

**Digging Up the Dirt:  
Who Really Won Argentina's "Dirty War"?**  
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In 1976, Argentina's military and political leaders, under the rule of General Jorge Videla, began a mysterious, undeclared, and violent war against alleged political subversion and leftist idealism throughout the country. Videla, who forcefully took over President Isabel Peron's rule, carried out his mission until the fall of his regime in 1983. Argentine police and other military officials raided homes in search of evidence of subversion. When they did not find anything or realized they had raided the wrong home, they went through with the abduction anyway. Up to 30,000 university students and other young adults disappeared during the kidnappings, practically wiping out an entire generation. The disappearances of these young intellectuals became known as the "Dirty War," a term coined by the media to describe the secrecy and the government's attempt at hiding the genocide. The whereabouts of the kidnapped men and women were known only by military and government officials. Political leaders refused to own up to the disappearances and worked hard to deny the reports of torture and murder that were circulating. Of the thousands of kidnapped young adults, only a few managed to escape. Unfortunately, most of these lucky people were too scared to speak out against what they had endured, so it wasn't until years later that the Argentine people were fully aware of the violence committed by their government. Through first hand accounts, though, it has become clear over the years that the treatment of "los desaparecidos" (the disappeared) was of a torturous nature, almost always leading to murder.

The Argentine government did everything in its power to oppress the people with a thick veil of silence; the crimes committed by the government between 1976 and 1983 were denied by the perpetrators throughout the war. Families of the disappeared were left without answers as to the whereabouts of their loved ones. School teachers did not speak of what was happening in their classrooms, because they feared for their lives. The Dirty War was not and still is not written about in any textbooks. And the political leaders, military officials, and wealthy company owners and businessmen who gave money to Videla's cause have yet to reveal information regarding the dark period. The secrecy of the crimes against humanity and the government's unwillingness to give an honest account of its actions is a clear example of how certain people who have held positions of power have been able to write history from their own one-sided perspective. The story of the Dirty War is one of abuse of power in what Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls "the production of history," and more specifically the "silencing of the past"<sup>1</sup>.

But who really won the Dirty War? With this paper, I intend to show how the perpetrators of the Dirty War in fact failed in keeping their dirty deeds a secret. The victims of this dark period in Argentina have been searching for ways to break through the veil of silence under which they were living, and have found success in a number of different outlets and mediums. I will use Trouillot to illustrate what the people of Argentina were fighting for. They made sure the world knew that there is a difference between "what happened" and "what is said to have happened"—the two common

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<sup>1</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Silencing the Past: The Power and Production of History (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

definitions of history that Trouillot identifies. The history that the people who carried out the Dirty War would like the world to believe is that the crimes they committed between 1976 and 1983 never happened. The Argentine generals and politicians who ran the war have attempted to convince the world of this history by denying their involvement in any abductions, playing dumb to accusations of torture and murder, and ignoring the cries of families desperate to know what was done to their relatives. Having control of the media and any publications produced in Argentina worked in their favor, as the absence of the war in textbooks and newspapers proved to be another method of silencing the truth.

Trouillot examines this control over written history, expressing concern for “the many ways in which the production of historical narratives involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production.” But he also makes the point that with any historical event, “what happened leaves traces, some of which are quite concrete—buildings, dead bodies, censuses, monuments, diaries, political boundaries—that limit the range and significance of any historical narrative.” The “materiality of the sociohistorical process”—his first definition of history—“sets the stage for future historical narratives”—his second definition.<sup>2</sup> Applying this concept to the Dirty War, it is clear that although the military and political leaders during the time of the war denied and ignored what was happening the traces that were left, including missing people, stories of the escaped, and testimonies of families and witnesses, led the people of Argentina to revise their incomplete and

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<sup>2</sup> Trouillot, Silencing the Past.

incorrectly written history and share with the world the parts of the war that had been silenced.

Argentina's dirty past is no longer completely silenced. The Argentine people fought back by speaking with news reporters, writing books and articles, sharing diaries, and protesting right in the middle of all the action- the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In later years, personal testimonies were published, court cases were brought to life, and films were made to showcase the horror of the war. The oppressors have been unsuccessful in their silencing of the war because since the very first kidnapping, the people of Argentina have been finding the means to tell their side of the story. Four key outlets introduced the world to the tragedy of Argentina's Dirty War: organizations, published personal testimonies, films, and legal battles.

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo is an organization that was founded in the early years of the kidnappings, and every day during the war it attracted hundreds of new members. These women were mothers, aunts, sisters, daughters, friends and cousins of missing men and women, and they began protesting in the center of Buenos Aires to press the government for some answers. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo wore white headscarves with the names of their missing family members written or sewn on them, and those headscarves have become a powerful symbol for the organization over the years; they are now recognized as the trademark of the Mothers' struggle. The association's motto, "todo es ilusion menos el poder,"—everything is an illusion except power—explains perfectly why there was such a need for the organization. Truth, with

regard to the Dirty War, is not what has been written down. The only truth that surrounds the war is that the country's leaders abused their power to commit and cover up their crimes. Their power is what allowed them to create a false history. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo have had to fight power with power, and prove that, as Trouillot puts it, all "facts are not created equal."<sup>3</sup> Since 1976, members of the association have become a dominant force in the journey to justice for victims of the War. Beginning with their picket signs and photographs, to their current position as the most influential organization fighting for this cause with a website (<http://www.madres.org>) that can be viewed all over the world, The Mothers of The Plaza de Mayo have become as powerful as the Dirty War leaders themselves.<sup>4</sup> Today, the organization has taken on causes far beyond Argentina's Dirty War, such as social and political problems in Bolivia and Cuba, to name a few. And the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo are not the only organization that developed during the time of the Dirty War as an outlet to voice the truth. Two human-rights organizations—the Relatives of the Detained/Disappeared for Political Reasons and the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo—have found power in numbers and have made great strides toward justice and peace as well.

A second outlet the people of Argentina have used to fight the government's "our-lips-are-sealed" policy is written media, such as newspaper articles, books of testimonies and interviews, and the sharing of journals of victims and witnesses. One of these

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<sup>3</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*.

<sup>4</sup> Asociacion Madres de Plaza de Mayo, <http://www.madres.org> (accessed 19 April 2005).

publications, Matilde Mellibovsky and Matthew Proser's book, Circle of Love over Death: Testimonies of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, reveals the stories of many families who suffered through the War, including Carmen Isabel Rodino de Cobo. In this excerpt, she speaks of the abductions of her two daughters, Ines and Noemi. Only Noemi survived the kidnappings.

Noemi reappeared spontaneously, but after a little while, she was detained again and remained out of reach for sixteen days, during which time we didn't know whether she was being held in detention or not, because they denied us access to her. At the police station where they had her, they denied that she was there. We knew she was there from information we had gathered, but officially they denied she was being detained. After sixteen days, the police chief handed her over without any explanation.<sup>5</sup>

Other publications have tackled the issue of the Dirty War, including many journals and newspapers in the United States. For example, Newsweek International published an article recently, in August of 2004, called "Opening Old Wounds" that attacks the leaders of the War for their secrecy and deception. The articles that continue to appear all over the world, almost thirty years after the start of the Dirty War, prove that the Argentine people have really been successful in their quest to prove history wrong.

Films, including documentaries and dramas, have examined the war and its outcome, showcasing the division that has been made between the Argentine people and their untrustworthy government. The 1985 film "La Historia Oficial" ("The Official History"), by Argentine-born director Luis Puenzo, is itself an example of how the people have broken the silence, and within the film there are many examples of how people

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<sup>5</sup> Matilde Mellibovsky and Matthew Proser, Circle of Love over Death: Testimonies of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Willimantic, Conn.: Curbstone Press, 1997).

fought the oppression during the time of war. The movie follows a high school teacher, Alicia, who is part of the upper class in Argentina, and whose husband works in close collaboration with the government and military. The film takes place during the Dirty War, in Buenos Aires. As the story unfolds, Alicia begins to question her husband's sincerity regarding their adopted daughter, Gabi. Hints from her liberal students and peers, and a run in with a Grandmother of the Plaza de Mayo help Alicia uncover truths about the secrets of the war in which she has unknowingly been involved. Alicia discovers that her adopted daughter was taken from a pregnant kidnapped young woman who was later murdered by the people for whom Alicia's own husband works. Puenzo's choice to include such a sensitive truth about the Dirty War was risky, but the outcome proved positive, because the film successfully spills many of the War's secrets. The film takes a very negative stance on the war, and is another defeat for Argentina's guarded leaders, because it tells the story the government never wanted its people to hear.

Other films, such as the Argentine documentary "The Garden of the Forking Paths," have followed suit, and now students in the United States and in other countries throughout the world are studying the crimes against humanity that were committed during the war. "The Garden of the Forking Paths" is a documentary that focuses on Argentina's political turmoil and shows the awful affect the crisis had on the country. There has yet to be a film that shows Argentina's state from 1976 to 1983 in a positive light, and the lack of those films defies the silence of the government who claimed that everything was just fine.

Since the fall of General Videla in 1983, Argentina's leaders have been using the court system to fight for truth and justice. The new regime change in 1983 brought hopes of answers, democracy, and justice for the victims of the Dirty War. However, the road to cleaning up the war was rough, and officers and political leaders who permitted the torture and murder lived freely for years, keeping their secrets tucked far away from the public. Their human rights violations went unpunished, due to the protection of certain amnesty laws. This continued until 2003, when current Argentine President Nestor Kirchner finally broke the silence. According to Christian Science Monitor journalist Tom Hennigan, President Kirchner "annulled a decree forbidding extradition of former military men to stand trial...for crimes committed in Argentina."<sup>6</sup>

Using the legal system as an outlet to break the silence has achieved only moderate success, but the future looks positive for those who have suffered due to the War. For now, justice and peace are still a distant dream for relatives of the disappeared. In his article "The Implementation of Human Rights as an International Concern: The Case of Argentine General Suarez-Mason and Lessons for the World Community," Mark Gibney remarks that the "process of attempting to come to terms with the horrors committed by a previous regime" is a difficult and often unfulfilled task. He also believes that, in the case of Argentina, "those who ordered political terror as well as those who carried out the torture, the rapes, the disappearances, and the brutal killings have not

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<sup>6</sup> Tom Hennigan, "Argentina Takes Steps Toward Cleaning Up 'Dirty War,'" Christian Science Monitor, 29 July 2003, p. 7.

been held accountable for their crimes.”<sup>7</sup> The difficulties that will come to pass during the persecution of the Dirty Wars leaders do not compare to how hard Kirchner and the relatives of the disappeared are willing to fight.

What is important about all of these outlets, and other means such as the internet and music (two outlets that are able to reach an international population), is that not only are they working to unveil a silence that has draped their lives for years, but in doing so are actually creating history itself. They are denouncing the history that has been written for them, and in doing so have created a new history, one filled with passion and power in the hands of the people. Since 2003, upwards of forty military and political men who were in power during the war have been arrested and have been/will be tried for their crimes. The arrests have brought the people of Argentina some sense of justice, but there are many questions that to this day remain unanswered, and thousands of families are still clueless as to the whereabouts of their loved ones. Rosa Roisinblit, a leader of the human rights group the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, said, “It is progress on the road to justice, truth, and the end of impunity. But I think there is still a long and winding road ahead.”<sup>8</sup>

So have the leaders of the Dirty War, the men who thought they’d be able to stealthily wipe out their opposition, really won? It is clear that they have not. The real victors in this nameless annihilation of left-wing thinkers are the women of the Plaza de

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Gibney, “The Implementation of Human Rights as an International Concern: The Case of Argentine General Suarez-Mason and Lessons for the World Community,” Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law 24 (1992): 165-199.

<sup>8</sup> Hennigan, “Argentina Takes Steps.”

Mayo, today's leaders who are working to justify the crimes, and the human rights activists who have brought the Dirty War into the spotlight and have gained support for their cause. The name that was given to the period alone holds such a negative connotation, it is impossible to ignore the people's victory in breaking their leaders' silence. But the struggle toward closure is not yet over, and the muffled cries of families have yet to be heard fully and clearly. There are organizations within and outside of Argentina and human rights activists the world over who will continue to fight until the whole truth is revealed.

It is clear from the forcefulness with which the people have fought the silence that the production of history doesn't need to revolve around power. Money and a high position may work for a while to present a false history to the world, but sooner or later the traces left behind create a strong enough basis for resistance. History is written by those in power, but that does not mean that power can't change hands. The people of Argentina have defied their commanding leaders by resisting the silence that has plagued their country for years. They have taken matters into their own hands and are creating history on their own terms.