

1-16-1998

Wounds From 'Dirty War' Still Fresh in Argentina

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Wounds From 'Dirty War' Still Fresh in Argentina." (1998). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/12456>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Wounds From 'Dirty War' Still Fresh in Argentina

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Argentina

Published: 1998-01-16

Fourteen years after military rule ended in Argentina, the repressive past has returned to the political stage. Two opposition legislators recently proposed rescinding the laws that allowed those guilty of human rights abuses during the dictatorship to go free. The following day, President Carlos Saul Menem announced plans to convert the most infamous torture center of that period into a park, a plan which human rights organizations vowed to block. Meanwhile, one of the most notorious torturers, known as the Angel of Death, bragged about his activities and warned against efforts to bring the military to justice.

In the mid-1980s, former president Raul Alfonsin (1983- 1989) supported passage of two laws to end the wave of military uprisings that followed the trials of several military leaders. The Punto Final law limited the time in which judges could file charges against military personnel accused of repression, while the Obediencia Debida exonerated those who had followed orders of their superiors (see NotiSur, 03/31/95 and 05/05/95).

Passage of the laws ended the legal processes and indictments against 1,180 lower ranking military. Although many high-ranking officers were sentenced to life in prison, including former de facto presidents Jorge Videla and Roberto Viola, all the officers were pardoned by President Carlos Saul Menem in 1990. The Comision Nacional Sobre la Desaparicion de Personas (CONADEP) says that, during the military repression (1976- 1983), 8,500 leftist politicians, students, and trade unionists disappeared.

On Jan. 6, deputies Juan Pablo Cafiero and Alfredo Bravo of the center-left Frente para un Pais Solidario (FREPASO) introduced a bill to rescind the two laws approved under Alfonsin. Their proposal lacked support from the Union Civica Radical (UCR), which governed the country when the laws were passed and now is part of the opposition Alianza coalition with FREPASO. The FREPASO legislators say the laws must be revoked because they "consolidated impunity and permitted assassins of the dictatorship to go free." Cafiero said that if the Alianza wins the presidency in 1999, he will propose a review of all pardons issued by Menem in 1990. Nevertheless, many other Alianza leaders have been cool toward the bill, which appears to have little chance of passage. "It is a weak bill by politicians who are determined to reopen wounds that I think have healed," said Menem.

Decision to raze torture center opposed

The following day, Menem announced that the Escuela de Mecanica de la Armada (ESMA), the most notorious symbol of the repression during the dirty war, would be demolished. Menem said the site, in a Buenos Aires suburb, would be turned into a park and "monument to national unity." The school was originally built to teach mechanical skills to navy personnel. It was converted into a clandestine jail and center for torture and assassinations after the military coup that ousted former president Isabel Peron. Under the direction of former Adm. Emilio Massera, it was the headquarters of the "death flights," in which people who had been kidnapped and tortured were thrown alive

from military planes into the Rio Plata. "We will erect a monument to honor the predominant feeling of national unity and reconciliation among Argentines," said Menem.

Nevertheless, the daily Pagina 12 accused Menem of planning a "monument to exoneration," referring to the 1990 pardon of military officers. Human rights organizations and families of victims of the repression were outraged at Menem's proposal. Two families of victims filed a court petition to stop the planned demolition of the ESMA. "The aim is to forget that the navy tortured and killed more than 4,000 Argentines there, without the state adequately trying and convicting the perpetrators," said Emilio Mignone, president of the Center of Legal and Social Studies, whose daughter is among the disappeared. "We believe that the site must remain as a symbol of state terrorism and in memory of the holocaust that took place there."

Madres de la Plaza de Mayo demonstrated outside the ESMA and said they would launch an international campaign to keep the place as it is. "We are going to ask the whole world for support so that they don't destroy the biggest concentration camp Argentina ever had," said Hebe de Bonafini, president of the group. The father of Swedish teenager Dagmar Hagelin, who disappeared in 1977, reacted bitterly to news of the plans. "If the president really wanted national reconciliation, he would allow investigations to go ahead," said Ragmar Hagelin in Stockholm. "I still don't know if my daughter was buried under the ESMA, if she was cremated, or if she was thrown into the sea from a plane."

Torturers held accountable in foreign courts

In Spain, a hearing is underway into the disappearance in Argentina of 600 Spanish citizens. Dozens of members and former members of Argentina's security forces have been summoned to testify, but the only one who complied was former captain Adolfo Scilingo, who confessed in 1995 to having tossed live prisoners into the sea during the dictatorship. Among those who benefitted from the Punto Final law was retired navy Capt. Alfredo Astiz. Survivors of the repression in the ESMA testified that Astiz was responsible for the deaths of two French nuns, Alice Domon and Leoni Duquet, and Swedish citizen Dagmar Hagelin.

In 1990, a French court sentenced Astiz to life in prison in absentia for the deaths of the nuns (see notiSur, 11/04/94). Under pressure from the French Embassy, Astiz was forced to retire in 1996, shortly before Menem made an official visit to Paris. In an interview in January with the weekly Tres Puntos, Astiz said the navy taught him "to destroy, to plant bombs, to infiltrate, and to kill" during the military dictatorship. "I am technically the best prepared person in the country to kill a politician or a journalist, but I don't want to," he said. "The ESMA was not a convent for Carmelite nuns led by Mother Teresa of Calcuta," said Astiz. It was a military building "where the enemy was detained."

Astiz denied responsibility for the disappearance of Hagelin. He said he knew who was responsible, but would not say because he is not a traitor like Scilingo. "I never tortured, it wasn't my job. Would I have done it if I had been given the order to do so? Of course. I am not sorry for anything." Then, in a veiled threat, Astiz added, "Don't keep closing in on us because we will respond. The armed forces has 500,000 men technically prepared to kill. I am the best of them all." The Asamblea Permanente por los Derechos Humanos (APDH) said it would file a legal complaint against Astiz for "defending criminal acts" and "threats against persons and against the democratic system." On Jan. 15, Menem ordered the head of the navy, Adm. Carlos Marron, to apply "maximum sanctions"

against Astiz. In response, on Jan. 16, Adm. Marron placed Astiz under a 60-day military arrest. Meanwhile, the attorney general's office said it will investigate to see if Astiz's remarks warrant criminal charges. (Sources: Inter Press Service, 01/07/98, 01/08/98; Associated Press, 01/08/98, 01/09/98; Grupo CNN, 01/09/98; The Miami Herald, 01/10/98; Reuter, 01/08/98, 01/13/98; Clarin, 01/13/98; Spanish news service EFE, 01/07/98, 01/08/98, 01/13/98, 01/15/98; Notimex, 01/07/98, 01/13/98, 01/15/98)

-- End --