7-11-2014

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Argentine Journalists, Media Owners Accused of Dictatorship-Era Crimes

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Category/Department: Argentina
Published: 2014-07-11

Having already tried and jailed hundreds of military personnel responsible for crimes against humanity committed during the last dictatorship (1976-1983), Argentina’s judiciary is now turning its attention to a number of cases in which the accused are civilians. The inquiries are focusing on academics, business people, judges, and members of the clergy who collaborated with the bloody regime, which, official records show, made no fewer than 30,000 people disappear.

At the behest of prosecutors determined to arrive at the truth, various judges have initiated legal proceedings against journalists and media companies accused of working with the regime’s publicity and intelligence apparatus to broadcast, both in and outside Argentina, a false, bucolic image of a nation whose dictators were committed to "re-educating the subversives in order to return them to society mentally sound," as the daily Clarín explained in an article published Dec. 1, 1977.

The top management from some of the country’s principal media outlets—newspapers Clarín, La Nación, and La Nueva Provincia, and Editorial Atlántida, which publishes a number of popular magazines—are now the subjects of major news stories. The names of well-known journalists still considered to be key opinion makers now appear in reports regarding the bloodiest years in the country’s recent history.

"If it prospers, this investigation we’re conducting against the former managing editor of the magazine Para Ti, Agustín Bottinelli, could end up serving as a test case," attorney Pablo Llonto said during an appearance on Canal 7, a public television station. "We hope the inquiry carried out this past June 11 will be a launching point for investigations into the role played in the last dictatorship by journalists, editors, and media owners."

"The mother of a dead subversive"

Llonto represents Thelma Jara de Cabezas, abducted in 1979 while searching for her son, who disappeared three years earlier (he was 17 at the time) after being snatched by a unit from the Marina de Guerra. Jara de Cabezas was held for more than seven months in the Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA), the dictatorship’s largest extermination camp (NotiSur, April 2, 2004).

Llonto claims that Bottinelli and the now deceased Aníbal Vigil, owner of the Editorial Atlántida publishing house and director of the women’s magazine Para Ti, agreed with the heads of the ESMA to produce a knowingly false report regarding the Jara de Cabezas case. The story—based on a supposed interview with Jara de Cabezas—painted a positive picture of the dictatorship, denied the existence in Argentina of extermination camps, and covered up not only the abduction in question but the government’s genocidal policies as a whole.

The publication date (Sept. 10, 1979) and the doctored interview it contained were carefully planned. Four days before the Para Ti story appeared, observers from the Inter-American Commission on
Human Rights (IACHR) of the Organization of American States (OAS)—prompted by various bits of information they had received—kicked off a week-long inspection visit in Argentina. The Jara de Cabezas case was of particular interest to the IACHR and other human rights defenders because the victim worked in the field of human rights. Jara de Cabezas was the organizing secretary for the group Comisión de Familiares de Detenidos y Desaparecidos.

Thanks to his lawyers' maneuvering and, above all, to the protection he was afforded by certain judicial institutions, Bottinelli was able for 20 years to avoid prosecution. He was interrogated once in 1994 but managed afterward to stay clear of the courts. Now, however, pressure is finally beginning to mount against the former Para Ti editor. "Right now there is the political will to get to the truth, which is what makes it possible for the judiciary to take action and for the dictatorship’s civilian [collaborators] to start being prosecuted," said Llonto.

On the designated publication date, Para Ti ran a photo of Jara de Cabezas along with the headline: "Habla la madre de un subversivo muerto" (mother of dead subversive speaks). The text portrayed Jara de Cabezas as disparaging the son she was seeking. It also quoted her offering advice to other Argentine mothers. "Stay alert," Jara de Cabezas supposedly said. "Keep a close eye on your children, because that’s the only way to avoid paying the high price of guilt, which is what I’m paying for having been so blind and stupid." Two weeks earlier an almost identical "interview" appeared in Últimas Noticias, a Montevideo, Uruguay, newspaper published by the Korean religious leader Sun Myung Moon’s Unification Church.

A pattern of collusion

When it decided to put forth a resolution to investigate Bottinelli, the judicial body behind the initiative, the Cámara Federal de Casación Penal, decided on several paths to explore. The Cámara spelled out its ideas in a document that, in practice, could serve as a guideline for judges who may still be reluctant to try media outlets given the latter's power to manage public opinion. The document argues that "the involvement of third-party individuals who produced a supposed news story that, in reality, was falsely constructed so as to cover up a claimant’s [in reference to Jara de Cabezas] illegal arrest is directly related to the cases being investigated as crimes against humanity carried out by agents of the state."

Shortly afterward, another judge decided to reopen a case, also involving Bottinelli and Atlántida, that had lain dormant since 2010. The second case pertains to Alejandra Barry, a 39-year-old woman who, when she was just three years old, was presented by the media as "the daughter of two killers who stopped being parents in order to make orphans." Barry’s parents were abducted in Buenos Aires and killed in Montevideo in 1976 in what was one of the first operations carried out under the infamous Operación Cóndor, a program of coordinated repression carried out by the dictatorships of Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Brazil, and Paraguay (NotiSur, July 7, 2000, and June 11, 2004).

A third case currently under investigation involves Vicente Massot, owner and director of La Nueva Provincia, a newspaper in the coastal city of Bahía Blanca, home to the Marina de Guerra’s most important base. The case took a major leap forward on April 24, when Massot was called in to testify before a judge. The decision to subpoena the media mogul—whose holdings included a newspaper, several radio stations, and broadcast and cable television channels—marked a major turning point in Argentina’s recent push to pursue press outlets and journalists.

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Prosecutors accuse Massot of entering into "a conspiracy" with high-ranking military personnel and claim he is "guilty of the kidnapping and murder of two union-member printshop workers ... and of making an essential contribution to the kidnapping, torture, and murder of 35 civilians in Bahía Blanca." Just as Bottinelli has tried to lay the blame on the deceased Aníbal Vigil, Massot says the person who ought to be questioned in the Bahía Blanca case is his mother, Diana Julio de Massot, who died several years ago.

One person who has been able to shed new light on relations established during those years between the dictatorship and certain media outlets is former journalist Osvaldo Papaleo, who was made to testify May 29 as part of an ongoing investigation into the fraudulent sale of Papel Prensa, the newspaper industry’s primary newsprint supplier, which ended up in the hands of the dailies Clarín and La Nación, and the state (NotiSur, Oct. 1, 2010). Papaleo served as information secretary under former President María Estela Martínez de Perón (1974-1976). He is also the brother of the widow of David Graiver, Papel Prensa’s founder and original owner.

Graiver was accused by the dictatorship of administering large sums of money collected by the Montoneros guerrilla organization. He later died in an unexplained plane crash in Mexico. Speaking under oath, Papaleo recalled how his sister Lidia was pressured into signing off on the newsprint factory’s sale. The pressure was being exerted, the ex–journalist claimed, by the chief executive officer (CEO) of Clarín, Héctor Magnetto, and the owner-director of La Nación, Bartolomé Mitre. Papaleo said that Magnetto at one point told his sister that "if she wanted to protect the life of her little daughter, she should go straight to the airport and leave the country."

During his testimony before Judge Julián Ercolini, Papaleo painted a revealing picture of what the Argentine journalism world was like at the time of the last dictatorship. The government, he explained, had an intimate relationship with certain media companies, in particular Clarín and Editorial Atlántida. Papaleo recalled to the judge that, in April 1977, the Editorial Atlántida magazine Somos published an article about the supposed Montoneros money that Graiver administered. "The article," he said, "claimed I was the one who formally revealed the Montoneros and Graiver link." At that time, such a denouncement was equivalent to a death sentence. Concerned, Papaleo sent Atlántida a certified letter asking it to retract the claims. Weeks later, he was arrested. Papaleo remembers seeing the letter he had sent to the editors of Somos lying on the desk of the police chief who interrogated him.

Papaleo also claims he was visited, hours before his arrest, by three senior managers from Clarín with whom he was on friendly terms. The managers warned Papaleo that he would be arrested and said he would be killed if he tried to flee. Testimony collected as part of the Thelma Jara de Cabezas v. Editorial Atlántida inquiry corroborates some of Papaleo’s claims and thus serves as further evidence of the collusion that existed between the dictatorship and certain media outlets.

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