it took one particular case to force the government to rethink the consequences of the Amnesty Laws. In November 1978, at the peak of military rule in Argentina, a man by the name of Jose Poblete and his wife, Gertrudis Hlaczik, were kidnapped and brought to *El Olimpo* concentration camp.[265] Their "offense" against the dictatorship had been a political organization that advocated for the rights of disabled citizens.[266] The couple's daughter, Claudia, was also abducted. While her parents remained *disappeared*, the child was reassigned to a military family and raised as their child.[267] The direction of the Polpete abduction and their child's adoption was under the instruction of Julio Simón, a dictatorial police officer.[268] With the work of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Claudia was eventually located, raising attention to this case. Prior to this point, Simón had not been held accountable for his involvement in this couple's disappearance and the consequences for their daughter, as he was protected by the aforementioned impunity laws. However, in a landmark decision, on March 6, 2001, Federal Judge Gabriel Cavallo declared that such laws violated the Argentinian constitution, enabling the prosecution to take place.[269] This decision was amplified under the

---

[265] Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) Staff, "Argentine Amnesty Laws Declared Unconstitutional," Latin America Data Base News & Educational Services, University of New Mexico Digital Repository, June 24, 2005, https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=14387&context=notisur, 2.

[266] Ibid.

[267] Ibid.

[268] Ibid.

[269] "VI. Amnesty Voided: The Cavallo Decision," Human Rights Watch: Argentina, accessed February 18, 2023, https://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/2001/argentina/argen1201-06.htm.

administration of President Nestor Kirchner when on June 14, 2005, the *Corte Suprema de Justicia* (CSJ), Argentina's Supreme Court, deemed the Amnesty Laws unconstitutional, ushering a wave of reopened cases and prosecutions.[270] The tangible effects of this powerful decision were immeasurable. In 2006 and 2007, for example, Simón was given multiple prison sentences for his crimes against humanity and involvement in the disappearances. Thus, although the post-dictatorial culture of denial enabled the freedom of these subordinate officers and refused to hold them accountable for their reprehensible behavior, these major shifts in the attitude of the law functioned to finally bring these criminals to legal justice. Such decisions by Judge Cavallo and the CSJ broke the silences surrounding these laws, declaring that these men should and will be held responsible for their offenses on human dignity.

Reversing the authority of the Amnesty Laws and pardons had repercussions for Videla, as well. The high occurrence of indictments in the early 2000s empowered judges to revisit Videla's verdict, aiming to reinstate Strassera's 1985 achievement of a life sentence for the leader of this murderous regime. What is significant about Videla's case is that not only did he receive a singular life sentence, but he received multiple indictments to "*perpetua*" (life) in prison when his case was reexamined in 2008. In 2010, Videla was given a life sentence for the crimes associated with the coup d'état. Moreover, in 2012, Videla was also held responsible for the systematic abductions and adoptions of babies of *los desaparecidos,* giving him an additional fifty years in prison. When considering the often-contentious question of justice, a point that is sometimes raised is the purpose of sentencing someone to more years in prison than they will live to see. Videla, for example, was already well into his 80s when he received the 2010 and 2012 verdicts, and he even died the following year, barely serving any of his legal sentence.

[270] LADB Staff, "Argentine Amnesty Laws Declared Unconstitutional," 1.

However, despite the natural contradiction that a person will never be able to serve multiple life sentences or sentences of fifty years when they are nearing the end of their life, there is tremendous symbolism behind these landmark decisions. While it was impactful that Videla was finally held responsible for his actions during the military dictatorship, having to be held accountable for different, horrifying crimes gave the families of victims a sense of empowerment and a degree of peace. Without the 2012 verdict, Videla would legally never have been responsible for the abductions and reassignments of the children, a political weapon that destroyed families and violated integral human rights. Thus, while Videla never saw the full extent of life in prison, there was a sense of closure for these families that the man who had terrorized their lives was finally paying for his sins.

"You Said Life": Restorative Justice and the Value of Human Life

In the case of certain crimes, restorative justice—resurrecting what was taken, stolen, etc.—is possible. If someone steals something, they can either return the stolen item or provide financial compensation so that the victim can purchase a replica item. However, crimes involving human rights abuses and the unlawful termination of life present a profoundly different problem. There is no imaginable restoration of human life once it is taken. A similar situation develops for survivors, as well. There is no equivalent or adequate restitution for having been tortured, dehumanized, raped, abused, and deprived of basic human rights. While legal justice provided some sense of closure for victims and their families, such consequences still did not completely account for the losses that individuals suffered. Although Argentines may have been comforted knowing that Videla spent his last moments behind bars, this still did not compensate for the grief that they felt, nor did it bring their loved ones back to life.

The distressing reality of restorative justice is epitomized in the 2009 film *El secreto de sus ojos* (The Secret of their Eyes). Though taking place in Argentina, the plot of this film is not necessarily centered around the dictatorship itself. The film traces Investigator Benjamín Esposito, who has still not come to terms with an unsolved case that he worked on in the early 1970s, prior to dictatorial rule. A young woman, Liliana Coleto, is raped and murdered. After conducting a thorough investigation, Esposito is not only able to identify the assailant—Coleto's childhood friend, Isidoro Gómez—but also obtains a confession.[271] However, Gómez cannot be prosecuted because he becomes employed by the government.[272] Esposito is not only defeated by government corruption that hinders justice for the victim, but he also feels personally responsible for having let down Liliana's husband, Ricardo, who is devastated by the loss of his wife and wants to see Gómez pay for his crimes.

As the film transitions between the time of the crime and decades later, it becomes evident that Esposito will not settle until he receives some type of resolution for the murdered Liliana and her husband. He watches as Ricardo suffers and cannot "imagine losing the love of your life."[273] Toward the end of the film, Esposito decides to visit Ricardo, who discloses that upon Gómez's release, he murdered him as retribution for what he did to his wife. Unsatisfied with this explanation, Esposito is left unconvinced that Ricardo killed Gómez. The Buenos Aires investigator returns to Ricardo's home and uncovers that this grieving husband has been keeping Gómez alive in a makeshift prison adjacent to his home for the past several decades. In a powerful close to this scene, Ricardo states, "You said life," showing his commitment to

[271] *El secreto de sus ojos*, directed by Juan José Campanella (2009; Buenos Aires, Argentina: Haddock Films, 2010), Amazon Prime.
[272] Ibid.
[273] Ibid.

bringing his wife's murderer to justice after the legal system, and Esposito, failed him.[274] Although Esposito had no sympathy for Gómez after the vicious act that he committed against Liliana, he is initially disturbed by this scene. Ricardo hands Gómez a small portion of food but refuses to speak to him. Esposito immediately understands what has occurred: Ricardo wants Gómez to suffer a life of debilitating isolation as his wife had suffered in her final moments. To kill Gómez would have ended his life, never creating the opportunity for him to adequately pay for his crimes. Although to a degree an act of vigilante justice, as Ricardo took matters into his own hands, his intentions are driven by this inherently problematic notion of restorative justice. If Ricardo had ended Gómez's life, this act would not have restored the life of his deceased wife. Thus, by kidnapping Gómez and forcing him to live a life of solitary confinement with no human interaction or happiness, this pain-ridden husband can at least make the violent perpetrator suffer as his wife had. Because restoring her life was not an option, Ricardo sought a different outlet to avenge her death and find justice. His agony and grief display the brutal and disappointing reality of not being able to obtain restorative justice. The only adequate compensation for his wife's death would be for her to be alive, but because that was not plausible, he coped with her death and found justice in the way that he saw fit.

Although this specific case does not directly correlate to the military dictatorship, the context of this film and the simultaneous rise of dictatorial violence are very much intertwined. The lack of legal justice that Esposito is able to obtain for the victim and her family reflects the critical issue that has been discussed throughout this chapter. While justice should have been guaranteed in this case, especially with a confession from the guilty party, it was not brought to fruition as a result of government corruption. Furthermore, the audience witnesses the

[274] Ibid.

ramifications of restorative justice on the individual. Ricardo cannot process his wife's death not only because of his personal loss, but also because it created a situation without hope: her life could not possibly be restored, and even punitive justice would not fully avenge the suffering that she endured. As a result, Ricardo sought his own methods of justice to ensure that his wife's assailant did not walk free. Although the scene of Ricardo holding this man prisoner is disturbing and rather off-putting, it illustrates the more pertinent point of a victim suffering from a senseless loss—a theme all too relevant to the pain of the families of *los desaparecidos*. Lastly, Ricardo's actions represent the lengths that individuals will take when justice is not available, and although these may not be legally acceptable, they reveal how corruption in legal systems often necessitates other outlets for closure from traumatic situations.

"I Take you out of That Place": Symbolic Justice and the Reclamation of Human Identity

By definition, a symbol is not inherently related to a specific concept but serves to represent the nature of that concept. To take the example of a dove, there is nothing necessarily intrinsic to a dove that suggests the idea of peace, yet the image of a dove evokes that association. The function of a symbol, thus, is to illustrate the intangible. Certain concepts cannot have physical manifestations. Peace is not something you can hold in your hands; it is not a physical object. However, the art of symbolism functions to bridge ambiguous and innate objects to living, identifiable physical manifestations. It is this pursuit that gives certain constructs meaning. In theory, the concept of symbolic justice seems intuitively contradictory. In the Aristotelian model, justice is somewhat tangible in that the action of restoring the stolen good to the owner achieves the equilibrium that allows society to function. Justice itself is not a tangible item, but it can be achieved through such tangible means. Similarly, Hammurabi's theory that

you have the right to harm someone who inflicted damage against you is also based in thinking that concrete actions can restore equality and order. Yet reality has shown that this aspiration for an ideal justice is almost never brought to complete fruition. This chapter has centered on these hindrances to physical justice. If Hammurabi had been the presiding judge at the Trial of the Military Juntas, Videla would have received the death penalty to compensate for the deaths that he exacted. Nevertheless, silence pervaded this process and rendered families with inadequate closure, forcing them to turn to other outlets to deal with their trauma, grief, and anger. What is particularly unique about symbolic justice is that regardless if survivors received financial compensation through reparations, obtained answers through social activism, or even saw legal indictments of perpetrators, they still would never feel complete comfort due to the loss of human life. Thus, symbolic justice not only served to fill gaps in compensatory, social, and legal justice, but also provided comfort in the hopelessness of never attaining restorative justice.

Justice is initially difficult to envision in a symbolic form, as it seems to necessitate some form of physical consequence. One of the prime examples of symbolic justice is depicted in the 2019 documentary, *Haydee and the Flying Fish.* This documentary focuses on Haydee Oberreuter, a former *desaparecida* who was tortured under the Chilean military dictatorship.[275] Haydee explains how she had always been enamored with the Chilean Navy as a child, as they were symbols of the greatness of their country and seen as protectors. However, this image would be shattered when she was abducted by the Navy and subjected to unimaginable horrors. Haydee had been pregnant upon arrival to the torture center, *Villa Grimaldi*. Deemed a "terrorist" by the military government, Haydee was tortured with a "mock autopsy," in which

[275] *Haydee and the Flying Fish*, directed by Pachi Bustos (2019; Santiago, Chile: Errante Producciones, 2020), Amazon Prime.

Naval officers sliced open her stomach, killing her unborn son, Sebastián.[276] Moreover, Haydee had long-term health complications as a result from this vicious and unsanitary "medical" procedure. However, the most terrifying reality for her was not her own torture, but that her son was senselessly taken from her. The officers rejoiced at the death of her son, that they had prevented the progeny of a "terrorist" from walking the Earth. From the day of her release, Haydee was devoted to seeking justice for Sebastián.[277]

Haydee would proceed to spend decade after decade in the pursuit of legal justice. She was determined to watch the officers that tortured her and murdered her son be placed behind bars. Toward the end of the documentary, after more than forty years, these men are finally given prison sentences. The sentences themselves were unremarkable, as they were given less serious indictments due to their elderly age and the widespread government denial that hindered full prosecutions. However, even this relaxed sentence was impactful for Haydee because it served to acknowledge her suffering and provided some form of restitution for Sebastián. Nevertheless, Haydee did not feel closure from this verdict. Moreover, she did not want her fate nor that of her unborn son's to have been determined purely by legal justice at the hands of the government.

How Haydee achieved justice took a profoundly unique form. After the trial, Haydee decided that it was time to "free" Sebastián from the horrible death that he met in the torture center. With her family members and friends, Haydee ventured to the original site of Villa Grimaldi where she had been tortured. Although painfully difficult to return to the site of her child's murder, Haydee knew that physically visiting the center was integral to confronting her trauma and moving forward. The former *desaparecida* explained how this act allowed her to

[276] Ibid.
[277] Ibid.

retrieve Sebastián's spirit from this place of Hell on Earth.[278] His physical corpse was never given to her, so he was thereby never freed from the walls of that place. For this grieving mother, therefore, his spirit and soul were also confined to that building until justice had answered. To release Sebastián's pain and sorrow, Haydee had her family and friends construct paper fish. Gathering on a boat, she constructed a symbolic act of setting Sebastián free. She had her loved ones toss the paper fish into the water, emblematic of Sebastián finally receiving eternal life. In the documentary, Haydee states: "Sebastián, with this act, I take you out of that place."[279] Through this powerful gesture, the tortured mother finally removed her son from the horrible place of his death and freed him to swim in the ocean for all of eternity. Through this, Haydee determined that her son's fate would not have been the gruesome one that he was condemned to by the naval officers, nor would it have been the inadequate legal sentence that the assailants received, but rather, it would be to liberate his soul so that he could finally be at peace.

What Haydee's story epitomizes is not only the pitfalls of tangible justice and the hope that can be attained with a symbolic manifestation of that pursuit, but more significantly, that symbolic justice is voice. In the act of symbolically freeing Sebastián's soul and allowing him to finally "live," Haydee effectively reclaimed autonomy over her body, her child, and her life. More specifically, this act enabled her to take back her identity. For years, her life had been controlled and determined by the whims of the military dictatorship. *They* decided when her child should meet his end, *they* decided that she was unworthy of humane treatment, and *they* decided how justice would be handled in the post-dictatorial years. What they had no authority over, however, was how Haydee coped with the aftermath of the trials and avenged her son's death. The disheartening reality of legal justice gave way for individuals like Haydee to pursue

[278] Ibid.
[279] Ibid.

some type of symbolic justice to grapple with dictatorial horrors on a personal, individual level. Her voice had been silenced under the dictatorship's rule. She was given no opinion toward the treatment of her body or the life of her son, rendering her helpless and dehumanized. Her voice continued to be silenced for decades as she continuously returned to government courts only to be dismissed and ignored, leaving her struggles invalidated. This symbolic act of "taking" Sebastián home, out of that dark place, and freeing him to "swim" allowed her to break this silence and assert her identity. The ocean itself as a symbol of eternity cannot be understated, for she brought Sebastián to a place where he would no longer be a biproduct of political violence and would instead enjoy pure, untainted freedom. To seek closure from such unfathomable loss, human beings need to find meaning or some form of hope in the senseless. Transforming Sebastián into a "flying fish" gave Haydee her voice in the silence, enabled her to find meaning, and illustrated that justice is not always the tangible, legal punishment, but can be a deeply personal and individual symbolic justice.

Conclusion

An idealist vision of justice would not have taken hold in the post-dictatorial Argentina that was recovering from years of heinous attacks on humanity. While there should have been immediate restitution for victims and their families, legal justice was continuously obstructed by pardons, amnesty laws, reduced sentences, and the dismissal of cases. Movements to hold military leaders accountable were met with violent threats. This widespread ignorance was the result of institutionalized silence that strove to destroy any notion of truth. While some acknowledged dictatorial crimes, many preferred to forget the past and move forward. Others denied allegations of human rights abuses and the atrocities that ensued. For nearly a decade,

innocent individuals had been disappeared from city streets, brought to horrifying torture centers, and murdered without any trace of their body, yet some claimed that this was justified behavior against terrorism, that the media fabricated the gravity of the situation, or that it did not occur at all. In a time when freedom was to prevail, the government and greater society found more covert ways to silence its population. Instead of patrolling university classrooms or throwing subversives from airplanes, the government instead established legal barriers to maintain the silence, covering its past and protecting the guilty. Justice thereby became an extension of the war against terrorism, associated with the people that the government sought to eliminate.

Though financial reparations, social activism and awareness, and legal prosecutions were critical steps toward government accountability, symbolic forms of justice were necessary in illustrating that complete closure can never be attained when a human life is terminated. However, despite this climate of conflicting accounts of memory and the delay of tangible justice, survivors found outlets. The Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo promised to never again be silenced by the government, advocating and searching for their loved ones and relatives despite opposition. Paulina in *La muerte y la doncella*, though fictional, found closure in her confession from Dr. Roberto Miranda, for her struggles had finally been acknowledged. Prosecutor Julio Strassera pursued the 1985 Trial of the Juntas, despite the imminent threats to his life and minimal public support, placing justice and truth at the forefront of his work. Though in the Chilean context, Haydee Oberreuter represents survivors of totalitarian violence taking power into their own hands, returning autonomy to their lives, and finding meaning in a situation without hope. What these stories prove is that justice is not restrained by its black and white definition. An ideal form of justice and legal accountability can be grossly manipulated by those who want to silence inalienable human rights, paving the way for alternative mechanisms of

confronting the past. The more symbolic, personal forms of justice are championed by those who not only desire the truth but, more significantly, require the truth to heal from their trauma.

The years of silence and terror under the Argentinian military dictatorship catalyzed desertion of moral responsibility and rejection of human dignity. The distortion of reality and overwhelming violence gave rise to two opposing memory narratives, leaving society at a crossroads of how to confront its past and move forward. This dichotomy of conflict, rooted in years of pain and denial, launched a revolution in how the modern world perceives justice. When justice was not available through the legal system, Argentines sought change. Though the fight for truth, social activism, and the more symbolic tokens of justice provided some peace and resolution, dictatorial survivors were still left with the scars of the past. Despite being able to reclaim their voice, they were still left with tremendous loss. Moreover, the lack of complete accountability remains a problem today, as families and friends continue searching for answers and demanding an acknowledgement of their losses. While the fight for justice sought to deliver truth to victims, the legacy of silence continues to maintain systemic denial and pervert the attainment of closure.

Conclusion

March 24, 2023: the forty-seventh anniversary of the military coup d'état that would change Argentinian history forever. In observance of Argentina's Day of Remembrance of Truth and Justice, thousands of people processed through city streets, carrying photographs of disappeared loved ones. The President of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, ninety-two-year-old Estela de Carlotto, stated: "We will always continue to look after this democracy in Argentina and all of the Great Homeland. When we do this, we are honoring the memory of those who fought for a fair, free and sovereign homeland."[280] This public process of remembrance continues decades after the dictatorship's collapse, allowing those who were silenced to reclaim their voice and actively commemorate the lives of those who were unjustly killed. Moreover, this continued display of advocacy illustrates the commitment of human rights organizations and Argentines in general to establishing truth and justice. For democracy to prevail, these individuals have promised to never forget the sacrifices of *los desaparecidos* and continue fighting on their behalf.

In this same vein, de Carlotto demanded "an end to hate speech and denialism" while marching through the cities of Buenos Aires.[281] The purpose of this national holiday becomes clearly twofold: not only is it a promise to remember the lives of those who were taken, but it

[280] "Argentines march to commemorate dictatorship's victims," *Buenos Aires Herald*, March 25, 2023, https://buenosairesherald.com/society/argentines-march-to-commemorate-dictatorships-victims.

[281] Ibid.

also embodies the continued struggle for justice in Argentina. Though nearly five decades have passed since the dictatorship assumed power, the government has still not made full amends for their past atrocities. This passive attitude toward history is not unique to the modern Argentinian government. Many national entities firmly believe that the past is the past, and that contemporary governments should not be held responsible for crimes committed under past leadership. However, these answers do not suffice for passionate and frustrated advocates like the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who are still demanding answers. For these individuals, it is essential that modern democracies acknowledge the crimes of the past, so as to prevent history from repeating itself. Moreover, it is not enough to simply move forward. Families were left destroyed by the violent agenda of Videla's military government, and yet many are still in the dark about what happened to their loved ones. Thus, this process of commemoration equally represents the continued pledge to hold past, present, and even future governments accountable for delivering truth and justice.

With this in mind, Argentina's current President, Alberto Fernández, wrote the following on social media: "Like every March 24, we embrace each other and march, valuing collective memory."[282] Such a statement is not surprising, as Fernández aims to spread a message of solidarity and unity as Argentines. However, what this thesis revealed is that a national holiday does not necessarily indicate "collective memory." While collective memory may be the present hope for Argentina's government, the post-dictatorial years have revealed that achieving an objective, unanimous, complete truth has been nearly impossible. The deeply rooted ideological conflicts that pervaded the pre-dictatorial years and had catastrophic ramifications under dictatorial violence only exacerbated the processes of memory formation after the dictatorship's

[282] Ibid.

collapse. Moreover, the pressing issue of silence, both on the part of the government as well as many of the people, was converted into post-dictatorial denial that gave rise to conflicts of memory and a delay of justice. Thus, while President Fernández and other current government leaders might propose collective memory and truth as their goal, the continued fight for justice by the Mothers, Grandmothers, and other human rights organizations points to a very different reality.

This thesis set out to analyze the mechanisms and nature of a totalitarian culture of silence that give it the capacity to disrupt human nature. Studying the obligatory silence of the detention centers revealed the intense dehumanization that *los desaparecidos* were forced to endure. Beyond the walls of the centers of physical torture pointed to overwhelming psychological terror to which even the "innocent" were subjected. What this investigation revealed was that silence—accompanied by threats of persecution—has a potent capability to overturn commonplace societal function. A world where people could speak freely, defend their loved ones, and use the government as a resource was completely replaced by one in which individuals had no obligation to each other, but only to the state, rendering society numb to a moral conscience. Government censorship helped to fuel this culture of denying reality, not only by lying about their atrocities, but also by blatantly ignoring the truth. The 1978 World Cup, for instance, allowed the government to broadcast Argentina as a nation of stability, peace, and glory, despite sponsoring heinous torture against innocent individuals. Though some were brave enough to resist dictatorial restrictions on free speech, such as Robert Cox, editor of the *Buenos Aires Herald*, exposing dictatorial hypocrisy came with a grave risk to one's safety. As a result, individuals were often forced into silence for fear of their personal safety. However, not everyone remained quiet out of fear: some embraced the culture of silence as ardent supporters

of dictatorial rule. Military families and wealthier individuals welcomed with open arms a system that benefited their interests and promised to eliminate Marxist influence from society, thus contributing to the silence that did not have serious consequences on their lives. What this first chapter exposed is that while silence can be its tangible manifestations, such as the loss of free speech, it also encompasses government methods of censorship, passive legitimization of dictatorial rule, and the complete lack of moral accountability to one another. It was this tense and fear-ridden climate that set the stage for what was to come in the post-dictatorial years.

Memory is an intrinsic part of the human being, giving us comfort in the past to move forward in the future. Yet remembering history is not necessarily so straightforward, especially when dealing with painful memories. This thesis presented the complex dilemmas that characterize remembering and memorializing totalitarian violence, specifically in the Argentinian context. There are undeniable connections between the concepts of survivorship, memory formation, and identity development in post-dictatorial societies. Survivors must confront an array of emotions, ranging from guilt and shame to anger and frustration to a degree of repressive memory-engagement. Yet at the same time, there is a necessity for action in order to heal from the past. Thus, while survivors may want to forget the past because its memory caused too much suffering, its confrontation is inevitable to moving forward. Attitudes toward historical memory simultaneously lead to identity constructions, in which individuals associate themselves with certain groups, namely the survivors or the perpetrators, furthering social divisions. Dictatorial collapse ushered a wave of social activism, as groups like the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo joined together to combat injustice and to fight for answers. Artistic commemoration, parks, monuments, and national holidays created public spaces where people could commemorate victims as well as fight for truth and meaning. At the same time,

however, many government leaders and individuals who had supported dictatorial rule extended the culture of silence by openly denying what had occurred. These two opposing accounts of memory—two diverging narratives of the truth—led to a deeply polarized post-dictatorial society. While activists were committed to unveiling human rights abuses and breaking institutionalized silence, former military leaders refused to acknowledge what occurred. These clashes of memory would have a profound influence on the pursuit of justice, as ideological differences and the persistence of silence continued to pervade the delivery of truth.

Though justice should have been an objective conversation, incriminating those who committed vicious crimes against humanity, it became quickly politicized in post-dictatorial Argentina. Justice was no longer about making reparations to victims and prosecuting military assailants, but was instead representative of the dichotomy of those who wanted to uphold dictatorial silence and those who did everything to destroy it. What this thesis exposed, therefore, is that justice has significant gray areas when influenced by a polarized political climate. The post-dictatorial fight for justice revealed the limitations of proper compensatory justice, for what survivors wanted more than reparations was an acknowledgement of the suffering that they endured and an abandonment of denial. This struggle for a validation of their pain manifested itself in significant expressions of social justice. The concept of transitional justice has become associated with Argentina's government's shift from dictatorial rule to democracy, necessitating a confrontation of the past to move forward as a nation. Though victims and their families longed for answers and truth, they simultaneously demanded concrete restitution through the indictments of perpetrators. However, legal justice was complicated and undermined by hindrances to justice, such as Amnesty Laws and pardons, furthering delaying punishment and serving to forgive criminals of heinous crimes against humanity. While eventually the legal

system offered rather small victories for survivors after years of denial, victims sought other ways to formally deal with the trauma that they endured. What these individuals desired most was restorative justice, or the return of their loved ones who were killed, yet because this was not possible, they turned to other outlets for expressing their frustration with an incomplete justice. Understanding the power of symbolism was critical to the development of this thesis: symbolic silences were just as destructive as tangible silences, and symbolic memorialization was equally as important as physical memory processes. Similarly, in the post-dictatorial years, symbolic justice offered an alternative for those who did not find closure in a corrupt legal process, allowing them to come to terms with their suffering on an individual level and to help them process their grief.

Above all, this study has been an analysis of the human nature. Throughout history, the two most pressing questions arising out of a period of violence, abuse of power, or an unavoidable tragedy are 1. What makes human nature so evil that caused people to behave in such a cruel way? and 2. What makes human nature so positive that people were able to not only endure, but recover from such tragedy? The conversation then becomes not necessarily about the specific events of a historical atrocity, but instead about the strengths and limitations of human nature. Historical violence requires individuals to question both the hope and despair of the human being. People have the possibility to create so much good but have just as much a capacity to inflict harm. It is the timeless internal conflict between Eros and Thanatos, where human nature dictates that we are driven by two instincts, one of love and one of destruction. This project unveiled the worst extremes of the Thanatos drive, where the military dictatorship committed unthinkable tragedies against innocent victims. Kidnapping, rape, torture, and extermination were not only horrifying forms of dehumanization, but catalyzed a society of fear

and panic. At the same time, however, this thesis suggests the hope that lay in humanity. Though the government tried to repress opposition in both the dictatorial years and in the transition to democracy, survivors showed that their voices would not be silenced. Despite the terror that ravaged Argentinian society from 1976-1983, some courageous individuals resisted dictatorial abuse and made a commitment to uncovering the truth. Although the odds were somewhat against them and the culture of denial presented countless obstacles to justice, victims work to this day to ensure that this tragedy is remembered and that it never happens again.

Though this study has centered on dictatorial power, processes of memory, and transitional justice in the context of Argentina, the hope is that these insights can be applied to understanding other cases of totalitarian violence. As this thesis showed, the parallels between Nazi violence in Germany and the military dictatorship in Argentina cannot be overlooked, suggesting that there is something consistent in analyzing authoritarian repression. Though dictatorships in different time periods have their own respective causes, mechanisms of violence, and aftermaths, there is something to be said about the universality of the human experience under totalitarian violence, specifically how it is transformed. Under brutal regimes, individuals are forced to make decisions, yet these choices are not without consequence for every action could be a matter of life or death. People must decide for themselves if they will resist unlawful abuses of human rights or acquiesce to the cultural of silence and denial. In a similar vein, once dictatorial power ends, humans are confronted with the choice of how to remember such a dark moment in time. Though the time and place may differ, the anxieties associated with survivorship are common in the aftermath of all traumatic histories. What is equally universal is the question of justice, or how to restore a sense of accountability and stability to society. Though every society grapples with justice in a different way, with some being more open to

punitive justice while others embrace myth and denial, all post-totalitarian states wrestle with justice to provide closure and to move forward to a better day.

The goal of this project was to utilize the specific case of Argentina to illustrate these timeless realities about human nature. Through the aforementioned theories and examples, this thesis can serve as a model for not only understanding totalitarian violence, but more significantly, its impact on everyday people. Humans are meaning-seeking creatures, demanding truth to better comprehend the human condition. Yet when normalcy is disrupted by unthinkable atrocities and violence, the search for meaning is not always straightforward. It is often painful, complicated, and disappointing. At the same time, however, there is hope for humanity to recognize its flaws and evils and to improve for future generations. If historians, global leaders, and ordinary people have an augmented understanding of the nature of totalitarian regimes and their impact on the human person, there is hope that these historic atrocities can be remembered and never again repeated.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

"VI. Amnesty Voided: The Cavallo Decision." Human Rights Watch: Argentina. Accessed February 18, 2023. https://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/2001/argentina/argen1201-06.htm#TopOfPage.

"Argentina's Day of Remembrance for Truth and Justice." News, The Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities. Accessed February 23, 2023. https://www.auschwitzinstitute.org/news/aipr-marks-arg-day-of-remembrance-for-truth-and-justice/.

"Argentines march to commemorate dictatorship's victims." *Buenos Aires Herald*. March 25, 2023. https://buenosairesherald.com/society/argentines-march-to-commemorate-dictatorships-victims.

Armentano, Javier. *Justicia perseguirás*. 2018. Digital collage. 590 x 360 cm. Museo de la Memoria, Rosario, Argentina, https://www.museodelamemoria.gob.ar/page/obra/id/131/Armentano%2C-Javier-/Justicia-perseguir%C3%A1s.

Bradas, Betiana. *El ojo de la memoria*. 2010. Mixed medium painting. 90 x 90. Museo de la Memoria, Rosario, Argentina, https://www.museodelamemoria.gob.ar/page/obra/id/134/Bradas%2C-Betiana/El-ojo-de-la-memoria.

Bronstein, Hugh. "Former Argentine dictator Videla dies in prison at age 87." *Reuters*. May 17, 2013. https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-argentina-dictator/former-argentine-dictator-%09videla-dies-in-prison-at-age-87-idUKBRE94G0HP20130517.

Bustos, Pachi, dir. *Haydee and the Flying Fish*. 2019; Santiago, Chile: Errante Producciones, 2020. Amazon Prime.

Calveiro, Pilar. *Poder y desaparición: los campos de concentración en Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Colihue, 2004. Retrieved from https://www.comisionporlamemoria.org/archivos/jovenesymemoria/bibliografia_web/dictadura/Calveiro.pdf.

"Children Born in Captivity." Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo. Accessed February 12, 2023. https://abuelas.org.ar/idiomas/english/cases/listado_cautiverio.htm.

CONADEP. *Nunca Más* (Never Again). El Proyecto Desaparecidos (Project Disappeared). 1985. http://www.desaparecidos.org/nuncamas/web/english/library/nevagain/nevagain_004.htm.

Cox, David. *Dirty Secrets, Dirty War*. Charleston: Evening Post Publishing Company, 2008.

de Onis, Juan. "Argentine Chief Urges Sacrifice." *New York Times*. March 31, 1976. https://www.nytimes.com/1976/03/31/archives/argentine-chief-urges-sacrifice-videla-declares-austerity-is-the.html.

Ferrari, León. *Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada + Detalle del Juicio Final de Hans Memling*. 1995. Collage in laser printing. 42 x 29.5 cm. Museo de la Memoria, Rosario, Argentina, https://www.museodelamemoria.gob.ar/page/obra/id/76/Ferrari%2C-Le%C3%B3n/Escuela-de-Mec%C3%A1nica-de-la-Armada-%2B-Detalle-del--Juicio-Final--de-Hans-Memling/.

Garcia, Daniel (AFP). "Argentina-Military." 1982. Digital photograph. Getty Images, https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/picture-taken-30-march-1982-of-a-worker-who-is-being-news-photo/496009132.

"History of Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo." Accessed January 13, 2023. Digital photograph. Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, https://abuelas.org.ar/idiomas/english/history.htm.

"José Abdala, Susana Falabella de Abdala." Muro de la Memoria. El Proyecto Desaparecidos (Project Disappeared). Accessed September 10, 2022. http://www.desaparecidos.org/arg/victimas/a/abdalaj/.

"Juicio a las Juntas Militares." Cases, International Crimes Database. Accessed February 6, 2023. https://www.internationalcrimesdatabase.org/Case/1118/Juicio-a-las-Juntas-Militares/.

Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) Staff. "Argentine Amnesty Laws Declared Unconstitutional." Latin America Data Base News & Educational Services. University of New Mexico Digital Repository. June 24, 2005. https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=14387&context=notisur.

Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) Staff. "Argentine Senate Rejects Promotions for Officers Accused of Rights Violations." Latin America Data Base News & Educational Services. University of New Mexico Digital Repository. November 4, 1994. https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=12712&context=notisur.

Levi, Primo. *The Drowned and the Saved*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988.

Levi, Primo. *Survival in Auschwitz*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

McConahay, Mary Jo. "Argentina's Past Dictatorship: Moving Toward Denial?" *The National Catholic Reporter*. May 12, 2017. https://www.ncronline.org/argentinas-past-%09dictatorship-moving-toward-denial.

McDonnell, Patrick. "Argentines Remember a Mother Who Joined the 'Disappeared'." *Los Angeles Times*. March 24, 2006. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2006-mar-24-fg-dirtywar24-story.html.

"Monument to the Victims of State Terrorism." Accessed February 19, 2023. Digital photograph. Parque de la Memoria, Buenos Aires, Argentina, https://parquedelamemoria.org.ar/en/monument/.

"Monumento a las victimas del terrorismo de estado" (Monument to the Victims of State Terror). Parque de la Memoria (Park of Memory). Buenos Aires, Argentina. Accessed online. https://parquedelamemoria.org.ar/en/monument/.

Nash, Elizabeth. "Argentinean Officer Jailed by Spain." Global Policy Forum. April 20, 2005. https://archive.globalpolicy.org/intljustice/universal/2005/0420scilingo.htm.

"Never Again to Silence." Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo. March 29, 2021. https://www.abuelas.org.ar/noticia/nunca-mls-al-silencio-1441.

Parque de la Memoria (Park of Memory). Buenos Aires, Argentina. Accessed online. https://parquedelamemoria.org.ar/en/park/.

Partnoy, Alicia. *The Little School*. San Francisco: Midnight Editions, 1986.

"President Jorge Videla (center) gives a thumbs-up to Osvaldo Ardiles (right) and captain Daniel Passarella (left) following the World Cup final between Argentina and Netherlands." Accessed October 15, 2022. Digital photograph. "While the World Watched." ESPN The Magazine & ESPNFC.com. ESPN. Courtesy of AP Photo. https://www.espn.com/espn/feature/story/_/id/11036214/while-world-watched-world-%20%09cup-brings-back-memories-argentina-dirty-war.

"Resolved Cases: Jorgelina Paula Molina Planas." Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo. Courtesy of Perry Willig, 2020. Accessed October 24, 2022. https://abuelas.org.ar/idiomas/english/cases/resueltos/025-molina-planas-jorgelina-paula.htm.

Strejilevich, Nora. *A Single, Numberless Death.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002.

Sutterud, Tone. "I'm a Child of Argentina's 'Disappeared'." *The Guardian*. December 27, 2014. https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/dec/27/child-argentinas-disappeared-new-family-identity.

Szurmuk, Monica. "One Single Countless Death: An Interview with Nora Strejilevich." *Bridges: A Jewish Feminist Journal* 8, nos. 1-2 (date unavailable): 1-6. Accessed September 20, 2022.

"There Was Genocide Here: Argentines Activists Slam Macri Gov't for Erasing History." *teleSUR*. January 31, 2017. https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Argentine-Activists-%09Slam-Govt-for-Erasing-Dictatorship-History-20170131-0006.html.

Thompson, Wright. "While the World Watched." ESPN The Magazine & ESPNFC.com. ESPN. June 9, 2014. https://www.espn.com/espn/feature/story/_/id/11036214/while-world-%09watched-world-cup-brings-back-memories-argentina-dirty-war.

Truth Commission: National Commission on the Disappeared." United States Institute of Peace. December 16, 1983. https://www.usip.org/publications/1983/12/truth-commission-argentina.

Videla, Jorge Rafael. 1980. Interview by Televisión Pública. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfESiQI_cYA&t=308s.

Secondary Sources

"1. Coordinated Repression." Operation Condor: A criminal conspiracy to forcibly disappear people. Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS). Accessed March 28, 2023. https://www.cels.org.ar/especiales/plancondor/en/.

Ávila, Benjamín, dir. *Infancia clandestina.* 2011; Buenos Aires, Argentina: Historias Cinematograficas, 2013. Vudu.

Campanella, Juan José, dir. *El secreto de sus ojos*. 2009; Buenos Aires, Argentina: Haddock Films, 2010. Amazon Prime.

Dorfman, Ariel. *Death and the Maiden*. 1990. Accessed online through Vanderbilt University. https://www.vanderbilt.edu/olli/class-materials/Death_and_the_Maiden_script.pdf.

Feierstein, Daniel. *Genocide as Social Practice: Reorganizing Society Under the Nazis and Argentina's Military Juntas*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014.

Feld, Claudia and Victoria J. Furio. "Constructing Memory through Television in Argentina." *Latin American Perspectives* 43, no. 5 (2016): 29-44.

Fletcher, Laurel E., Harvey M. Weinstein, and Jamie Rowen. "Context, Timing and the Dynamics of Transitional Justice: A Historical Perspective." *Human Rights Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (February 2009): 163-220.

Forteza, Gaspar. "Regarding Simón y otros: Accountability in Argentina and International Human Rights as Domestic Positive Law." *FIU Law Review* 3, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 187-233.

Jelin, Elizabeth. *Los trabajos de la* memoria. Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno de España Editores, S. A., 2002.

"Justice as a Virtue." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Stanford University. March 8, 2002. Revised August 7, 2020. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/justice-virtue/.

Kazemi, Arya Bardo. "Political violence in Argentina during the 1970s" (1997). *UNLV Retrospective Theses & Dissertations*. 3330.

Knudson, Jerry W. "Veil of Silence: The Argentine Press and the Dirty War, 1976-1983." *Latin American Perspectives* 24, no. 6 (November 1997): 93-112.

McFarland, Sam. "Azucena Villaflor, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and Struggle to End Disappearances." *International Journal of Leadership and Change* 6, no. 1 (June 2018): 57-66.

Mitre, Santiago, dir. *Argentina, 1985*. Culver City, California: Amazon Studios, 2022. Amazon Prime.

Osiel, Mark J. "Constructing Subversion in Argentina's Dirty War." *Representations* 75, no. 1 (Summer 2001): 199-158.

Plotkin, Mariano. *Mañana es San Perón: A Cultural History of Perón's Argentina*. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2003.

Robben, Antonius C. G. M. "How Traumatized Societies Remember: The Aftermath of Argentina's Dirty War." *Cultural Critique*, no. 5 (Winter 2005): 120-164.

Salvi, Valentina and Luis Alberto Hernández. "'We're All Victims': Changes in the Narrative of 'National Reconciliation' in Argentina." *Latin American Perspectives* 42, no. 3 (May 2015): 39-51.

Sheinin, David M. K. *Consent of the Damned: Ordinary Argentinians in the Dirty War*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012.

Verbitsky, Horacio. *The Flight: Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior*. New York: The New Press, 1996.