The Mothers of the Disappeared: Challenging the junta in Argentina (1977 – 1983)

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Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance
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Conflict Summary:

While a military junta ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983, dissent was silenced. In broad daylight or in the middle of the night dissidents were swept from their homes, and across the nation those who spoke suddenly "disappeared," either to prison with torture or the grave. It became dangerous to socialize with those who spoke out against the military. Even the lawyers who dared to defend them were disappeared. It was clear, and later documented, that the disappearances were a deliberate strategy of the authorities, government officials, armed forces, and intelligence officers (Agosín 1993: 22-23). General Jorge Rafael Videla, who came to power in through a coup d'état that toppled Isabel Peron and remained as president from 1976-1981, took responsibility for what he called an "internal war" (BBC News 2010).

The silence was broken by a brave group of mothers, searching for their missing children, who at first were motivated by family rather than politics. They gathered in the Plaza de Mayo in front of the presidential palace, the national cathedral, and various government ministries. At the first demonstration on 30 April 1977 only fourteen women participated but by the following year hundreds were participating. On Mother's Day, 5 October 1977, 237 mothers included their names and identity card numbers on a half-page advertisement in the national newspaper *La Prensa* calling for a "the Truth" regarding the disappearance of their children.

The Mothers of The Plaza de Mayo (who were also sometimes called "The Mothers of the Disappeared") empowered others to speak out about human rights abuses in the country and by the early 1980s, support for the regime began to erode. They were assisted by Servicio Paz y Justicia (SERPAJ), a grassroots movement with an Argentine affiliate that worked through churches across Latin America. It was founded by Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, an Argentine sculptor, architect, and university professor turned human rights organizer. Pagnucco and McCarthy (1999: 248) said it played the role of "movement midwife" in Argentina and elsewhere in Latin America, providing aid for groups in the form of "skill and knowledge to facilitate creations that are ultimately out of their hands." Esquivel worked with organizations such as the International Fellowship of Reconciliation and "Friends of the Ark," which were small predominantly Catholic groups committed to Gandhian nonviolence. SERPAJ was committed to a broad range of peace and justice issues. Esquivel also helped to start the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights, which united trade unionists, politicians, and intellectuals. His strategy was to create separate organizations with different constituencies and to coordinate their activities with SERPAJ (Pagnucco and McCarthy 1995: 251). SERPAJ was supported financially by donations from European church-based organizations and an international support network. Other funding came from Esquivel himself, who shared his 1980 Nobel Peace Prize funds.[1]

In the wake of an economic crisis and a humiliating defeat by the British in the Falklands-Malvinas War, the junta's rule was widely discredited. Open resistance emerged among formerly-silent religious and labor leaders, as well as increasingly vocal opposition parties. Moreover, a power struggle emerged within the military itself with mutual finger pointing about the lost war, and then-President General Leopoldo Galtieri was replaced in June 1982 by another general, Reynaldo Benito Bignone. Veterans of the war joined students, housewives, the unemployed and the unions protesting in the streets and the junta announced it would hold elections (Fisher 1989: 117). Raul Alfonsin, of the Radical Part, was elected president and, despite continued struggles and some compromises with the military, managed to restore democracy to the country.

Political History:

Independent from Spain from 1816, Argentina became one of the most prosperous and sophisticated countries in Latin America. With rich natural resources and a literate population, it enjoyed a strong economy and comfortable lifestyle until a series of economic crises, inflation, and capital flight in the mid-twentieth century. However, in both prosperous and unprosperous times, democratic transfers of power were infrequent, as coups d'état in 1930, 1943, 1955, 1962, 1966 and 1975 put various military regimes in power (Mendez 1991).

Between 1976 and 1983, Argentina's government was a military dictatorship and the country was besieged by a so-called "Dirty War" that involved armed conflict between insurgent groups and a government that deliberately used terror to suppress resistance—or even public questioning—of its rule, as documented by the government's own "National Commission on Disappeared Persons" (CONADEP) appointed by democratically elected President Alfonsin (*ibid*.).

A combination of economic disaster and then a humiliating defeat in the Malvinas-Falklands War with the British plunged the military junta into crisis, creating more space for resistance. In 1980 the country's financial institutions collapsed and high domestic interest rates and the overvaluation of the peso led to widespread problems and bankruptcies within domestic industries. Foreign firms such as General Motors closed their Argentine plants; unemployment and a drop in real wages led to labor unrest and eventually general strikes. Although the Argentine regime had enjoyed solid support from the United States and the World Bank because of its neoliberal economics and fight against socialism, the war with Britain, the collapsing economy, and Jimmy Carter's human rights policies caused relations to cool. Even many of Argentina's economic elites began to withdraw their support for the military regime as the financial system collapsed.

Strategic Actions:

The distinctive aspect of this conflict was the initiative by the Mothers of the Plaza, a traditional, non-political group of women who were moved to civil resistance by their traditional status as mothers. It is precisely this unexpected nature of the participants that gave them a strategic edge in their conflict with the military junta.

The major tactic that initiated the movement was to meet in the Plaza de Mayo, in the center of Buenos Aires, facing the presidential palace, to protest the "disappearance" of their children. They wore headscarves with the names and sometimes carried photographs of their children who had disappeared, leaving the military junta baffled about how to respond. They began as individuals searching for their children through legal means in government offices, then escalated their tactics by gathering in the Plaza. Government officials at first tried to marginalize and trivialize them by calling them "*las locas*," the madwomen, but they were baffled as to how to suppress this group for fear of a backlash among the population. As the movement grew and gathered international attention and widespread sympathy, the junta cracked down at the end of 1977, and fourteen of the mothers themselves were "disappeared." After a period of careful regrouping, they returned to the Plaza despite the obvious danger in doing so.

International attention to the movement was cultivated as a strategy, facilitated by Argentina's hosting of the World Cup in 1978, where the international press corps covered the Plaza demonstrations as a corollary to the sporting events, aided by the appearance of players from several European teams at the Plaza in a show of solidarity. Similarly, an international health conference in Buenos Aires was met by the Mothers and witnessed by the international media that broadcast their new slogan: "They took them away alive, we want them returned alive" (Ackerman and DuVall 2005: 276).

At the beginning of a new decade, following a difficult period because of severe repression, the Mothers reclaimed the Plaza on the first Thursday of 1980 and returned every subsequent Thursday. Movement momentum grew in the early 1980s with economic collapse, increased attention to the atrocities by the international community and the United Nations, and finally the junta's defeat in a 74-day war with the British after Argentine troops unsuccessfully attempted to take over the Falkland Islands held by the British off the East Coast of Argentina. In its first public critique of the regime, the Conference of Argentine Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church issued a document in May 1981 on the "Church and National Community" that questioned its economic policy and methods used in the regime's "war against subversion."

As the resistance escalated, so did the public repression of the movement. In the city of Mendoza, for example, as the Mothers demonstrated, police fired on the demonstrators with machine guns, with one fatality and a reported ten injuries. The incident backfired, according to

Else de Becerra (Fisher 1989: 114) but the question remains as to why the police were only able to kill and injure so few firing a short distance into a crowd with machine guns unless they were somehow failing to carry out their orders. After the Malvinas-Falkland defeat, the emboldened resistance saw thousands joining the Mothers for a 24-hour "March of Resistance" on the plaza on 10 December 1982. The regime's legitimacy had collapsed.

Although the Mothers of the Plaza were the most visible aspect of the movement, especially in the beginning, other groups were mobilizing support for the resistance, notably SERPAJ, which provided financial support and strategic advice to the movement comprised primarily of women with no prior political activist experience.

Protest and Persuasion

- Marches in the Plaza de Mayo across from the presidential palace;
- Publication of a monthly newsletter by Esquivel, *Paz y Justicia: Accion No-Violenta Latinoamericana*;
- Broadening the struggle to an international audience especially through SERPAJ and an international tour by representative Mothers of the Disappeared;
- Petitions published as advertisements in the newspaper La Prensa addressed to the president, Supreme Court, military commanders, junta leaders, and the church; sponsors signed their names and listed the names of the *desaparecidos* ("the disappeared"), gaining notice of news media and other government officials;
- Distribution of leaflets and posters put on public buses and trains and other public venues, including the Congress;
- Recruitment of major figures for newspaper advertisements such as Nobel laureate author Jorge Luis Borges and head of the national football team board of selectors César Menotti (Fisher 1989: 111);
- Clandestine meetings in homes and churches when public demonstrations were impossible or too risky;
- Carrying carpenter's nails to identify with Mother Mary whose son was also tortured and executed by the state, as a way of resonating with Argentine popular religious culture to communicate their message;
- Formation of a legal registered organization, the *Asociacion Civil Madres de Plaza de Mayo* and the creation of branches in the provinces around the country;
- Formation of the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* (Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo) that also cultivated support abroad for their campaign, often focusing on efforts to find and return children who had been kidnapped and given up for adoption to other families;
- A labor demonstration for "Peace, Bread, and Work" in November 1981, although the labor unions failed to address human rights issues for the most part until the military regime was in its final phase and resistance grew;

- Publication of a demand for information on the fate of workers disappeared from the Mercedes Benz factory by their fellow workers;
- Catholic mass in memory of Oscar Smith, a disappeared electricians' union leader, to which the Mothers were invited;
- International pressure on the junta from the United Nations, Amnesty International, and the Carter administration with its human rights agenda;
- Issuance of a document in May 1981 by the Argentine Catholic bishops, "Church and National Community", pointing out the "danger of usury" and questioning methods used by the regime in the "war against subversion";

Noncooperation

- Labor unrest, beginning with slowdowns and then strikes, culminating in a general strike in April 1979; in June 1981, 1.5 million workers participated in a general strike;
- Part-time withdrawal from domestic and mothering duties as the Mothers of the Disappeared moved into the public sphere to protest;
- Noncooperation with laws banning demonstrations and periodic closures of the Plaza de Mayo;
- Refusal by mothers to sign a document acknowledging they knew the illegality of demonstrations in the Plaza;
- Refusal to support the war effort in the Malvinas-Falklands War, claiming it was a diversion from domestic conflicts over the junta's repressive tactics;

Nonviolent Intervention

- Gatherings on the Plaza de Mayo as acts of civil disobedience and "Lightning strikes" where they gathered on the edges of the square and ran to break through barricades before being turned back by the police (Fisher 1989: 90); According to Aida de Suarez, one of the demonstrators, "On Thursdays at half past three this square belongs to us" (Fisher 1898: 108);
- Painting thousands of silhouettes on buildings in the center of Buenos Aires with the names of *desaparecidos*.

The Situation Today:

Establishing a democracy in Argentina was not easy, despite the victory of 1983. With a long history of military coups, leaders of the new democratic government had to look over the shoulder to the generals watching them from the sidelines of official power. The major dispute was over what to do about the crimes of the junta and the Mothers persisted in their struggle for justice. The Argentine Congress passed a law in December 1986 to limit the prosecution of military officers accused of kidnapping, murder, and torture during the military rule. During debate preceding its passage, the Mothers of the Plaza tossed leaflets from the gallery and

shouted at the legislators before being expelled (Femenía 1987). Unfortunately, efforts to institutionalize their voice after the end of military rule were not very successful and internal divisions split the movement because of differences over whether or not to be aligned with political parties (see Safa 1990:362).

The first democratic president after the Dirty Wars, Raul Alfonsin, took steps within days of his inauguration to investigate and prosecute those responsible for human rights abuses under the junta. The process was severely criticized by some human rights groups including the Mothers of the Plaza because of limitations on how severely the military could be punished for their participation, but even the critics participated in the process once it was underway. Nobel Laureate Adolfo Pérez Esquivel refused his appointment to Alfonsin's CONADEP, however, because he like other human rights activists had preferred a congressional investigation that would have more authority. Junta President Videla, who had declared that "in order to guarantee the security of the state, all the necessary people will die", was prosecuted and jailed in 1984, although subsequently released as part of a broad presidential pardon for convicted regime leaders by President Carlos Saul Menem in order to facilitate the democratic administration's uneasy relationship with the military (Schumacher, 1984; Chavez 1985; Christian 1990). The Supreme Court later overturned the pardon and Videla stood trial in July 2010 for the murder of more than 30 political prisoners in 1976 (BBC News 2010).

Eager to address the economic crisis and under the influence of US policies, the government undertook a series of "structural adjustments" that had a serious negative impact on the middle classes, who revolted in December 2001 with an outpouring of demonstrations known as "cacerolazos"—the banging of pots and pans outside their homes. A severe economic depression, high debt levels and a bank run led to economic collapse in 2001, a default on the government's foreign debt, and the resignation of President Adolfo Rodriguez. In subsequent years the economy grew steadily until 2007 and the democratic political structure survived the storms.

Endnotes:

1. Personal communication from Philip McManus, 5 August 2010 (cf. McManus and Schlabach 1991).

* Paintings by Argentine Nobel Laureate Nobel Laureate Adolfo Pérez Esquivel from his series "Stations of the Cross from Latin America 1492-1992." are available online at http://www.alastairmcintosh.com/general/1992-stations-cross-esquivel.htm. See especially the scene with Jesus being escorted by contemporary armed soldiers, in which one of the Mothers of the Plaza holds a sign asking "Where is my son?"

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