Struggling with the past: the human rights movement and the politics of memory in post-dictatorship Argentina (1983-2006)

van Drunen, S.P.C.

Citation for published version (APA):
Preface

The period of the military dictatorship (1976–1983) in Argentina continues to influence political relations despite numerous attempts to officially close the subject. This book analyses this phenomenon, focussing on the struggle of human rights organizations, victims of the dictatorship, and other social and political groups that have persistently tried to keep the past on the public agenda, mobilizing around the demands for truth, justice and memory. Through a historical analysis of this struggle, and the dilemmas and conflicts that emerged in this context, my research aims to gain some insights into the ways in which Argentine society has given meaning to the period of the military dictatorship. The study will contend that the societal actors demanding truth, justice and memory have played a crucial role in shaping both the contents of public memory and the ways in which the past was dealt with at the institutional and political levels. The insights acquired in this study are not only relevant for readers interested in Argentina, but also for scholars and practitioners concerned with the question of how societies deal with the aftermath of repressive regimes and gross human rights violations in other countries. But before developing the main argument, some historical background is necessary.

In the period between March 1976 and December 1983, a repressive military regime was in power, responsible for thousands of people disappearing, being imprisoned or assassinated. The majority of the victims were citizens who had been engaged in some kind of social or political activity, and who had spoken up for social justice. Among them were journalists, intellectuals, artists, politicians, professors of all levels of education, students and unionist workers, and later also human rights activists and relatives of the disappeared. The widespread terror that was imposed on society was carried out in the context of what the armed forces called the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (National Reorganization Process, *el Proceso*) that started with the military coup on 24 March 1976. Their aim was the complete reorganization of Argentine society, in which the economy was to be modernized and liberalized, and become part of the world economy; the guerrilla and all other expressions of ‘subversion’ were to be eliminated at their roots; and the working class disciplined. A new moral order respectful of ‘Christian, modern and western’ values was to be imposed on Argentine society (Pion Berlin 1989: 105; McSherry 1997: 78–80; Munck 1998: 54). As soon as the military took power, the most basic civil and political liberties were suppressed: strikes, collective negotiations and students organizations were forbidden, unions came under governmental control, censorship was imposed on the media and political parties were suspended. The military took control of every single governing structure of the country, occupying most of the ministries and the provincial governments, and leaving the municipalities to allied civilians, principally of the Peronist and the Radical parties (Novarro and Palermo 2003: 21).
A tradition of military involvement in internal affairs and political violence preceded the military coup of 24 March 1976. From 1930 onwards, the armed forces, which had become a national institution in its own right, regularly intervened with military coups, often in alliance with the landowning and urban conservative elites. This tendency was reinforced by the ten years of Peronist rule (1945-1955). While Perón managed to gain the unconditional support of the working class, he also met with the opposition of conservative sectors within the armed forces, as well as of important sectors of civil society. These sectors within society developed strong anti-Peronist feelings, and sought means to break the power of Perón. In 1955 he was overthrown by a military coup backed by the Catholic Church hierarchy, all the non-Peronist parties, and important sectors of the middle classes and of the rural and urban economic elites (Cavarozzi 1997: 19; Marchak 1999: 57). Fear for Peronism also motivated another military coup in 1966. Until then, the military had always withdrawn after the coup, leaving the government to be run by civilian presidents. In 1966, however, they made a first attempt to remain in power. Their goal was to impose a political and social ‘order’ and stabilize the economy, understood as the reduction of the role of the state that had become central under the Peronist governments (Tedesco 1999: 9; 17).

During this dictatorship, known as the Revolución Libertadora (Liberating Revolution) and which lasted until 1973, political polarization deepened. The suppression of civil and political rights, in combination with an international context of the Cold War, sparked resistance movements among workers, students and the lower ranks of the Catholic Church, motivated by ideas of social justice and revolution. Sources of inspiration were as diverse as the Cuban Revolution, the experience of May 1968 in France, and the liberation struggles in the colonized world. A process of political radicalization set in among these sectors, in which the use of armed struggle became increasingly seen as a means to achieving social change. At the beginning of the 1970s, politico-military (or guerrilla) organizations emerged, the Marxist–Leninist Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (People’s Revolutionary Army, ERP), and the Peronist Montoneros being the two most important ones. The Montoneros received the support of Perón, who had become the central figure of the opposition during his exile in Madrid (Gillespie 1982: 40). The organization experienced an exponential growth following its strategic alliance with the Juventud Peronista (Peronist Youth, JP). This alliance provided the organization with a mass movement, which came to be identified as the Tendencia Revolucionaria (Revolutionary Tendency) within the Peronist movement.

These politico–military organizations, as well as other forms of protest such as mass strikes, riots, and demonstrations put the military regime under extreme pressure (Gillespie 1982: 113). As social protests increased, the government saw itself obliged to free the road for elections. Frenetic political activity characterized the period of the electoral campaign, which lasted until March 1973. The Peronist Tendencia Revolucionaria played a key role in the campaign, mobilizing impressive numbers of people on the streets, and at demonstrations and rallies in favour of Héctor Cámpora, the Peronist candidate who ran for presidency because Perón had been proscribed from running (Gillespie 1982: 134–5; Marchak 1999: 96–8). Cámpora won the elections, and was inaugurated President of Argentina on 25 May 1973. During his short presidency, the Tendencia Revolucionaria acquired a number of important political positions within the government, the National Congress, provincial governments, local legislatures and in higher education (Gillespie 1982: 130–2). But tensions also grew with respect to the right flank of the Peronist movement, represented by the trade unions. After Perón took over presidency in September 1973, these unions became increasingly dominant within
the government, gradually displacing the representatives of the left (Gillespie 1982: 133-5; Verbitsky 1985: 17). Perón's death in July 1974 heralded a period of further escalation. Under the presidency of his wife and Vice President Isabel Perón, attacks on the left became more violent and directed at targets far beyond the guerrilla forces. The activities of para-police groups such as the Alianza Anticomunista Argentina (Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance, Triple A), which had started in 1973 – intensified, and reached their peak in 1974 and 1975. These death squads abducted, tortured and killed more than one thousand activists and left their bodies on the roads to imbue terror into the minds of their opponents. Numerous artists, writers and journalists went into exile after seeing their names on the death lists of the Triple A (Gillespie 1982: 154; Robben 2005: 136-8).

The situation worsened when, in January 1975, the involvement of the army in internal security was extended in the operation against the rural guerrilla forces of the ERP in the northern province of Tucumán. In February 1975, the government of Isabel Perón gave its official approval to army involvement, when key members of her government signed Decree 261, which authorized the armed forces to ‘annihilate’ the rural guerrilla insurgency in Tucumán. Many of the repressive practices that would be carried out during the military dictatorship of 1976-1983 were applied for the first time in Tucumán (Robben 2005: 148-151). The involvement of the armed forces in internal security was taken a step further in October 1975, when the army became part of an internal security council led by Isabel Perón. Soon afterwards, the police was subsumed into the army (Nino 1996: 53). In this same period, newspapers reported daily on acts of political violence, real and supposed armed confrontations between guerrillas and security forces, political assassinations and bombings (Novaro and Palermo 2003: 80). Social protests, especially from the workers movement, further marked the period (Gillespie 1982: 203-4). In this context of economic crisis, social protest, political repression and guerrilla activity, an alliance began to emerge between powerful economic groups and the armed forces with the purpose of reorganizing the country. Rumours of a coup started to circulate, which became stronger as signs of an upcoming military takeover became more concrete. By the time the military coup took place on 24 March 1976, everybody was expecting it to happen (Baud 2001: 9-13). It was received both inside and outside Argentina as a welcome solution to the chaos (Feitlowitz 1998: 6).

The levels of repression that characterized this military regime, however, were not foreseen. Abductions, tortures and assassinations and even disappearances had already taken place in 1974-75. But from 1976, the repression acquired a qualitative difference, which lay in its systematic, widespread and clandestine character. A central aspect of this repressive system was the practice of disappearance. Targeted persons were brutally abducted in their houses or on the street by a group of heavily armed military and policemen wearing civilian clothes and driving cars without license plates, the so-called patotas or grupos de tareas (task groups). The local police were ordered not to intervene. In most of the cases, the victim's house was sacked. Once abducted, the victims were ‘disappeared’. They were taken to an unknown prison or clandestine detention centre, where they were hooded, forced to endure terrible physical and psychological torture, and faced almost certain death. Victims were thrown from airplanes drugged but still alive into the sea, or they were executed and their corpses were burnt or buried as Nomen Nescio (name unknown, NN) in different cemeteries. A particularly gruesome fate was reserved for women who were abducted while still pregnant. Many of these women were kept alive in extremely harsh conditions until they had given birth. Immediately afterwards, most of them were killed and their babies were given to
military couples or couples befriended with the military to be re-educated according to 'true' Argentine values. Approximately three hundred of these cases have been officially denounced, but estimates run up to five hundred.

In the harshest period of the military dictatorship, from 1976 until 1979, disappearances occurred on a daily basis. The truth commission CONADEP has documented 8,960 cases of disappearance but the numbers are believed to be much higher. Human rights organizations have coined the number of 30,000 disappeared, estimating that for each disappearance, two had not been made public (Filc 1997: 37). Other estimates vary between 12,000 and 20,000 persons (Calveiro 1998: 29; Font 2000: 75). A small minority of 2,793 persons survived (Página/12, 15.09.2009). Among these survivors, a dozen escaped. Some were released but under libertad vigilada (controlled liberty), meaning that they had to report their actions, and they were not allowed to leave the country. Others were given the opportunity to leave the country but were not allowed to come back. They joined the huge group of exiles who had already fled to Europe, the United States and other Latin American countries. A final group were legalized and became political prisoners at the disposition of the Poder Ejecutivo Nacional (National Executive Authority, PEN), becoming part of the already large group of political prisoners, many of whom had been imprisoned in the years preceding the military coup. According to the CONADEP (2003: 408) in 1976 alone the number of prisoners at the disposition of the PEN was 8,625, of which 2,443 had been arrested in the preceding years. Conditions in the prisons deteriorated enormously after the military coup in 1976 and there are several cases of detainees who were executed while being legal political prisoners (CONADEP 2003: 409). Still, being legalized meant 're-appearance', and this always implied a greater chance of survival than being a 'disappeared'.

Reflecting on the systematic character of the repression, Calveiro (1998: 31) states: ‘It was the repressive method of the state, it was not an isolated fact, not an excess of groups out of control, but a repressive technology adopted in a rational and centralized way’. The plan was well prepared and thought up by the highest ranks of the armed forces: the Generals Videla, Viola, Suárez Mason, Menéndez, Martínez, and other members of the military leadership. They drew inspiration from the Doctrine of National Security, the experience of the French military in Algeria, and from the training sessions in counterinsurgency warfare that they had received in the School of The Americas in Panamá (Armony 1997: 1-4; Novaro and Palermo 2003: 84). The plan involved the entire security and defence system of the country. The national gendarmerie, federal police, naval prefecture, provincial police and the penitentiary service came under the control of the Army High Command. Specialized military intelligence personnel carried out the ‘dirty work’ of torture and disappearances. The numbers of task group members reached several thousands and were composed mainly of young officials, sub-officials, policemen and civilians (Romero 1994: 284; Robben 2005: 194). This intelligence personnel acquired a high level of autonomy, but ultimately was under firm control of the military junta, as well as having complete access to military personnel, hardware and intelligence (Pion Berlin 1989: 103; Armony 1997: 17, 20). The armed forces also collaborated with other military regimes in the repression of their citizens through ‘Operation Condor’, a joint collaboration between the intelligence services of Chile, Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia, Uruguay and Brazil, which also received assistance from the CIA and other state security agencies (Armony 1997; McSherry 2003).

Besides eliminating political opponents, another purpose of this systematic repression was to spread terror and paralyse civil society. Calveiro (1998) argues that the secret detention
centres were meant to eliminate ‘subversive elements’ from society, but also to inspire terror and exclude the possibility that ‘subversion’ would re-emerge. Numerous persons witnessed kidnappings on the streets or abductions from houses. The blatant and violent ways in which they were carried out ensured that they did not go unnoticed. Often houses were plundered during or after the operation, with trucks taking away the furniture, in full view of the whole neighbourhood (CONADEP 2003: 282-92; 327). As for the victims, they literally disappeared to a secret world that remained invisible for common citizens. The open, and at the same time clandestine character of the repression, the violation of the private sphere through the abductions from the homes and the sacking of the houses, the disappearance of entire families and of persons who did not correspond to the image of the ‘subversive guerrilla’ that had been constructed over time all contributed to create a ‘culture of fear’, which deeply affected the workings and institutions of civil society (Corradi 1987: 113). A large group of people chose to ignore what was happening. The secrecy and ambiguity of the repression made it possible for people to deny what was going on (Novaro and Palermo 2003: 135).

This dramatic experience of gross human rights violations and state-orchestrated terror has left its hallmark on Argentine society. The issue of how to deal with this period has led to heated debates from the time of the democratic transition to the present day. As in many other countries dealing with similar legacies, disputes have evolved around what truth should be told, whether and how to punish the culprits, and how to lend meaning to the events of the past. One of the main actors in this debate has been the initially small group of persons, both victims and non victims, that chose to resist the dictatorship and denounce the disappearances both inside and outside Argentina. In the process leading to the transition to democracy, these isolated groups of individuals developed into a highly influential human rights movement composed of victims, human rights organizations, and engaged individuals, among them journalists, intellectuals, artists and lawyers. This movement became a leading actor in the struggle for truth, justice and memory and challenged the numerous official attempts to limit the prosecutions of culprits and close the subject. At the same time, within these same groups claiming justice, truth, and memory, there was significant diversity on what these concepts meant in practice. These struggles and disputes over how to deal with and remember the past human rights violations, as well as how they evolved over time, form the core of this book.