



ARGENTINA: THE END OF TERRORISM THROUGH STATE TERRORISM

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Between 1969 and 1979, Argentina witnessed a campaign of terrorist violence that resulted in 4,402 incidents in which 920 persons died. This campaign was first launched against an unpopular and illegitimate military regime. Under siege from a combination of terrorist violence and collective violent protest, the military agreed to return power to a democratically elected government. However, three years later and as a consequence of continued violence, the military were back in power, with an implicit popular mandate to impose law and order through any means available. This was done through the "dirty war."

This paper first reviews historical developments over the 1969-1979 period. A second section reviews the violent repertoire of different social sectors. The argument advanced here is that the intensity of terrorist violence and of collective violent protest created the perception that Argentina was on the verge of a revolutionary situation. This perception influenced the actions of terrorist organizations, which escalated their violence, and of the government, which launched a campaign of illegal repression. The fear of revolution also coloured the attitude of civil society vis a vis a new military regime. The final section of this paper explains the end of terrorism through a combination of several factors. The sudden growth in membership, from 600 combatants in 1972 to 5,000 in 1975, and the availability of unlimited funds through kidnap ransoms, emboldened the terrorist organizations. The terrorists chose to continue their campaign beyond the return to democracy. In doing so, they lost the widespread support they had enjoyed until 1973, and precipitated the emergence of death squads under a supposedly democratic government.



Initially, the effect of illegal repression was that of stifling dissent and increasing group cohesion within terrorist organizations. The terrorists' response to illegal repression was a forward escape. However, this attitude could not survive the intensity of the "dirty war." While initially, death squad activity proved counter-productive, in that it provoked greater group cohesion and renewed violence, massive illegal repression during the "dirty war" decimated the groups. The end of terrorism came in 1979, through another campaign of terrorism conducted by the state.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The roots of the violence that plagued Argentina in the 1960s and 1970s lie in the 1955 military coup that deposed Juan Perón. With the proscription of the Peronist party after that date, Argentina became a semi-democracy.¹ To the military and their civilian allies, a Peronist government was unthinkable. However, it became impossible to exclude the Peronist electorate and govern effectively at the same time. The unions, which identified with the "exiled tyrant," responded to the proscription of Peronism with "Struggle Plans" – occupations of factories, industrial sabotage, and violent strikes. Between 1955 and 1966 Argentina was governed by five presidents, two army generals and three civilians, none of whom finished his term. The civilians were deposed by military coups, and the soldiers were forced to admit defeat, call for elections, and return to the barracks in haste. It was in order to conclude this cycle of mass praetorianism² that general Juan Carlos Onganía seized power in June 1966.

The 1966 military coup was the fifth since 1930. However, the situation was now different. Traditionally, the Argentine military had intervened in politics following what Alfred Stepan has called the "moderator pattern" in civil-military

¹ Marcelo Cavarozzi, *Autoritarismo y Democracia, 1955-1983* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1983), *passim*.

² Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), Chapter 4.



relations. Military governments prior to 1966 had had very limited objectives and had been of short duration. However, in 1966 Onganía and the top brass talked about a 15-year military government that would introduce profound economic, political and social changes.³ According to an opinion poll conducted one week after the coup, 66% of the population approved of the coup. In another poll, 77% of respondents thought the coup was “necessary.” However, within two years, 70% of those surveyed considered Onganía equal to or worse than his civilian predecessor, Arturo Illia.⁴ These poll data are important because they support a central theme in this analysis: broad sectors of Argentine society viewed the Onganía regime as the country’s last hope of escaping the 1955-66 deadlock. Disenchantment with the military government produced a social radicalization that expressed itself through violence, and the support for violence, after 1969.⁵

In May of that year, Argentina witnessed its first major riot, the Cordobazo, which resulted in 14 dead and millions in property damage. 1969 also witnessed the emergence of six terrorist organizations: the Peronist Armed Forces (FAP), the Shirtless Commando, the Montoneros, the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR), the Liberation Armed Forces (FAL), and the People’s Revolutionary Army (ERP). The first four organizations called themselves Peronist, while the last two identified with Marxism-Leninism. These six organizations suffered splits and mergers in subsequent years. By 1974, primarily as a consequence of mergers, only Montoneros and the ERP were active. Membership in these organizations varied dramatically. Total membership in all terrorist groups was

³ The 1966-73 military government became the prototype of what Guillermo O’Donnell has called a bureaucratic-authoritarian regime. See his *1966-1973 El Estado Burocrático Autoritario. Triunfos, Derrotas y Crisis* (Buenos Aires: Editorial de Belgrano, 1983). On the moderator pattern see Alfred Stepan, *Brasil: los militares y la política* (Buenos Aires: Amorrortu Editores, 1974), especially pp. 73-84. On the Onganía regime see Roberto Roth, *Los Años de Onganía. Relato de un Testigo* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones La Campana, 1981); and Gregorio Selser, *El Onganiato* (Buenos Aires: Hyspamérica Ediciones, 1986).

⁴ Frederick C. Turner, “The Study of Argentine Politics through Survey Research,” *Latin American Research Review*, 10:2 (1975), pp. 73-116: 93; and O’Donnell, *El Estado Burocrático Autoritario*, p. 66.

⁵ On social radicalization during the Onganía regime see María José Moyano, *Argentina’s Lost Patrol. Armed Struggle 1969-1979* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 17-34.



200 in 1969, 600 in 1972, 5,000 in 1975, and 1,000 in 1979. These terrorists first went into action against a military regime but continued operating against the constitutional government elected in 1973, and were partly responsible for a new coup in 1976. The violent repertoire also changed significantly over a decade. As will be discussed later, changes in the nature of the regime under which the terrorists operated and in their operational repertoire also brought fluctuations in popular support for terrorism.⁶

The Cordobazo and the operations by terrorist organizations, especially the spectacular kidnapping, "revolutionary trial" and "execution" of general (and ex-president) Pedro E. Aramburu, ended the *pax onganiana*. Onganía was replaced by general Roberto M. Levingston, who in turn was replaced by general Alejandro A. Lanusse. It was Lanusse's job to orchestrate the customary call for elections and return to the barracks. The military's civilian allies thought the country was on the brink of a revolution. A leading business periodical in Buenos Aires complained that

Any businessman who tries to put limits to the pretensions of workers, with the risk of turning his factory into a battlefield, or the risk of being kidnapped by terrorists, deserves a medal for heroism ... the military administration insists it will try to institutionalize the country, but the fact is the administration is about to institutionalize our moral and material breakdown.⁷

Lanusse shared these fears about greater coordination between collective violent protest and terrorist operations, which is why he decided there would be no proscriptions for the March 1973 elections. This was a major concession,

⁶ The literature on terrorism in Argentina is extensive. For a review, see *Ibid.*, Chapter 2, n. 28, 35 and 42. On all Argentine terrorist groups see Richard Gillespie, "Armed Struggle in Argentina," *New Scholar*, 8:1 & 2 (1982), pp. 387-427. On the Montoneros see Richard Gillespie, *Soldiers of Perón. Argentina's Montoneros* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); and Pablo Giussani, *Montoneros. La Soberbia Armada* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana/Planeta, 1984). On the ERP see Julio Santucho, *Los Últimos Guevaristas. Surgimiento y Eclipse del Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (Buenos Aires: Puntosur Editores, 1988); and Luis Mattini, *Hombres y Mujeres del PRT-ERP* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Contrapunto, 1990).

⁷ *El Economista*, cited in O'Donnell, *El Estado Burocrático Autoritario*, p. 456.



and tantamount to an admission of defeat: the military had spent 18 years trying to exorcise the ghost of Perón. In any event, if the objective of Lanusse's electoral strategy was to contain the social radicalization, the effect was the opposite. By 1971, according to survey data, 45.5% of respondents in Greater Buenos Aires and 49.5% in the rest of the country considered that terrorism was "justified." Those expressing support for terrorism were primarily drawn from the upper and middle classes, the natural allies of military governments.⁸ In March 1973, the Peronist presidential candidate, Héctor J. Cámpora, obtained 49.56% of the popular vote. The Peronists won 20 out of 22 governorships, 45 out of 65 Senate seats, and 143 out of 243 seats in the Chamber of Deputies.⁹ Peronist candidates received a sizeable portion of the non-Peronist vote. These electoral results can be interpreted as a complete repudiation of everything the military represented, for two reasons. First, because the military and their civilian allies had spent 18 years blocking the Peronists' access to power. In addition, Lanusse had gone on national television on the eve of the election to urge his countrymen not to vote for Peronist candidates.

If, in the 1969-73 period, widespread anti-military sentiment dominated political life, after 1973 political turmoil moved within the Peronist party. By 1973, Peronism was split into a left wing and a right wing, both vying for supremacy within the party. This struggle between the Peronist right (the political class, almost all the unions, and small youth groups) and the Peronist left (the terrorist organizations, a small union component and virtually all youth groups) would precipitate another military coup three years later.¹⁰ With Cámpora's inaugural in May 1973, the Peronist left seemed in control. It had managed to get several of its spokesmen appointed to key political posts. The left had also obtained an amnesty for all combatants, and the legalization of all terrorist organizations (Peronist or Marxist), which Cámpora announced in his inaugural speech and Congress immediately enacted into law. However, the "Cámpora spring" lasted one month. On June 20, as Perón was about to land at Ezeiza airport, the

⁸ Ibid., pp. 463-65.

⁹ Moyano, *Argentina's Lost Patrol*, pp. 30-34.

¹⁰ On the 1973-76 Peronist administrations see Liliana de Riz, *Retorno y Derrumbe: El Último Gobierno Peronista* (Buenos Aires: Hyspamérica Ediciones, 1987).



Peronist right opened fire on the Peronist left. The left returned fire. The battle resulted in 16 dead and 433 wounded, and the welcoming ceremony had to be called off.¹¹ Cámpora resigned, under the pretext that once Perón was back in the country, nobody else could be president. New elections were held in September 1973. The ticket Juan Perón - Isabel Martínez de Perón polled 62% of ballots.¹² In the following months it would become clear that Perón leaned on the right in order to destroy the left.

An ERP attack against a military garrison allowed Perón to outlaw the organization immediately following his election victory. Montoneros, the other terrorist group, remained a legal political grouping well into 1975. However, Perón closed down various Peronist left wing periodicals, fired political appointees with leftist leanings, and had dozens of leftists arrested. After his death, his widow, turned president, continued and intensified these policies. A death squad, the Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance or Triple A, became the government's chief counter-terrorist weapon.¹³ Violence continued to increase. By September 1974, according to one of the Buenos Aires dailies, there was one political death every 19 hours.¹⁴ In this climate of increasing violence and economic chaos, the military seized power in March 1976. The new government, which called itself the Process of National Reorganization, established a series of objectives. The only objective achieved was the end of the terrorist campaign. The cost of this achievement, borne by all social sectors, was the "dirty war."

VIOLENCE AND ITS AGENTS

¹¹ Moyano, *Argentina's Lost Patrol*, p. 36 and p. 177 n. 69.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹³ On the Triple A see Ignacio González Janzen, *La Triple-A* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Contrapunto, 1986).

¹⁴ "Un muerto cada 19 horas," *La Opinión*, September 17 1974, p. 32.



Before turning to the analysis of the decline of terrorism, it becomes necessary, in the words of Peter Merkl, to discuss “who did what to whom, and why.”¹⁵ Accounting for the decline of terrorism involves, in the first place, pinpointing when that decline began. In addition, it must be stressed that terrorism, Argentine style, was accompanied by high levels of collective violent protest. The parallel development of these two types of violence influenced popular perceptions of terrorism (and the terrorists’ perceptions of themselves) as well as the government’s counter-terrorist strategy. Finally, any explanation of the decline of Argentine terrorism must take into account the impact of right wing violence on terrorist strategic choices. Table 1 presents data on all three types of violence.

Table 1 - Incidents of Political Violence in Argentina, 1969-1983

	Terrorist Organizations	Collective Violent Protest	Terrorism and Collective Violence	Right Wing Violence	Total
1969	114	386	500	8	508
1970	434	225	659	24	683
1971	654	706	1,360	83	1,443
1972	352	336	688	49	737
1973	413	342	755	190	945
1974	807	107	914	370	1,284
1975	723	98	821	704	1,525
1976	662	74	736	7,369	8,105
1977	163	---	163	5,310	5,473
1978	67	---	67	1,793	1,860
1979	13	---	13	321	334
1980	---	---	---	155	155

¹⁵ Peter H. Merkl, “Approaches to the Study of Political Violence,” in Peter H. Merkl (ed.), *Political Violence and Terror: Motifs and Motivations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 31-2.



1981	---	---	---	39	39
1982	---	---	---	24	24
1983	---	---	---	18	18
Total	4,402	2,274	6,676	16,457	23,133

Source: Contemporary press reports and Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, *Anexos del Informe de la Conadep* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1985).

A cursory look at the first column reveals that terrorist violence escalated almost continuously in the 1969-75 period. De-escalation occurred in 1972, partly because the terrorist groups turned their energies to the presidential campaign, but also because the groups had been significantly weakened by arrests and convictions. However, these figures make it impossible to defend the view that terrorist groups were in retreat by the time of the 1976 coup, and that the military magnified the terrorist threat in order to justify the coup against Mrs. Perón.¹⁶ That the groups were able to maintain such levels of violence even in 1976-77, while the “dirty war” raged on, indicates that in 1975-76, the terrorist war machine was formidable. Terrorist violence not only increased in absolute terms. It also became deadlier. Until 1973, the emphasis was on “violence against property, not persons,” and the groups focused on small-scale attacks against the security forces and Robin Hood type actions like the distribution of food in slum dwellings. After 1973 the groups concentrated on operations against human targets (kidnappings and murder) and singled out for assassination individuals whose death the public could not easily write off, like off-duty policemen or union leaders. It became increasingly difficult to justify or understand why the terrorists, who had been amnestied, escalated their violence against a constitutional government they had been instrumental in electing. After 1973 the groups also turned to spectacular operations against heavily guarded bases and regiments. The practical effect of these terrorist operations, which involved over 100 combatants and sophisticated technology,

¹⁶ This view is widespread. See for example Gillespie, *Soldiers of Perón*; Daniel Frontalini and María Cristina Caiati, *El Mito de la Guerra Sucia* (Buenos Aires: Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales, 1984); and Louise Mallinder, *The Ongoing Quest for Truth and Justice: Enacting and Annuling Argentina’s Amnesty Laws* (Queen’s University, Belfast: Institute of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Working Paper no. 5, 2009).



was to legitimize massive repression. Therefore, by the time of the 1976 coup, the terrorists had suffered a political, not a military defeat. This theme will be developed later.

What was the relationship between terrorism and collective violent protest? In Italy and Germany, terrorism has been interpreted as a response to the apparent failure of collective protest. Analysts of the Red Brigades and the Red Army Faction stress the connection between the end of a cycle of collective protest and the birth of terrorism.¹⁷ This was not the case in Argentina. As Table 1 indicates, terrorism and collective violence emerged in 1969 and developed along parallel lines up to 1973. Although the levels of collective protest declined after that date, that protest was still significant from 1973 to 1975.

Between 1969 and 1973, collective violence expressed itself primarily through riots. The Cordobazo provided a pattern that would be replicated in other cities and towns. These riots were largely anomic, by-products of other peaceful forms of political action. However, there was a certain element of contagion. All riots, including the Cordobazo, were forays into “enemy territory.” They began in the working class suburbs and culminated in the destruction of downtown public buildings and bourgeois enclaves. The image that the press (and, one assumes, television) conveyed was that of barbarian hordes. This image was reinforced by the wave of physical occupations of buildings, which became the hallmark of collective violent protest in 1973-76. During this period, students occupied their schools and universities, workers occupied their factories, employees occupied the hospitals, radio stations, public buildings and banks, neighbourhood groups occupied city halls, and inmates occupied their prisons. The duration of these occupations varied significantly (from hours to months), as did the intensity of the violence that accompanied them. In many of these occupations the objective was to remove authority figures. Occasionally, these

¹⁷ Donatella della Porta and Sidney Tarrow, “Unwanted children: Political violence and the cycle of protest in Italy, 1966-1973,” *European Journal of Political Research*, 14 (1986), pp. 607-632; Donatella della Porta, “Social Movements and Terrorism in Italy and West Germany: Strategic Choices and Escalation Dynamics in Underground Organizations,” paper presented at the XII World Congress of Sociology, Madrid, July 9-13, 1990.



occupations were an attempt to resolve a labour conflict. In other cases, the objective was merely to prevent a rival group from taking the initiative.¹⁸

Independent of the objectives, the image that this collective violence conveyed was one of a generalized crisis of authority. What was being questioned was the very nature of hierarchical relations, in the private and public spheres. Confronted with this spectacle of generalized popular rebellion, the terrorists, civil society, and all governments after Lanusse's assumed that Argentina was on the verge of revolution. This was far from true, in that collective protest never challenged the existing class relations. However, the misperception influenced behaviour. The terrorists assumed that the masses would understand and support any and all operations, joining the ranks of the popular armies in droves. Civil society gradually became convinced that Isabel Perón's administration was "primordial chaos" and "something intolerable, compared with which any other regime was better."¹⁹ Those who had cheered the terrorist operations of 1969-73 and had danced in the streets to celebrate the end of military rule in 1973 were, after 1976, prepared to look the other way while "bolshies" disappeared. Finally, the scope and intensity of collective violent protest allowed general Jorge R. Videla, who became president after the 1976 coup, to conclude that "a terrorist is not just someone with a gun or a bomb, but also someone who spreads ideas that are 'contrary to western and Christian civilization.'"²⁰ Mass organizations were to pay dearly for these misconceptions about the linkages between terrorism and collective protest, in the form of repression and disappearances.

Under the rubric of right wing violence, Table 1 includes all incidents for which either paramilitary squads or right wing Peronists were responsible. Discussing these two jointly might appear incorrect, since violence exercised from the state has a distinct nature. However, the relationship between the Peronist right and

¹⁸ "Lema: Ocupar para Destituir," *Crónica*, June 13 1973, p. 5.

¹⁹ Guillermo O'Donnell, "Argentina: La Cosecha del Miedo," *Alternativas*, 1 (September 1983), pp. 5-14: 7.

²⁰ President Videla quoted in P. Strafford, "Argentina: Back on the rails, but at what cost?" *The Times*, January 4 1978, p.12.



the security forces was close. Frequently, the police abetted or overlooked the activities of the Peronist right. There is also evidence that members of right wing Peronist groupings joined the ranks of paramilitary squads, in particular the Triple A.²¹ Finally, these two sets of individuals had a shared interest, the need to check the development of the left. It should also be said that the Peronist right played a secondary role, for right wing violence was first primarily and later exclusively a state-sponsored operation.

During the 1966-73 military regime, right wing violence originated in private initiatives of members of the security forces. Policemen and, occasionally, officers in the armed forces, staffed these paramilitary squads. Even though there was no governmental decision to organize death squads, there was no great interest in finding the culprits either. Just as it occurred in Spain, Northern Ireland, or Colombia, in Argentina right wing violence initially resulted from the frustrations of individuals who decided to mete out punishment. These individuals would organize a commando, which usually took the name of a recent victim of terrorism. After a punitive operation, the group appeared to disband, even though it is likely that the same individuals formed part of different groups over time. This was not the case after 1973. Under the 1973-76 Peronist administrations, right wing violence no longer originated in private initiatives. Right wing violence after 1973 was organized, directed and financed by a constitutionally elected government. The leader of the Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance was José López Rega, Perón's Minister of Social Welfare. In Orwellian fashion, the ministry's funds financed the death squads.

There is a second important difference between pre- and post-1973 right wing violence. Under military rule, right wing violence focused on bombings of legal offices that defended terrorists, or theatres that showed films or plays considered reprehensible (such as *Last Tango in Paris*). After 1973, the Triple A expressed itself primarily through assassination. The definition of the enemy

²¹ María José Moyano, "The 'Dirty War' in Argentina: Was it a war and how dirty was it?" in Peter Waldmann and Hans Werner Tobler (eds.), *Staatliche und parastaatliche Gewalt in Lateinamerika* (Frankfurt: Vervuert Verlag, 1991), pp. 49-50.



was also broadened. Those to be targeted were no longer only the terrorists and their lawyers. Journalists and artists, militants in legal organizations (such as unions, student groups or community organizations), and former officials in the Campora administration, were now at risk.

The wisdom and morality of devising a counter-terrorist strategy that relies heavily on illegal repression will be discussed below. What must be stressed here is that the actions of the Triple A, and subsequently of the 1976 military government, stifled dissent within terrorist groups, prevented any meaningful discussion of strategic choices, and strengthened group cohesion, because terrorist organizations protected the combatants from the perils of life above ground. As one terrorist recalled,

[the 1974-75 period] was like the horror movie in which the room's walls are closing in. [Action] was cathartic. It demonstrated we were alive. And the Triple A hit hard. Guerrillas were used to being bank employees during the week and guerrillas during the weekend. And the Triple A got you during the weekend. The dilemma was that if you walked into a restaurant without the .45 [calibre gun] and the AAA turned up you got massacred, and if you carried [the gun] and they found it on you they massacred you anyway. We didn't have the experience or the cool judgement to react to that. After [1974-75] it was a race towards death on skateboard or bicycle. And many felt almighty with a grenade.²²

A second consequence of massive illegal repression was the development of survivor guilt. The memory of those who had fallen hardened the resolve of those left behind. The terrorists' response to the 1976 coup made this clear. Initially, the terrorists assumed that general Videla would be a new Ongana. When it became clear that the military were bent on the complete physical extermination of the terrorist groups (see Table 1), the combatants should have ceased all operations or, at the very least, turned to a defensive strategy involving sabotage and small-scale attacks. Instead, the groups continued to

²² Moyano, *Argentina's Lost Patrol*, p. 76.



expose their forces in frontal attacks against the military, with predictable results. Approximately 80% of all members of ERP and Montoneros perished in the “dirty war.”

EVALUATING THE END OF TERRORISM

"The decline of terrorism appears to be related to the interplay of three factors: the government response to terrorism (which is not restricted to preemption or deterrence), the strategic choices of the terrorist organization, and its organizational resources."²³ The government's response can be decisive. The government has two options. First, it can deploy its coercive apparatus, the security forces and the Criminal Code. In this case, the government's objective is primarily to affect terrorist organizational resources. Harsher penalties for certain crimes, “diplock” (non-jury) trials, increased training and equipment for the security forces, or laws that require landlords to provide information on their tenants, are all examples of coercive measures designed to impact terrorist membership and the group's ability to operate.²⁴ In addition to coercion, the government has a second option, conciliation. In this case, the government can introduce reforms designed to deprive the terrorist group of another organizational resource, public support. The decision to address the demands of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association in the early 1970s, or the decision to grant regional autonomy to the Basque provinces in Spain in 1981, are illustrations. In both cases, the government realized that the population had legitimate grievances and that these were being exploited by the terrorist discourse. Satisfying popular demands through effective reform became a way of depriving terrorism of a recruitment tool. Other conciliatory measures, such as the introduction of the Repentance Law in Italy that reduced sentences and criminal charges in return for terrorist cooperation, are aimed at reducing cohesion within terrorist groups. “Social reintegration” policies in Spain, and the

²³ Martha Crenshaw, “How Terrorism Declines,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 3:1 (1991), pp. 69-87.

²⁴ For a review of these measures see Christopher Hewitt, *The Effectiveness of Anti-Terrorist Policies* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), Chapter 3.



Argentine amnesty of 1973, are also examples. Indirectly, these measures may affect both the level of support for terrorism, and the group's strategy.

It is possible to think of purely coercive or purely conciliatory responses. However, in practice governments will respond with a mix of coercion and conciliation. Conciliatory policies require patience, and can be costly – literally and figuratively. Reforms that will deprive terrorists of popular support may involve significant government expenditure. In addition, the effects of reform are only visible after some time. Politicians tend to prefer quick results. Coercion is less costly politically. Introducing harsher penalties for terrorist crimes may have little or no deterrent effect, and an increase in security force personnel will not necessarily affect the terrorist organization. However, politicians who opt for coercion know that, at least temporarily, they will appear to be acting decisively, even though their stand may be less than effective. “Security theatre,” as Bruce Schneier terms it, always has an impact on the audience even though it may not have an impact on the terrorists.²⁵

The government's response is not the only factor that explains terrorist decline. The group may choose a strategy that results in organizational over-stretch. In 1970, for example, one month after they kidnapped and killed general Aramburu, the Montoneros staged a second spectacular feat, the occupation of the town of La Calera. In 40 minutes the group occupied and robbed the bank, robbed arms from the police station, occupied the town hall and the post office, played the Peronist March and distributed leaflets. Two combatants were arrested during the getaway, and information they provided nearly destroyed the organization through deaths and detentions. Shortly after La Calera, as the leader of Montoneros recalls, “we were reduced at one point to 20 people holed up in two flats.”²⁶ In this case, the group's strategic choice almost led to the organization's extinction. However, it is also possible to think of cases where the terrorist group's strategy leads to a loss of public support and/or increased

²⁵ Bruce Schneier, *Beyond Fear. Thinking Sensibly about Security in an Uncertain World* (Springer, 2003).

²⁶ Christopher Roper, “Don't cry for us, say the Montoneros,” *The Guardian*, March 2 1977, p. 4.



coercion, all of which leads to terrorist decline. The Red Brigades' decision to kill Aldo Moro, or the killing of Daniel Mitrione by Uruguay's Tupamaros, provide good illustrations.²⁷

Terrorist organizational resources will also influence the government's response. In Colombia, where the terrorist groups have thousands under arms, occupy portions of the national territory, and live off the drug trade, the coercive response is no longer an option. While the Colombian government may have hoped to prevail over terrorism at some point in the past, it cannot expect to do so today, and must follow the conciliatory path, and offer to negotiate.²⁸ Timing determines the interplay of these three factors (governmental response, strategic options and organizational resources). Over time, certain options become closed and new ones emerge.

How did these three factors produce the decline of terrorism in Argentina? The argument developed below is that the availability of two organizational resources, money and combatants, helped the groups make poor strategic choices, even though they were not the only determinants of those choices. The decision to continue the fight beyond 1973, and to escalate the violence, deprived the terrorist groups of support and created a climate of opinion favourable to the elimination of terrorism by any means possible. Internal dissent over the wisdom of these strategic choices existed, but it was stifled by the internal dynamics of the groups and by the Triple A and the "dirty war." Paradoxically, the end of terrorism came through terrorism. Montoneros and the ERP were physically exterminated by state terror.

²⁷ On the Red Brigades see Robert C. Meade, *Red Brigades: The Story of Italian Terrorism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), especially Chapters 13 and 15. On the Tupamaros see Sir Geoffrey Jackson, *Secuestrado por el Pueblo* (Barcelona: Editorial Pomaire, 1974).

²⁸ These issues are discussed in Douglas Porch and Maria Rasmussen, "Demobilization of Paramilitaries in Colombia: Transition or Transformation?" *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 31:6, June 2008.



TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES

Within Argentine terrorist groups, two resources became abundant after 1973: money and members. Between late 1972 and 1974-75, total membership in terrorist groups increased from 600 to 5,000. In terrorist jargon, this process became known as the "fattening process." Those who joined were "parsleys," naive, politically immature individuals. The fattening process was the consequence of societal radicalization under the 1966-73 military regime, which resulted in a romanticized view of the terrorists and in the glorification of the instrumental value of violence. We have already mentioned poll data that showed significant support for terrorism under general Lanusse. Though no other polls are available, an estimate of the breadth of public support for terrorism in 1973 can be made if we consider some additional factors. First, newspaper coverage of the electoral campaign prior to the March 1973 elections does not mention a single instance in which any of the candidates condemned terrorism. If the candidates refrained from such pronouncements, they must have felt that the public was in no mood for them. Second, it must be remembered that following Campora's inaugural, the Congress unanimously passed an amnesty law. This amnesty was justified on the grounds that the country had suffered a period of political and social irregularity, which rendered convictions for political offenses highly questionable. This congressional vote on the amnesty should also be viewed as a reflection of the public mood at the time. Finally, the number of people present at rallies and marches organized by the terrorists also provides an estimate of public support. Throughout 1973, and on four different occasions, the terrorists mobilized 40,000 – 150,000 persons.

In addition to the increase in membership, the groups discovered a profitable source of funds: kidnappings. Argentine terrorists had always emphasized self-reliance. During the early years they financed operations through donations, but also through robberies of banks and armories. However, money was always in short supply. Kidnappings for ransom remedied this. Between 1971 and 1979 the terrorists extorted 114 ransom payments through kidnappings. Most of these kidnappings took place between 1972 and 1975. By and large those kidnapped were executives in multinational corporations or in top Argentine



businesses. It is impossible to estimate the total monetary value of these kidnappings. Sometimes the press reported ransom figures, sometimes it merely reported that a ransom had been paid, and sometimes it omitted even that information. However, we do know that the 16 most profitable kidnappings netted the terrorists U\$S 105.4 million over four years.²⁹ In 1970s Argentina, these funds made the terrorist organizations very rich.

One conclusion to be drawn here is that terrorist operations after 1973 happened to some extent because they were feasible and possible. Flush with money and strengthened by the incorporation of so many to the ranks, the terrorist groups had little incentive not to squander resources in pursuit of a flawed and suicidal strategy. Another conclusion to be drawn here is that these terrorist “armies” of 5,000 combatants, so well financed, so well equipped, and so ferocious (see the statistics on terrorist violence in 1974-6), were unstoppable. This was the conclusion that the military drew. The “dirty war” appeared, in the eyes of the military and of those civilian sectors which vindicate it to this day, as the only course that would guarantee the end of terrorism in the short or medium term.

TERRORIST STRATEGIC CHOICES

In 1973, Argentine terrorists could have claimed credit for bringing Perón back to power, declared victory, turned in their weapons, and joined conventional political organizations. Instead, they chose to wage war against a government they had been instrumental in electing. There are several reasons that account for this decision. First, it has been argued that until 1973 the terrorists enjoyed widespread popular support. However, that support was linked to the fact that the terrorists had gone into action against an unpopular and illegitimate military regime. The terrorists mistook for revolutionary fervour what was in fact a rejection of Onganía, Lanusse, and their policies; and assumed they would have the same degree of support once a democratically elected Peronist

²⁹ Moyano, *Argentina's Lost Patrol*, pp. 57-60.



administration was in power. A second reason why the struggle continued beyond 1973 is the terrorists' youth and inexperience. As a former combatant argued, "everything was linked to our age. We were all twenty or twenty one."³⁰ These were individuals who had grown up in post-1955 Argentina. Since conventional political activity was something they had not witnessed in their lifetime, they could hardly be expected to develop a taste for it overnight. The terrorists' youth also fostered the development of simplistic, manichean views: all capitalism was evil, and socialism was the solution; the only principled alternative to bourgeois reformism was revolution.

Earlier, this essay discussed the development of collective violent protest after 1969. The lesson that terrorists derived from episodes such as the Cordobazo was that revolution was at hand:

"You should emphasize the unique characteristics of that political moment. We were impressed by what we believed was a crisis of domination. We never realized that it was a partial crisis."

"We did not discriminate because we were immature. Vietnam, Cuba, Russia, everything was seen as one step forward in the victory of socialism over capitalism."

"At a given moment we believed that revolution was at hand. This was a serious error in judgement, but it was based on the impressive mass mobilizations of the time ..."³¹

This perception, as we have seen, was shared by the Peronist government, the military, and civil society. From the perspective of the terrorists' own logic, the decision to continue fighting after 1973 seemed fully justified by the scope and intensity of collective violent protest. Argentine terrorists believed in the theory of "the worse, the better." The Basque ETA also believed in this idea, even though ETA gave it a more straightforward name: action-repression-action spiral. According to the theory, sustained terrorist action will precipitate state repression, which will in turn catalyze popular combativeness and support for

³⁰ Ibid., p. 123.

³¹ Ibid., p. 118.



terrorism. Proponents of this theory, in Argentina or Spain, never contemplated two likely scenarios. If, as was the case in Spain, repression concentrated on terrorist organizations, there would be no significant increase in support for ETA. In the case of Argentina, the theory could have worked prior to 1974. However, with the advent of the Triple A it could not but fail, because right wing violence tended to strike at those within reach, the activists in mass organizations. Instead of increasing the levels of popular combativeness, the Triple A had a paralyzing effect on collective action.

A fourth reason why terrorist activity continued beyond 1973 was that the terrorist group became a surrogate family. This phenomenon has also been observed elsewhere.³² Individuals who joined terrorist organizations were very young. They joined in the company of friends with whom they shared a previous militancy in legal organizations. The new experiences in the underground, the learning process that becoming a terrorist involved, reinforced those affective ties first developed during that earlier militancy. A combatant's sense of identity became tied up with the organization. Terrorist organizations were able to reinforce this process by offering material and more intangible rewards. The most important of these was some form of power, in the form of promotion. Terrorism became a "career."

All of the above explains why the terrorists decided to wage war against the Peronist governments. It must also be said that the manner in which that war was waged changed dramatically after 1973. After that date, ERP and Montoneros gradually abandoned the political objectives that had animated them, and conceived the struggle purely in military terms. At the operational

³² For a comparative description that incorporates several cases see Donatella della Porta, "Introduction: On Individual Motivations in Underground Political Organizations," in Donatella della Porta (ed.), *Social Movements and Violence: Participation in Underground Political Organizations* (Greenwich, CT and London: JAI Press, 1992); and also Donatella della Porta, "Leaving underground organizations. A sociological analysis of the Italian case," in Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan (eds.), *Leaving Terrorism Behind. Individual and collective disengagement* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2009). For a more recent treatment of similar issues, which reaches the same conclusions Della Porta reached in 1992, see Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), Chapters 3-4.



level, the initial emphasis on attacks on property and not persons gave way to indiscriminate killings and frontal attacks against military installations involving 100-500 combatants. At the organizational level, the groups attempted to mimic the Argentine armed forces in any way possible. Terrorist groups introduced ranks, uniforms and insignia, and grouped their combatants in “battalions.” While the terrorists took advantage of the 1973 amnesty to set up a variety of mass organizations, these were employed in the service of the terrorist organizations, as a source of recruitment. The visible heads of these mass organizations were the first victims of illegal repression.

The terrorists’ ideological pronouncements, which were abundant, had always made references to “war.” The terrorists drew analogies between the war of independence against Spain in the nineteenth century, and their own “second war of independence” which would liberate Argentina from imperialism. However, while in the early years the groups viewed armed struggle as a complement to mass struggle, after 1973 they thought they could prevail militarily. An additional element that developed after 1973 was the cult of death. During the early years operations were planned with care, for two reasons. The terrorists did not want to alienate support through unnecessary deaths or destruction. Also, the terrorist groups were small, and could not afford significant losses. With time, from the pages of their periodicals and in press communiqués, the groups began to gloat about their killings. They also started glorifying death in combat. The phenomenal increase in membership allowed the leader of Montoneros to state that

Since October 1975 ... we knew that the coup would occur within the year. We did nothing to stop it ... We made however our calculations, war calculations, and we prepared to undergo, in the first year, human losses not inferior to 1,500 units ... if we managed not to go beyond this level of casualties, we could have the certainty that sooner or later we would win ... this year the dictatorship’s offensive will end and finally the



conditions favourable for our final counteroffensive will present themselves.³³

In the early years, issues of strategy had been hotly debated within the groups. A former combatant describes the pre-1973 period as “a time we all remember with enormous nostalgia ... Everything got discussed, from politics to sex ... It was almost a psychotherapy group.”³⁴ After 1973, debates on strategy became infrequent, even though it was clear to many inside the terrorist organizations that they were heading for disaster. Strong affective ties with fellow combatants (alive or dead), and the introduction of military ranks and more rigid authority relations among combatants, stifled the possibility of internal dissent. As another combatant recalled, “you obey without questioning because life within the organization creates a militant who says, ‘I am opposed to this but it must be right.’”³⁵

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO TERRORISM

Between 1969 and 1973, one of the military regime’s main concerns was that of isolating the terrorists from their societal support. To this effect, Lanusse promised free elections in which the Peronists would be allowed to field candidates. At the same time that he satisfied popular demands for re-democratization, Lanusse implemented new measures against terrorism. Onganía had already introduced the death penalty, even though it would never be applied. Lanusse modified the Criminal Code, introducing harsher penalties for various crimes, and launched a special tribunal to deal exclusively with terrorist offenses, the Federal Penal Chamber of the Nation. The rationale behind the creation of this tribunal was that the same individual could be

³³ Mario Firmenich, leader of Montoneros, interviewed by Gabriel García Márquez. The interview first appeared in *L’Espresso* in April 1977 and is reproduced in “Suplemento: Los sueños de la guerrilla,” *El Porteño*, 5:52 (April 1986), pp. 35-50: 50. For a discussion of terrorist ideology see Moyano, *Argentina’s Lost Patrol*, Chapter 8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.116.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.127.



indicted for crimes committed in different provinces, and the existence of one tribunal with national jurisdiction would facilitate the speedier administration of justice. This tribunal consisted of nine judges, divided into three courts with three justices each. There was no appeal except in case of arbitrariness. Another innovation involved the establishment of a maximum security prison in Patagonia, exclusively for those convicted of terrorist offenses.

Lanusse's policies achieved some tangible results. By 1972, a substantial number of terrorist cadres were imprisoned in Patagonia or had been killed in combat. In addition, the total number of operations in 1972, though still high, was the lowest since 1969. However, Lanusse's response to terrorism was crippled by the widespread perception that the regime was illegitimate. This is why the newly elected Congress unanimously granted an amnesty for terrorist groups in 1973 and abolished all anti-terrorist legislation sanctioned by the military. According to Campora's Minister of the Interior,

The topic of 1973, the great challenge for the [Campora] government was, I think, to inaugurate in Argentina a political system that would allow dissent to express itself through democratic mechanisms, eradicating extra-parliamentary pressures. Which from our perspective had been facilitated by military coups. Then, for us the amnesty was a high risk, a risk of returning to the insurgency [individuals] who might be tempted to go back to the struggle. But we wanted to establish new rules of the game ... Our view was that as long as Argentina maintained a democratic system, there would be no room for armed struggle.³⁶

This view was perhaps over-optimistic. Prior to the inaugural, the ERP had sent Campora a letter explaining that the group would not attack the administration but reserved the right to attack the armed and security forces. In addition, when the Chamber of Deputies met to discuss the projected amnesty law, the deputies began the session by standing in silence for one minute in homage to a union leader who had just been killed by Peronist terrorists. Finally, when the

³⁶ Personal interview with Dr. Esteban Righi, Minister of the Interior during the "Campora spring" and the architect of the amnesty.



plane carrying the amnestied prisoners from Patagonia landed in Buenos Aires, the terrorists descended the plane wearing ski masks or covering their faces with their jackets.³⁷ In retrospect, the 1973 amnesty appears flawed on two counts. The first mistake was to release all 371 imprisoned terrorists on the day of Campora’s inaugural. A more cautious approach would have entailed the release of prisoners in stages, and contingent on the behaviour of the terrorists still at large. To some extent, this was the path followed under “social reintegration” in Spain in 1983, and in the Northern Ireland peace process.³⁸ In addition, the response by the Peronist administrations of 1973-74 was not so much conciliatory as it was a complete capitulation to the terrorists. Even though all terrorist groups continued staging operations after the return to democracy, and this was widely publicized at the time, the government largely ignored the violence. Peron outlawed the ERP (a measure which, by itself, was totally ineffective) but the Montoneros remained a legal political organization until late 1975. When the response to terrorism finally came, it was in the form of illegal repression by the Triple A.

An episode of illegal repression automatically weakens the moral standing of a government battling terrorism. The activities of the Liberation Antiterrorist Groups (GAL) in Spain, a death squad responsible for 27 deaths between 1983 and 1987, became in the 1990s a cancer in the body politic, as former officials in charge of internal security were brought to trial for collusion with these squads and the Spanish press debated whether former Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez was involved.³⁹ Illegal repression may also increase the levels of

³⁷ On the ERP’s letter see “Anunci el ERP que no dejar las armas,” *La Opinin*, April 25 1973, p. 11. On the homage to the murdered union leader see *La Opinin*, May 23 1973, p. 9. On the arrival of the plane from Patagonia see “Ms de 100 presos liberados en Rawson,” *La Razn*, May 26 1973, p. 10.

³⁸ On the Spanish case see Robert P. Clark, *Negotiating with ETA. Obstacles to Peace in the Basque Country, 1975-1988* (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 1990), Chapters 4 and 6. On the release of prisoners in Northern Ireland after the Good Friday agreement see Michael von Tangen Page, “A ‘most difficult and unpalatable part’: the release of politically motivated violent offenders,” in Michael Cox, Adrian Guelke, and Fiona Stephen, *A Farewell to Arms? Beyond the Good Friday Agreement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

³⁹ See Manuel Cerdn and Antonio Rubio, “Toda la Verdad sobre el Watergal Espaol,” *Cambio* 16, 939, November 27 1989, pp. 116-22; Jos Diaz Herrera and Isabel Durn, *Los secretos del poder. Del legado franquista al ocaso del felipismo* (Madrid: Ediciones Temas de Hoy, 1994);



violence by encouraging retaliation by armed organizations. The Northern Irish example is a case in point, with the spike in violence that followed the introduction of internment on August 9, 1971 and the Bloody Sunday massacre of January 30, 1972.⁴⁰ In the Argentine case, there were no isolated incidents of illegal repression. The Triple A paramilitaries were engaged in a carefully planned campaign which, in the eyes of the terrorists and the radicalized sectors that supported them, legitimized the war rhetoric of the terrorist groups by providing them with an argument about self-defense. The campaign by the Triple A strengthened the groups' cohesion and precipitated the most audacious terrorist attacks. In this sense, illegal repression was not only reprehensible but also counter-productive. It was also unnecessary, because the terrorists' actions had repelled the middle class. By 1975, the terrorists had been politically isolated, thanks to their own actions.

While the terrorists' reaction to the Triple A was to step up attacks and remain loyal to the group, confronted with the "dirty war" they could, in the words of a terrorist cited earlier, only "race towards death on skateboard or bicycle." Over the years, journalists and academics have described and analyzed the Argentine "dirty war" at length.⁴¹ Death squads formed by active duty members of the armed and security forces kidnapped individuals and tortured them in detention centres. The vast majority of these "disappeared" were eventually killed. The death squads tailored their operations to the terrorist groups' territorial organization. Montoneros and the ERP both had a collegiate national executive, and territorial commands known as columns (Montoneros) or regionals (ERP). Death squads operated on a column-by-column or regional-by-regional basis. A Montonero column or an ERP regional would be targeted. Once it had been crushed, the death squads targeted a new one. One of the

"Felipe González testifica que nunca ordenó la 'guerra sucia,'" *El País*, International Edition, June 29-July 5 1998, p.1.

⁴⁰ See CAIN Web Service, "Table NI-SEC-06: Security related incidents (number) in Northern Ireland (only), shootings, bombings, and incendiaries, 1969 to 2003," available at <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/ni/security.htm#06> (accessed November 10, 2010).

⁴¹ A significant portion of the literature is cited and discussed in Moyano, "The 'Dirty War' in Argentina." See also Prudencio García, *El drama de la autonomía militar. Argentina bajo las Juntas Militares* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1995); and Horacio Verbitsky, *El Vuelo* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1995).



methods employed was the address book system. After an individual disappeared, so did everyone else listed in that individual's daily planner. If the daily planner was not available, the individual was tortured until he provided information that led to further "disappearances." Massive illegal repression yielded relatively quick results: in three years (1976-79) the military killed 80% of the terrorists, and the survivors, in disarray, called off the struggle.

CONCLUSION

In 1973, Argentine terrorists lost an opportunity to capitalize on their early success and turn to conventional political action. Instead, they chose to continue their campaign of violence against the newly elected democratic government. They also escalated their destructiveness and attempted to prevail militarily over the armed forces. What facilitated this escalation was the colossal increase in membership after 1973, and the availability of funds obtained through kidnap ransoms, though other factors also played a role. The terrorists misread the societal radicalization and interpreted as support for revolution what was in fact anti-military feeling. In this, they were guided by their lack of experience with conventional politics, and by the isolation of the underground. The terrorists' strategic choices, coupled with the significant levels of collective violent protest, created a pervasive climate of fear. This fear was so intense that illegal repression came to be viewed as the only response that would guarantee the end of terrorism. The activities of the Triple A proved counter-productive because they stifled dissent within the terrorist groups and encouraged suicidal attacks. However, applied on a large scale, illegal repression under the "dirty war" decimated the terrorist organizations. Terrorism in Argentina ended as a consequence of another campaign of terror, of a different ideological orientation.

The price that Argentine society paid for this cycle of revolution and counter-revolution was high. The dead, the wounded, the "disappeared," the children born in clandestine detention centres and sold as chattel by the military juntas, capital flight and economic decline can all be quantified. Perceptions and psychological effects are more difficult to evaluate. For fifteen years following



the return of democracy in 1983, some sectors within Argentine society insisted on the notion of a "war" against terrorism, which in their eyes justified the atrocities of the "dirty war."⁴² Sadly, the relatives of the "disappeared," who hide the fact that their loved ones were terrorists, seem to validate this view. Argentine presidents since 1983 attempted to close the debate on the past by providing amnesties for terrorists and military officers involved in the "dirty war." This became known as the "theory of the two demons," the notion that one could not condemn illegal repression without also condemning the terrorist campaign that preceded it. This "theory of the two demons" was hotly contested by many quarters, even though it seems to have become *The Official Story* – not only the film that won an Oscar for Argentina, but also the interpretation of the past that Argentine civil society seems most comfortable with, because it can then avoid introspection. In the last decade, late president Norberto Kirchner repealed the amnesties, offered compensation to the "disappeared" and their relatives, and opened the door to further trials of military officers.⁴³ The Argentine juntas took little more than three years to eradicate terrorism through the "dirty war" but Argentina has spent three decades dealing with the consequences.

⁴² Ten years after the end of the campaign of violence by ERP and Montoneros, and in spite of exposure in the media of the full horrors of the "dirty war," a group of 5,352 citizens came together to publish a full page advertisement in the nation's organ of record that read: "GRATITUDE AND SOLIDARITY. We express our gratitude and solidarity to the totality of the Armed, Police and Security Forces, who defended our Nation in the war launched by subversive aggression and defeated the terrorist organizations which attempted to impose on us a marxist regime." See *La Nación*, June 20 1989, pp. 11-13. Emphasis in the original.

⁴³ For an account of the human rights policies of presidents Raúl Alfonsín, Carlos Menem, and Norberto Kirchner, see Alexandra Barahona de Brito, "Truth, Justice, Memory and Democratization in the Southern Cone," in Alexandra Barahona de Brito, Carmen González Enríquez and Paloma Aguilar Fernández (eds), *The Politics of Memory: Transitional Justice in Democratizing Societies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and Mallinder, *The Ongoing Quest for Truth and Justice*.