

The Dirty War And Desaparecidos

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Introduction

Argentina's "Dirty War" refers to the system of state terrorism practiced most intensively by the military dictatorship that ruled from 1976 to 1983. The regime called its project the Process of National Reorganization and claimed that it was fighting subversion. In reality, security forces and associated groups abducted, tortured, murdered, and forcibly disappeared people through a clandestine system that operated outside lawful judicial procedure. Victims included members of armed organizations, political activists, trade unionists, students, journalists, teachers, lawyers, religious workers, relatives, and people with little or no political involvement. (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, 1984; Feitlowitz, 1998; Robben, 2005)

The term "war" is controversial because it can imply two equivalent armies governed by the same rules. Argentina did experience serious political violence before and during the dictatorship, including attacks by guerrilla organizations and violence by right-wing groups. State power, however, was used to create secret detention centers, deny custody, destroy evidence, steal children, and terrorize society. The word *desaparecidos*, or "the disappeared," describes people whose detention and fate the state concealed. (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, 1984; Feitlowitz, 1998)

Political Crisis Before the 1976 Coup

Argentina entered the 1970s after years of military intervention, political exclusion, economic conflict, and polarization. Juan Perón returned from exile and was elected president in 1973, but he died in 1974. His wife and vice president, Isabel Perón, succeeded him. Her government faced inflation, strikes, factional struggle, guerrilla violence, and right-wing terrorism. (Robben, 2005)

The Argentine Anticommunist Alliance, commonly called Triple A, carried out assassinations and threats against perceived leftists. The government also authorized military operations against guerrillas, particularly the People's Revolutionary Army in Tucumán. Repression therefore began before the coup. On 24 March 1976, the armed forces removed Isabel Perón and installed a junta led initially by commanders of the army, navy, and air force. (Feitlowitz, 1998; Robben, 2005)

The Architecture of State Terror

The dictatorship suspended democratic institutions, censored expression, intervened in universities and unions, and reorganized government through military authority. Repression was decentralized in

operational zones but coordinated through national security structures. Intelligence services identified targets; armed groups seized them from homes, workplaces, streets, or checkpoints; and victims were taken to clandestine detention centers. (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, 1984; Robben, 2005)

Abduction usually occurred without a warrant. Families searched police stations, courts, military offices, hospitals, and prisons but received denials. Habeas corpus petitions often failed because authorities refused to acknowledge detention. This uncertainty was deliberate. A visible prisoner can receive legal representation and become the subject of public advocacy; a disappeared person is placed outside the official record while family members remain trapped between hope and grief. (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, 1984; Feitlowitz, 1998)

Clandestine Detention, Torture, and Murder

Hundreds of clandestine detention sites operated in military facilities, police buildings, schools, houses, and other locations. The Navy Mechanics School in Buenos Aires became one of the most notorious, but the system extended throughout the country. Prisoners were often blindfolded, assigned numbers, isolated, interrogated, and tortured. Methods included electric shock, beatings, sexual violence, simulated execution, deprivation, and threats against relatives. (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, 1984; Feitlowitz, 1998)

Some captives were released or transferred to recognized prisons. Many were murdered. Bodies were buried under false identities, burned, destroyed, or disposed of in rivers and the sea. In the “death flights,” drugged prisoners were thrown from aircraft. Concealment protected perpetrators, prevented mourning, and made the state’s threat appear unlimited. (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, 1984; Feitlowitz, 1998)

How Many People Disappeared?

Numbers must be presented carefully. The National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, CONADEP, documented 8,961 cases for its 1984 report, while explicitly recognizing that its list was incomplete. Human-rights organizations and the Argentine movement for memory commonly use the figure of 30,000 disappeared. Later state registries have continued to gather and verify information about disappearance and murder. (Argentina.gob.ar, n.d.; Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, 1984)

These figures should not be treated as a contest in which uncertainty diminishes the crime. Clandestinity, destroyed records, fear, exile, incomplete reporting, and years of denial make a final count difficult. Each documented file represents an individual, family, workplace, and community. Responsible historical writing distinguishes documented cases, estimates, and symbolic figures rather than presenting one number without explanation. (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de

Personas, 1984)

Women, Pregnancy, and Stolen Children

Women were targeted as activists, relatives, workers, and students, and they experienced gendered torture and sexual violence. Pregnant detainees were sometimes kept alive until childbirth. Their babies were then taken and placed with military or police families or other households, while the mothers were murdered or disappeared. Birth records and identities were falsified. (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, 1984; Feitlowitz, 1998)

The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo organized to find these children and restore their identities. Their work contributed to advances in genetic identification and the creation of a national genetic data bank. Adults raised under false identities have faced complex emotional and legal realities when discovering their origins. The theft of children shows that repression extended beyond eliminating opponents; it attempted to control family, memory, and the next generation. (Robben, 2005)

The Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo

In 1977, mothers searching for missing children began gathering at the Plaza de Mayo near the presidential palace. Police rules against standing in groups led them to walk in circles. Their white headscarves became an international symbol. By appearing publicly and repeatedly, they challenged the state's attempt to make both victims and grief invisible. (Feitlowitz, 1998; Robben, 2005)

The movement was not politically uniform, and it later divided into organizations with different strategies. Its historical importance lies in transforming private loss into a public human-rights claim. The Grandmothers focused especially on children born in captivity or abducted with parents. Relatives, survivors, lawyers, journalists, religious figures, and international organizations also documented abuse despite censorship and danger. (Robben, 2005)

The Falklands/Malvinas War and the End of the Junta

The dictatorship faced economic crisis, labor protest, internal division, and declining legitimacy. In April 1982, Argentina occupied the Falkland/Malvinas Islands, initiating war with the United Kingdom. Defeat in June discredited the armed forces and accelerated the transition. Elections were held in October 1983, and Raúl Alfonsín assumed the presidency on 10 December. (Robben, 2005)

The military did not end repression simply because it sensed one immediate revolution. The regime

lost authority through a combination of economic failure, social mobilization, exposure of human-rights crimes, internal conflict, and military defeat. The democratic transition created an opportunity for investigation but did not guarantee justice. (Robben, 2005)

CONADEP and *Nunca Más*

President Alfonsín created CONADEP in December 1983 to receive testimony, inspect detention sites, and collect evidence. Its report, *Nunca Más*, documented the systematic nature of disappearance and provided evidence for prosecution. The archive now forms part of Argentina's institutional memory and contains testimony from survivors and families. (Argentina.gob.ar, n.d.; Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, 1984)

CONADEP was a landmark, but survivors and human-rights organizations had already carried out essential documentation. Testimony involved risk and trauma. The report helped convert dispersed experiences into a public record that contradicted claims of isolated excesses. (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, 1984)

The Trial of the Juntas and the Struggle Against Impunity

In 1985, civilian courts tried leaders of the military juntas. The Trial of the Juntas was extraordinary in Latin America because a new democracy prosecuted former rulers through ordinary judicial institutions. Several commanders were convicted. The trial demonstrated that state officials could be held personally responsible for organized repression. (Robben, 2005)

Military pressure and concern about governability later contributed to the Full Stop and Due Obedience laws, which limited prosecutions. President Carlos Menem issued pardons. Human-rights groups continued pursuing truth through domestic and international cases, identity investigations, demonstrations, and "truth trials." Congress annulled the impunity laws in 2003, and the Supreme Court declared them unconstitutional in 2005. Prosecutions for crimes against humanity resumed and have continued across many jurisdictions. (Robben, 2005)

Justice has been slow and incomplete. Defendants and witnesses have died, records remain missing, and some victims have not been identified. Yet Argentina developed one of the world's most sustained domestic accountability processes for dictatorship-era crimes.

Memory, Sites, and Democratic Culture

Former detention centers have become sites of memory, museums, archives, and educational spaces.

The ESMA complex is a prominent example. Memorialization is contested because societies disagree about language, responsibility, and political use of history. Debate is legitimate, but denial of documented torture and disappearance threatens democratic understanding. (Argentina.gob.ar, n.d.; Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, 1984)

The original essay suggests that the Dirty War is unlikely to recur because democracy and rule of law were restored. No democracy can treat non-recurrence as automatic. Prevention requires civilian control of security institutions, independent courts, access to archives, education, free expression, protection of protesters and minorities, and resistance to language that portrays opponents as enemies outside the law.

Intergenerational Effects

Forced disappearance creates an ambiguous loss because families lack certainty, remains, and ordinary mourning. Children grew up without parents; some lived under false identities; survivors carried physical and psychological trauma; and exile divided communities. Later generations inherited questions about silence, complicity, resistance, and justice. (Feitlowitz, 1998; Robben, 2005)

Intergenerational impact does not mean that every Argentine fears the armed forces in the same way. Memory varies by family, region, politics, and experience. The national commitment expressed by “Nunca Más” is strongest when it protects universal rights rather than becoming only a slogan associated with one political faction.

Conclusion

Argentina’s Dirty War was a system of state terrorism in which the dictatorship used clandestine detention, torture, murder, disappearance, censorship, and child appropriation to control society. Political violence existed before the coup, but it did not justify placing state power outside the law. The desaparecidos were hidden to obstruct justice, terrorize families, and deny public mourning. The Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, survivors, CONADEP, the Trial of the Juntas, and later human-rights trials transformed concealment into evidence and memory. Argentina’s recovery demonstrates the importance of democracy and legal accountability, while also showing that prevention requires continued vigilance. (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, 1984; Feitlowitz, 1998; Robben, 2005)

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