

## Humiliation Policies Applied to Individuals, Detainees and Refugees During the Period 1975/1983 in Rosario, Argentina

© by Marcela Valdata <sup>1</sup>

### **Brief Historical and Political Development of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

This summary will attempt to present a brief historical evolution that oscillated between democratic periods and authoritarian rules that were prominently represented by de facto governments. In 1912, Argentina's political life changed radically with the sanctioning of an electoral reform that granted all citizens the right to vote, though it was still restricted to the male vote. This was followed with the creation of political parties aiming to represent the lower classes, which were up to then organized around anarchist groups and workers unions predominantly. However, this democratic process began to decline after 1930, when the first *coup d'état* interrupted the elected government, a situation that would repeat itself throughout the century. From 1930 to 1943, the democratic system suffered a crisis, manifested through electoral fraud, the banning of political parties and the interruption of democratically elected governments. This historical period was known as the "Década Infame" [Infamous Decade]. The following phase, from 1943 to 1955, was characterized by an unprecedented social mobilization with the broad participation of the lower classes, the emergence of a new political movement called *Peronist*- after its leader Juan Domingo Perón- and again by the interruption of freely elected governments.<sup>2</sup>

The coup d'état of June 4, 1943, was led by the semi-secret society GOU (Grupo de Oficiales Unidos – United Officers Group) whose members were officers with ranks of colonels, majors and captains. For the first time officers of the Armed Forces occupied relevant administrative and political positions,<sup>3</sup> though they did not last long in office. General Arturo Rawson was designated president, but his mandate lasted only twenty-four hours. His successor was General Pedro Ramírez, who only remained in power for a few months due to his unpopular political stand, implementing a policy that attacked workers unions and sent labor leaders to actual concentration camps. Vice-president General Edelmiro J. Farrell succeeded Ramírez, but also failed to show the proper capability to govern. Colonel Juan Domingo Perón, a member of this de facto government in charge of the Ministry of War, was designated Secretary of Labor and Welfare on December 10, 1943. A few months later, he was also named Vice-president, thus occupying three offices within the government. Unlike the rest of the military in power, Perón enjoyed great popularity among the working class, which brought about a division in the Armed Forces. The internal struggle among the military officers in power resulted in Perón's resignation, which was immediately followed by his arrest and imprisonment on Martín García Island. On October 17, 1945, after a multitudinous popular mobilization, Perón was released from prison. From that date on, he would be considered the most important representative of the working class, and the *Movimiento Nacional Justicialista* [National Movement for Justice] -also known as *Peronismo*- was created. Its motto was "building a nation socially just, economically free and politically sovereign". In 1947, women's right to vote was sanctioned.

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<sup>2</sup> I. Dussel, S. Finocchio and S. Gojman, *Haciendo memoria en el país del nunca más* [Remembering in the Country of Never Again], Eudeba Editors, 1997, Argentina.

<sup>3</sup> Fernando Sabsay, *Presidencias y presidentes constitucionales argentinos 1932-1999* [Presidencies and Argentine Constitutional Presidents 1932-1999]. Página 12 Editions, Vol 2, 1999]

Three sectors supported Perón's political structure: the labor movement, the army and the Catholic Church.

In the 1952 elections, Juan Domingo Perón was again elected president. During this period, many of his followers thought the government was abandoning its policies for the creation of national industries when it promoted the installation of foreign companies in the country by granting key contracts to the American Motors Corporation, and Standard Oil California, among others.

The suppression of mandatory religious teaching in schools, the legalization of divorce and other measures seen as anti-clerical caused a reaction from the Catholic Church. Several rebel Navy officers bombarded Plaza de Mayo and the Presidential Palace (Casa Rosada), in an attempt to murder Perón. This unusual violence against the presidential figure and disregard for the lives of innocent civilians caused Perón's resignation in 1955.

The de facto military government that was formed following these events occupied the country's most populated cities, and was known as the "Revolución Libertadora" [Liberating Revolution]. The Commander in Chief of the Army, Pedro Eugenio Aramburu, led the coup.

Subsequently, the Peronist Party was banned. Perón traveled to several countries until he finally established his residence in Spain, from where he continued his contact with the Peronist (also known as Justicialista) Party in Argentina.

Only two civilian governments took office in the next eighteen years and both were interrupted by military coups.

### **Political Situation Previous to the Military Coup of 1976-1983**

In the early 70s, the ban on the Peronist Party was finally lifted. In 1973, its candidate, Héctor J. Cámpora, won the presidential elections. He had been designated by Perón and took office on May 25.

Due to internal struggles, the Peronist Party was divided in two factions: one responded to the rightist union leaders of the 62 Organizaciones [62 Organizations], and the other responded to the leftist movement led by the armed group *Montoneros*. On June 20, 1973, these two factions pretended to lead the multitude gathered to pay homage to Perón on his arrival to Argentina, causing a confrontation that resulted in a number of wounded and dead.

The triumphant right-wing in this struggle demanded President Cámpora's resignation, which took place on July 13 of that same year.

In September 1973, new elections were scheduled for the following year. Perón presented his candidacy for president, with his wife María Isabel Martínez as vice-president. But the old Argentine leader and mythical character was sick at this time and not strong enough to govern. He died on July 1, 1974. With the government weakened by an unbalanced economy and popular unrest, María Isabel Martínez de Perón was sworn in as president, directing her government policies to accommodate a narrow circle led by the Minister of Social Welfare, José López Rega. His figure became increasingly more important in government decisions. He headed the Peronist right wing by organizing the Alianza Anticomunista Argentina [Argentine Anti-communist

Alliance], also known as the Triple A, formed by rightist paramilitary groups that began the wave of terror the country began to suffer.

After 1975, political and social violence, expressed by ideological persecution and social unrest was the predominant characteristic of our country.

“The military coup of March 24, 1976” against the democratically elected government was led by the three Armed Forces<sup>4</sup> nominating itself *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* [*National Reorganization Process*].

Violence intensified with this new de facto rule. In the name of National Reorganization, a systematic policy of persecution of all opposition was set in place: it included leaders of the labor movement, political parties, social organizations, student unions, religious and intellectual organizations. In addition to this, a strong censorship in the fields of culture and education began. A lasting economic transformation also took place as a consequence of a ruinous import policy that resulted in the near destruction of domestic industries, causing grave social consequences such as sub-employment and unemployment.

### **Public Policies of Humiliation**

This historical process created increasing unrest in our society. All public policies of humiliation implemented by the military regime since 1976 were premeditated and systematic; the persecution, detention and disappearance of individuals was directed toward all sectors that opposed the regime. The venues of everyday socialization were closed and ideological and xenophobic persecutions and other aberrations created a favorable ground for humiliation. The method of terror applied, generated anguish and feelings of inferiority and helplessness among civil society.

A constant abuse of power by the military forces was instrumented through a policy of unprecedented violence marked by illegal arrests with the subsequent loss of dignity and identity of the individuals who later disappeared or were killed. Through this mechanism, the institution of detention centers (legal and illegal)<sup>5</sup> was imposed, whose purpose was to humiliate and/or destroy the individual in different ways: when they were detained, when they were liberated or forced to exile or when they were disappeared. Interpersonal and social bonds deteriorated, causing different traumatic disorders that have left their marks up to the present. It is important to add that these traumas in individuals and in civil society as a whole are intimately related with the constant state of hyper-vigilance, threats to life or physical integrity, encouragement of feelings of helplessness, horror, etc. that were exercised by the Joint Forces<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> The Argentine Armed Forces are formed by the Navy, Army and Air Force. The first Military Junta was presided by: Jorge Rafael Videla in representation of the Army, Emilio Eduardo Massera, Navy and Ramón Agosti, Air Force.

<sup>5</sup> Detention centers in control of the Executive Power operated under legally established norms. In some cases, reported to the courts by the victims, the detainees were entered illegally, that is, without recording the detentions in the State's bureaucratic orders. The majority of these cases resulted in the disappearance of the individuals. The illegal detention centers were discovered gradually as they began to be reported by the detainees. Among their main characteristics we can point out: places removed from urban centers, private residences located near accesses to roads and highways. These locations were temporary and the period in which they operated was linked to the purpose of each center (extermination-transit/transfer).

<sup>6</sup> The concept of *Armed Forces* was broadened to *Joint Forces* with the incorporation of the Police Forces

As a consequence of these traumatic conditions, many of the affected individuals were excluded from the production system due to physical or psychological afflictions or political reasons. The government forced some individuals to leave the country while others opted to seek political refuge by force of the circumstances. In some cases, safe haven was sought in areas removed from the big cities, where the individual could conceal his identity, which proved to be an effective survival strategy. After almost thirty years since the genesis of this process, the consequences are still felt in the present. However, this field of study has not yet been investigated in depth.

### **Our Proposal For the Prevention of Authoritarian Practices**

We believe the best tool to avoid repeating the experiences of the past is creating awareness in civil society about the events that took place during the years 1975-1983. The need for this research arises from the lack of systematic records on the subject. The city of Rosario, including the larger area surrounding it, does not have a databank containing reports of the humiliation suffered in detention centers, and there are no systematic analyses that would allow us to determine the causes and the number of exiles in our area. Therefore, our objective is to analyze the policy of humiliation implemented in the period 1975-1983 in the city of Rosario and the Greater Rosario area, and the strategies developed by those who sought to escape persecution, detention and disappearance.

We propose a qualitative study, based on the ethnographic method of data collection with interviews and participating observation. The bibliographical, iconographic and photographic survey material will remain in the Museo de la Memoria [Museum of Memory] of Rosario<sup>7</sup>, as part of its archive and its analysis will allow the different professionals involved in the research to reach a joint interpretation of the events.

### **Research Venue and Team**

This research will be carried out in a museum that is part of the municipal government, the Museo de la Memoria [Museum of Memory]. With this, we visualize an attempt by the State to compensate civil society for those years of horror. This museum aims to create awareness in the population concerning the nefarious events of our history and attempts to produce a necessary cultural change in our population, especially in the younger generations that are not sufficiently informed about this topic. The research proposed by this highly qualified interdisciplinary team would contribute to expand and analyze the information about the events of this period. Moreover, it will add to the documentary material of the Museo de la Memoria [Museum of Memory], making this work readily available for the general public and for future investigations.

Interdisciplinary team formed by the following disciplines:

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(Federal and Provincial), Gendarmería [Border Police] and Prefectura [Coast Guard] to the activities of repression. These Joint Forces included civilian and retired personnel of these forces that formed a *Task Force* also known as *patotas* [gangs].

<sup>7</sup> The Museo de la Memoria [Museum of Memory] is the first one in Latin America to be recognized as worthy of Nacional Interest. It was created by Municipal Ordinance No. 6506 on February 26, 1998, in the city of Rosario as part of the Secretary of Culture of the Municipality of Rosario. Its mission is to reconstruct memory, identities and the social networks that were destroyed since March 24, 1976, a moment that marked a breakdown in the traits and behavior of Argentine society. It is devoted to the task of preserving and exhibiting material from this period as well as researching and teaching, with a specialized library.

Psychology: From this field, we propose to gather information, analyze the variables and most persistent effects in the mental health and everyday life of the individuals who suffered persecution directly, were forced to seek safe haven, were abducted and/or incarcerated and tortured during the period mentioned above, 1975-1983.

Anthropology and Sociology: These two fields are the articulating axis, since they allow us to enrich the analysis through their thorough data collection. The use of a qualitative method and exhaustive fieldwork of ethnography are the bases for this study. The ethnographic analysis will be cross-referenced with the input of variables from the fields of psychology, sociology and political science.

Political Science: This field will allow us to understand the power structure during the mentioned period, which used repression as the main mechanism for domination. The focus will be on the motives for the persecution of the individuals that are the object of this study, motives that can be considered eminently political.

Museology: Through this field, we will attempt to contribute to the rescue of the tangible and intangible patrimonial heritage of this historical process, in the framework of the field of influence of the referent institution.

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Translation Note: The names of institutions and book titles have been translated to offer the non-Spanish speaker an approximate idea of their purpose or topic. In the case of book titles, none in the cited bibliography have been published in English to my knowledge at this date.

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