

Chapter 2

Argentina 1969–1999

2.1 Period of Guerrilla Violence, 1969–1976

In the midst of widespread political turmoil and violence, a military coup took place in Argentina in March 1976. The military government implemented a “Process of National Reorganisation”, which involved a systematic policy of clandestine repression to wipe out the main two armed political groups: the Peronist Montoneros and the Marxist Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP). For in the years leading up to the military coup of 1976, political violence was widespread (Calveiro 2005; Lewis 2002; Romero 2002; Robben 2005a). There were armed groups on various sides of the ideological divide, including an armed guerrilla movement and paramilitary death squads. The political violence and armed take over of the 1970s is commonly referred to outside Argentina as a “dirty war”.¹ The term has been used by both the armed forces, to justify its repressive actions against so-called subversives who threatened Argentina’s western, Christian culture, as well as by the guerrilla insurgency, which believed itself to be waging a just fight for a socialist Argentina, free of social inequality (Robben 2012).

The revolutionary impetus for radical social change was strong during the 1960s and 1970s, with guerrilla groups ideologically committed and ready to become the new “authors of history” using armed struggle (Robben 2005a, p. 97). Though Ché Guevara’s desire to liberate his native Argentina may have ended with his death in 1967, his ideas about the use of revolutionary violence to fight exploitation and

¹ The term “dirty war”, explains anthropologist Antonius Robben (2012), first appeared in an ultranationalist magazine in March 1974, to describe the Marxist guerrilla insurgency. It was later adopted by the Peronist left to denounce right-wing paramilitary death squads. The term again shifted after the military coup of March 1976 when the Montoneros accused the military dictators of war crimes, saying “this is a dirty war, like all wars waged by reactionary armies. It is not just dirty because it uses the people’s sons to fight against their brothers and their interests, but because it doesn’t even respect the war conventions. The enemy assassinates the wounded, tortures and executes prisoners, and turns its brutality against the people’s relatives” (Evita Montonera cited in Robben 2012, p. 307). The term was soon used by the military dictators against the armed guerrilla movement as General Vilas stated, “This is a dirty war, a war of attrition, dark and sly, which one wins with decisiveness and calculation” (cited in Robben 2012, p. 307).

injustice continued to flourish (Robben 2005a). The number of bombings carried out by the armed guerrilla movement rose from 141 in 1969 to 654 in 1971, estimates Robben (2005a). The movement also robbed banks, invaded radio and television stations to broadcast political messages, mailed letter bombs to businessmen, kidnapped executives for ransom and threatened their families (Lewis 2002). The guerrilla groups were engaged in urban bombings that claimed scores of victims and mounted attempts on military installations and their personnel (Brysk 1994).

The guerrilla groups were run like a regular army, according to Argentine political scientist Pilar Calveiro (2005). Recruits were assigned a rank and a uniform, and all were made to obey strict rules and to follow military-type discipline (Calveiro 2005). Beyond the mass front lay a broad network of sympathisers—or, as the “Montoneros” called them, the “rear guard of Peronism”—who lived in the neighbourhoods and who were, as the tabloid *Evita Montonera* described them, the “eyes and ears of the people” (Lewis 2002, p. 43–44). Those in the “rear guard” had their fingers on the pulse of the communities in which they lived, and were knowledgeable about all aspects of the lives of police and military officers and their families (Lewis 2002).

While the Montoneros were considered to be by far the larger of the two main guerrilla groups, their actual number remains a mystery (Lewis 2002). The army estimated Montonero troops to be about 30,000 strong, with another 150,000 people active in the mass front organisation and support networks at the beginning of 1975 (Lewis 2002). However, Argentine human rights groups, such as the Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (Centre for Legal and Social Studies, CELS), calculate that the combined armed guerrilla forces at the beginning of 1976 numbered between 2,000 and 3,000 combatants (Lewis 2002). General Jorge Rafael Videla, who led the military coup in 1976, reportedly believed that there were around 4,000 armed guerrilla fighters at the time of the army’s takeover (Lewis 2002). A former Montonero militant, Juan Gasparini, calculated that the movement lost as many as 5,000 combatants in the first few months of the 1976 military coup (Lewis 2002). In any case, the Montoneros were supported by favourable public opinion and grew in numbers, firepower and organisational complexity in the early 1970s (Lewis 2002).

The origins of the armed guerrilla movement can be found in 1969, when military dictator General Onganía’s tight grip on power was shattered, and some of the largest unions led by Trotskyites, Maoists and left-wing Peronists joined students around the country to challenge the regime (Lewis 2002). During this time, the military branch of the ERP was formed and waged a rural insurgency in Tucumán province, northern Argentina. The evolution of the Montoneros soon followed (Robben 2005a). The guerrilla movement saw itself as fighting a “people’s war” (*guerra de pueblo*) (Calveiro 2005). Its aim was to “awaken popular consciousness and to show all compatriots the road out of exploitation, hunger and the poverty that our community has been subjected to” (Calveiro 2005, p. 69).

Lewis believes that it was the exiled Perón who, in 1956, initially planted the seed for guerrilla insurrection and the violence that followed among his followers when he wrote to Peronist leaders:²

² On 20 September 1955, Perón went into exile for the next 17 years. During this time, the Peronist movement was proscribed and Peronist sympathisers were violently suppressed by the military

We must plan our actions minutely and prepare for their execution by permanent practice and exercises. If it's necessary to use the Devil, then we'll use the Devil as we must. The Devil is always ready for such work. But, it is necessary that the struggle be based on guerrillas. The forces of reaction should never find a place to land a blow, and every day they should feel the force of resistance. (cited in Lewis 2002, p. 11)

A new generation of Peronist resistance emerged, one that was even more combative and aware of the inherent political power than a united labour movement could provide; the movement began to rely on tactics of sabotage and underground propaganda to lay the fertile ground for Perón's eventual return in 1973 (Lewis 2002).³ Lewis (2002) writes that Perón's genius lay in his ability to keep a close watch on events back home and a tight rein over the Peronist movement, even from a distance in exile. Perón was adept at adjusting his political tactics in response to Argentina's ever-changing political climate (Lewis 2002). For 17 years, even in exile, Perón was able to “exert an almost magical political power from behind the scenes”, and “by virtue of his absence, he became a mythic presence” (Feitlowitz 1998, p. 4). Peronist resistance gradually became coordinated as it learned tactics from other similar, international scenarios such as the Cuban Revolution (Lewis 2002). Ernesto “Ché” Guevara was adopted as a cult hero by the movement, and the Peronist underground began to realise, from watching the Cuban experience, that power could be won through armed violence (Lewis 2002).

The power of the armed guerrilla movement grew in May 1969 when the infamous *Cordobazo* uprising took place. Tens of thousands of workers and students fought off the police and army during 2 days of violent battles in Córdoba in central Argentina; this signalled a leap closer to social revolution (Robben 2005a). As anthropologist Antonius Robben (2005a, p. 45) suggests, the *Cordobazo* “marked a watershed in mass mobilization” of ousted President Juan Perón's followers, including a growing band of middle-class students and an increasingly militant working class, who took the initiative in their leader's absence and instigated grassroots street demonstrations. While reflecting the deepening political crisis that began with the overthrow of Perón, the *Cordobazo* was also a more localised version of the worldwide New Left movement of the 1960s, which was rebelling against traditional social institutions and idealising socialism as being ethically superior to capitalism (Lewis 2002). The *Cordobazo* signalled—not only to those in the military and unions but to the

government of General Aramburu (1955–1958) (Lewis 2002). Aramburu labelled Perón “the monster”, and newspapers of the day called him “the fugitive tyrant” (Robben 2005a, p. 27).

³ Perón had long been an advocate of the Argentine worker and supporter of the labour movement. It is believed that the founding of Perónism began on 17 October 1945, when hundreds of thousands of workers or *descamisados* (“shirtless ones”) walked into the heart of the nation's capital—La Plaza de Mayo—to protest against the internment of Perón. Perón had helped pass labour legislation to improve workers' salaries, conditions and rights and used his authority as then Secretary of Labour and Social Welfare under the military government of Rawson, to unionise workers and strengthen the union movement, especially in rural areas (Robben 2005a). Amid protests from resisters within the military ranks, Perón enforced labour laws that had long been ignored in the country, including laws that delivered an 8 h day, paid vacations and the prohibition of child labour (Lewis 2002). As a result of these enforced changes, Perón was interned by the army in 1945, only to be released 5 days later after fierce protests led by Argentine workers nationwide (Robben 2005a).

revolutionaries themselves—that “the fighting spirit of the Argentine working class remained unbroken despite years of military repression, and that its capacity for resistance had neither been domesticated by the Peronist hierarchy nor paralysed by Perón’s prolonged absence” (Lewis 2002, p. 45). It also signalled that there was no alternative to defeating the Onganía dictatorship (1966–1970) except through armed struggle (Romero 2001). For the radical Left, writes historian Paul Lewis (2002), the *Cordobazo* provided an inspiration, and over the next couple of years a number of armed revolutionary organisations emerged as a result. The combined impact of these organisations was far greater than any previous guerrilla attempts.

The Montoneros were the most adept at navigating the political climate and grew in power, eventually absorbing most of the other guerrilla organisations apart from the ERP (Romero 2001). The group triumphed within the Peronist movement by gaining the full support of Perón, thus “winning a space for their autonomous action”, and at the same time the recognition of a leader who had become a master in the art of, as he said, ‘using his two hands’ (the left and right wings of his movement)” (Romero 2001, p. 191). The Montoneros gained support from broad sectors of the urban poor and the Third World priests’ movement, and were thus able to mobilise large numbers of volunteers within neighbourhoods, universities and to a lesser extent unions, through the Juventud Peronista (Peronist Youth). Many future Montoneros began their political careers in some of Argentina’s elite schools, and as a result high schools became highly politicised (Lewis 2002).

An intellectual new Left emerged, highly influenced by Sartre’s existentialism, which argued that “the objective structures of exploitation did not predetermine people’s consciousness, but that people were active subjects who produced history” (Robben 2005a, p. 38). A former Montonero guerrilla commander recalls the growing social consciousness of his university days:

The university begins to embrace Peronism, begins to nationalize itself in the sense that the student breaks with his own isolation, his own environment and begins to develop ... a social commitment with his people ... We became close to the working class neighbourhoods through social work. (cited in Robben 2005a, p. 38)

Peronists and Marxists joined forces to control the national universities’ self-governing institutions and demanded that student bodies incorporate lower middle-class and working-class students, so that the total number of enrolments at Argentina’s national universities grew from 82,500 in 1950 to 274,000 by 1970 (Lewis 2002).

Ché Guevara’s capture and execution in Bolivia, and the failure of rural guerrilla tactics in other Latin American countries—including Brazil, Paraguay and Guatemala—led to a major tactical overhaul within the guerrilla movement (Lewis 2002). Urban middle-class intellectuals, already too conspicuous in a rural setting and unable to win the support they needed from rural farmers, moved to the cities, where they created chaos and disrupted the economy (Lewis 2002). This was intended to allow the rural guerrillas a free run in the countryside (Lewis 2002). In the cities, while small armed groups (*combatientes*) would do most of the fighting, their actions were supported by mass-action groups of students and workers (*milicianos*), who contributed to the atmosphere of unrest by waging strikes,

distributing propaganda, committing acts of sabotage and participating in street demonstrations (Calveiro 2005). While the full-time guerrillas lived underground and engaged in armed combat, those belonging to the front organisations led normal lives, attended classes and held down regular employment (Lewis 2002).

Lewis (2002) estimates that between the start of 1969 and the end of 1975, half of all guerrilla attacks occurred in the nation's capital, Buenos Aires, and its surrounding areas; 30% of attacks occurred in Córdoba and Santa Fe Provinces; and another 10% occurred in the other regional centres of Rosario and Tucumán. While many of those killed were police officers and soldiers, other victims included industrialists, merchants, ranch owners, labour union officials, politicians, guerrilla deserters, innocent bystanders and wealthy businessmen—many of whom were held for hefty ransoms (Lewis 2002).

Many individuals who were targeted by the armed guerrilla movement were abducted and kept in “people's prisons” (Lewis 2002). These were rustic cells often located in the dugout remains of old buildings that had no windows and little ventilation, and were invariably so small that captives were forced to lie down or squat (Lewis 2002). During our interview, Silvia Ibarzabal showed me photos of the “people's prison” where her father, Lieutenant Colonel Jorge Ibarzábal, was held captive for 10 months before eventually being murdered. Silvia lived with her family in front of an army base, and remembers the Saturday night when the base was attacked. She told me:

We had to hit the floor and stay down all night because bullets were being fired into our apartment. The attack lasted practically the whole night, with intense gun fire, bombs, tanks, helicopters that evacuated the wounded and finally ... They killed a senior officer, they killed a lady right in front of her children, they killed a soldier so they could enter the room, they wounded other people and they kidnapped my father. (Ibarzábal 2009)

Silvia told me that the ERP, which claimed responsibility for her father's kidnapping, demanded a prisoner swap rather than a ransom. As her father was being transported to another “people's prison” within Buenos Aires, the vehicle in which he was travelling was stopped by police and, rather than surrender the prisoner, the guerrilla guarding Ibarzábal shot him (Lewis 2002). Silvia said that once her father's abandoned body was found, they discovered that he had suffered extreme deprivation; at around 34 kg, his body was severely emaciated. The effect on his children was devastating:

They not only kidnapped him, but they also took away our [her and her brothers' and sisters'] innocence, our adolescence. They took away our youth. (Ibarzábal 2009)

By 1975, the country was in the midst of widespread violence (Lewis 2002). The right-wing death squads, otherwise known as the Alianza Anticomunista Argentina (Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance) or Triple A, used the hunt for left-wing armed guerrillas as a pretext for the round-up of any ideological opponents of the government (Lewis 2002). Under Isabel Perón's leadership, and for the first time in history, the “eradication” of “subversive elements” was officially decreed on 5 February 1975 (Feitlowitz 1998, p. 6). The decree (no. 265) mobilised the armed forces to “execute military operations necessary to neutralize and/or annihilate the

actions of subversive elements in the province of Tucumán” (Crenzel 2008a, p. 200, own translation). The role of the armed forces changed, and their intervention was now considered necessary, “saving” the country from its dangerous enemy (Calveiro 2005). Individuals’ disappearances, the use of clandestine detention centres, the torture of prisoners and their illegal detention began during this time (Calveiro 2005).

With President Isabel Perón suffering a nervous condition and being increasingly absent from office, the provisional president, Senator Italo Luder, signed the fateful decrees that expanded the army’s anti-guerrilla role (Lewis 2002). The decrees extended the military’s authority to “annihilate the activities of subversive elements” Argentina-wide (Lewis 2002, p. 119). What the military might make of such powers was hinted at by General Jorge Videla, who would go on to become President: “As many people as necessary must die in Argentina so that the country will again be secure” (cited in Feitlowitz 1998, p. 6). By mid-March 1976, a cloud of anxiety spread across the political, economical and social arenas. It had become urgent for the armed forces to take action and nobody was about to stop them (Calveiro 2005). Between May 1975 and March 1976, there were 4,324 armed guerrilla attacks recorded around the country (Calveiro 2005). Radical leader Ricardo Balbín declared in February 1976, “I don’t know if the government is looking for a coup, but it’s doing everything possible for there to be one” (cited in Calveiro 2005, p. 47, own translation). In the early hours of 24 March 1976, a new military junta consisting of (General Jorge Rafael) Videla, Admiral Emilio Massera and Air Force Brigadier Olando Agosti assumed power of the nation and issued the legal instruments of the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (Process of National Reorganisation), by which Videla became president (Romero 2006).

2.2 Military Dictatorship, 1976–1983

The newly installed military regime of Videla, Massera and Agosti presented itself as a “noble victim” (Feitlowitz 1998). Adversaries were publicly demonised and deemed “non-persons”, without the right to free expression, citizenship or even to exist (Romero 2006, p. 220). At first, exhausted by the violence and pleading for more order, some individuals welcomed the military coup. This included renowned novelist and poet Jorge Luis Borges, who said “now we are governed by gentlemen” (cited in Feitlowitz 1998, p. 6). From that point, the coup was known as “The Gentlemen’s Coup” (Feitlowitz 1998, p. 6). Even prominent and respected Argentine journalist Jacobo Timmerman, who had been threatened by the extreme left prior to the military takeover, cited the “‘reserve and welcome modesty’ of the ‘new authorities’” (cited in Feitlowitz 1998, p. 6), and believed that the new government “would bring Argentina the civilized reparation that it deserved” (cited in Feitlowitz 1998, p. 7).

Argentine historian Ludmila da Silva Catela (2009) writes that even some of the families of the *desaparecidos* initially welcomed the coup in 1976, hoping it would

put an end to the chaos that had gripped the country. Catela (2009) believes that, over the years, the population had become so accustomed to the military intervening in crumbling governments *a poner orden* (to restore order) that it was thought this coup would be similar. For example, one of the women that I interviewed, Cristina, recalled: “During that time, the newspapers were saying that this [violence] had to be dealt with. They talked of a coup as if it was something traditional in Argentina” (Muro 2009). It was commonly thought that Videla would be able to bring a quick end to the violent battles that had been waged in various parts of the country (Romero 2002). All three junta generals were more than ready to take up that challenge in the name of “Western, Christian civilization” (Feitlowitz 1998, p. 7), believing discipline, obedience and a strong hand were the secret ingredients for doing so (Calveiro 2005).

The leaders of the military junta proved to be masterful orators, and language was a “precious weapon” in their hands; the regime controlled the discourse during its reign through a torrent of speeches, proclamations and interviews that appeared in various media (Feitlowitz 1998, p. 32). Described by Marguerite Feitlowitz (1998, p. 20) as an “echo chamber”, the “official rhetoric of the Dirty War drew much of its power from being at once ‘comprehensible’, incongruous, and disorienting” (Feitlowitz 1998, p. 20).⁴ The regime had manipulated language to “shroud in mystery its true actions and intentions”, while saying “the opposite of what it meant” (Feitlowitz 1998, p. 20). One of the mothers from Las Madres, René Epelbaum, explains the effect this strategy had on her: “It made you psychotic. We could barely ‘read’, let alone ‘translate’ the world around us. And that was exactly what they wanted” (cited in Feitlowitz 1998, p. 20).

The regime consistently denied the existence of the *desaparecidos*, particularly when addressing foreign governments and reporters. Videla was quoted as telling a British journalist in 1977:

I emphatically deny that there are concentration camps in Argentina, or military establishments in which people are held longer than is absolutely necessary in this ... fight against subversion ... I live with my family in a military zone and am certain that I don't live in a concentration camp. (cited in Feitlowitz 1998, p. 28)

In the early years of the dictatorship, many in Argentine society were largely unaware of the state's involvement in the disappearance of its civilians. Even when journalist and Montonero Rodolfo Walsh wrote and published a letter to the military junta on the first anniversary of the dictatorship in March 1977, openly denouncing the state's systematic disappearance of individuals, families of the *desaparecidos*

⁴ The period of military rule, 1976–1983, has been described using a variety of different terms, each inferring different causes and conditions. The military applied terms such as dirty war, anti-revolutionary war and the fight against subversion. Human rights groups used names for this period such as state terror, repression and military dictatorship. Guerrilla groups talked about this period in terms of a civil war, a war of liberation and an anti-imperialist struggle (Robben 2005a). The term “dirty war” was coined by the military junta to suggest that “dirty” tactics were needed, as distinct from those normally used in warfare, in order to fight a war against an enemy that “remained hidden, fought from ambush, and used terrorist tactics to subvert institutions” (Lewis 2002, p. 2).

believed the disappearances to be the work of para-police or para-military groups, operating independently of the state (Crenzel 2008a).

Some families of the *desaparecidos* found themselves making excuses for the disappearance of their family members. The sister of a *desaparecido*, Eliana, told me:

At one stage I thought “this can’t be happening”. I always held the hope that they were living somewhere overseas or that they’d lost their memory [and had forgotten where they lived]. (Carreira 2009)

In fact, many were unaware of the state’s involvement until the families of the missing began to meet each other in the halls of government offices when filing for *habeus corpus*, and started to put two and two together (Muro 2009). Though the majority of abductions occurred in front of witnesses, the captivity, torture and murder of the *desaparecidos* were, for the most part, clandestine (Crenzel 2008a). The operations of the armed forces’ task groups were covert—so covert that one woman militant I interviewed, whose colleagues were disappearing and who happened to take refuge in an apartment building directly opposite *La Escuela de Mecanica de la Armada* (ESMA), saw no evidence of what went on at the institution during her 2 year stay in hiding there (Boulliet 2009). Until 1978, almost no *desaparecidos* survived the ESMA camp to testify to their clandestine detention there (Feitlowitz 1998). Nenina, whose partner, José, was disappeared in 1977, said:

I knew that they [colleagues] were being held somewhere but we didn’t know about the ESMA ... I didn’t see anything. What I did see was the coming and going of trucks loaded with food-stuffs ... I would lie down on the balcony next to the kitchen and I would watch, for anything strange. Everything seemed normal. (Boulliet 2009)

However, after bodies from the “death flights” began washing up on the shores of Uruguay, Videla made an about-turn on the issue of the disappeared. In 1979, on the US television, he admitted that some of the deaths were “excesses” committed by his troops:

We must accept as a reality that there are missing persons in Argentina. The problem is not in ratifying or denying this reality, but in knowing the reasons why these persons have disappeared. There are several reasons: they have disappeared in order to live clandestinely and to dedicate themselves to subversion; they have disappeared because the subversive organizations have eliminated them as traitors to the cause; they have disappeared because in a shootout with fire and explosions, the corpse was mutilated beyond identification; and I accept that some persons might have disappeared owing to excesses committed by the repression.... (Videla, cited in Feitlowitz 1998, p. 28)

The *desaparecidos* were officially neither alive nor dead, but were, according to General Viola, the military junta’s second president (March–December 1981), “absent forever”; their “destiny” was to “vanish” (cited in Feitlowitz 1998: 13). Viola’s explanation of what had happened to the thousands of Argentine citizens whisked off the streets during the military dictatorship was both vague and “resoundingly final” (Feitlowitz 1998, p. 49)—even during the 1978 Soccer World Cup in Argentina, when the state was pressured by the world’s media for information on reported disappearances, the practice of torture and the revelation of clandestine detention camps. The junta brazenly responded by mobilising those sympathetic

to the regime to walk the streets while wearing badges that read “*Los argentinos somos derechos y humanos*” (We Argentines are right, we Argentines are human) (Feitlowitz 1998, p. 36). The signs began to propagate, and appeared in the windows of apartment buildings, on briefcases and handbags, and in the arrivals lounge of Ezeiza International Airport (Feitlowitz 1998). Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, who demanded “*aparición con vida*” (bring them (the disappeared) back alive), responded by talking with foreign journalists, who had come to see the mothers *haciendo la ronda* (circling) in La Plaza de Mayo (Boitano 2009). However, as Lita, whose son, Miguel Angel, and daughter, Adriana, were disappeared in 1976 and 1977, respectively, told me:

We spoke with the journalists who didn't want to believe us. Few of the [Argentine World Cup Soccer team] players believed us either. Very few. We were the madwomen, the mad-women who screamed. (Boitano 2009)

Romero (2002, p. 220) argues that the “military government’s propaganda, massive and overwhelming, picked up traditional themes of Argentine political culture and took them to their final, terrible consequences.” Though the military junta repeatedly appealed to family values and deployed the concept of the family as central to its ideology, the repression carried out by the state destroyed entire family units (Franco 1992). For the families of the *desaparecidos*, no mother, father, grandparent or child was immune (Franco 1992). The military believed that families, while being the cornerstone of Argentine morality, were also sites of dissidence; this helps explain the severity of their attacks against many families of the *desaparecidos* (Franco 1992). The families became “dangerous” to be around and thus increasingly isolated; close friends learned to stay away and families no longer knew who to trust. Some cut all ties with friends and colleagues, and attempted to blend in with their surroundings. Hoping not to attract the authorities’ attention, the families maintained the search for their loved ones and worked to support young families. Cristina told me:

There were days that, for example, I had to spend in the zoo. He [her husband] left me there in the morning with my oldest son, and I was pregnant, with a bag ready in case I went into labour or if my husband didn't return...if something happened to him. And I stayed all day at the zoo with little money, sitting down, watching who was around, looking at the animals, until the hour that someone came for me, and I could breathe again. Because I never knew if my husband would be able to come back for me or not. I never knew what was going to happen. (Muro 2009)

Despite the growing resilience and courageous actions of Las Madres, the junta skilfully used language to not only cover up its real actions and intentions but to instil guilt, terror and confusion among the population (Feitlowitz 1998). For example, with the aid of media, the Ministry of Education directed a linguistic campaign at parents: “How to Recognize Marxist Infiltration in the Schools” (Feitlowitz 1998, p. 37). The manual informed parents about the sorts of words, such as “dialogue”, “exploitation”, “structural change”, “socialism”, “uprising”, “rebellion”, that would signify that their children were involved in “subversive” activities (Feitlowitz 1998, p. 37). Just as the military apparatus “watched over” parents, it also urged parents to do their part by regularly checking up on their children’s homework

and extracurricular activities (Feitlowitz 1998, p. 37). Mothers were particularly targeted by the junta's media campaigns, with daily broadcasts on radio and on television asking: "How have you raised your children?" and "Do you know what your children are doing, *right now*?" (Feitlowitz 1998, p. 37). The military alluded to the fact that maybe the "subversive threat to Western, Christian civilization" they feared was the fault of the Argentine mothers (Feitlowitz 1998, p. 38).

In its propaganda campaigns, the military apparatus made it abundantly clear who could be a part of society and who could not (Feitlowitz 1998). The junta encouraged Argentine citizens to denounce individuals whose appearance, actions or presence seemed "inappropriate" (Feitlowitz 1998). In a front-page article of one newspaper at the time, the junta warned that "the people must learn to recognize the 'civilized' man who does not know how to live in society and who in spite of his appearance and behaviour harbors atheist attitudes that leave no space for God" (cited in Feitlowitz 1998, p. 23). Proper identification was to be carried at all times, and Argentine society was given a six-point set of rules for navigating public space, including how to act on approaching military checkpoints (Feitlowitz 1998). So confusing and terrorising were these warnings and rules that it took very little for innocent citizens to be mistakenly targeted or shot at, and taken to one of the military's clandestine camps. As one woman recalls: "You got to a point where you didn't dare to direct your gaze, you were no longer *able* to focus" (cited in Feitlowitz 1998, p. 149).

By perpetuating the "public secret" of disappearance, the junta "simultaneously announced terror's power and normalized the impossibility of living in a constant state of fear" (Gordon 2008, p. 75). Under the regime's protective mantle of official denial and impunity, the public sphere shrank and society was paralysed with fear (Barahona de Brito 2001). The military's official rhetoric worked "to conquer the mental space of Argentine citizens" by turning a "'normal' setting into a bizarre, and disorienting, theatrical" (Feitlowitz 1998, p. 151). Going about one's normal daily actions such as catching a bus home from work could render one a powerless witness to the violent kidnapping of a passenger mid-journey by armed gangs (Muro 2009). The terror inflicted by the armed forces, explains Feitlowitz (1998), required a setting that was largely undisturbed, for if the setting was radically changed, how could one assimilate what was happening? Feitlowitz (1998, p. 151) also suggests that: "If the missing were eerily present by virtue of their absence, in what sense were those present really *there*? Space was manipulated to make one thing clear: It was strictly forbidden to get one's bearings." What appeared to be normal could easily turn into a deadly spectacle.

Such was the military's power over public opinion that many citizens began to blame the *desaparecidos* for their own disappearance by saying, *por algo sera* ("there must be a reason") or *estaban en algo* ("they had their hands in something") (Feitlowitz 1998). While civilians were eye-witnesses to kidnappings, many were reluctant witnesses, denying what they had seen for the sake of their own safety and that of their families, including those who had been disappeared (Feitlowitz 1998). For example, Eliana told me:



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