TERROR AND PUBLIC SPACES: RECONCILING ARGENTINA’S TRAGIC PAST IN THE ESCUELA
DE MECANICA DE LA ARMADA

Rosana Womack

Abstract

During Argentina’s Dirty War (1976-1983), the Escuela de Mecanica de la Armada (ESMA) was the military’s largest, most active clandestine center, with an estimated 5,000 dissidents disappearing through its doors. Once a revered and honored learning institution, ESMA became the locus and emblem of torture, death, slave labor, illegal adoptions, and other crimes. ESMA’s fate after Argentina’s return to democracy has been at the center of heated debate. As human rights groups and the families of the disappeared rallied to claim ESMA as a space for memory, the military junta sought to stop their efforts through impunity. The memory that human rights groups and families of the disappeared represent does not align with those of the military forces and their supporters. For the military, the use of ESMA as a site for memory solely of its role in the Dirty War represents a half-memory and a half-truth in which omits prior historical events. Through the analysis of primary and secondary sources, archival data, and personal interviews, this paper elucidates ESMA’s role as a site for memory as it pertains to the Argentine military junta in order to address alternate memory-work that is currently ignored within debates over ESMA’s reconfiguration.

Introduction

On March 24, 1976, a three-man military junta, comprised of Army General Jorge Rafael Videla, Navy Admiral Emilio E. Massera and Air Force Brigadier General Orlando R. Agosti, seized political control from the democratically elected president, Isabel Martinez de Peron, and initiated one of the most violent periods in Argentine history: the Dirty War. Once in power, the military launched El Proceso de Reconstrucción Nacional (The National Reorganization Process), or el proceso, which “dissolved the Congress and the provincial legislatures, removed the President and the provincial Governors from office, and assumed ‘the political power of the Republic’ making the military the supreme organ of the Nation.” For the Escuela de Mecanica de la Armada (ESMA), a naval military school turned clandestine detention center during the Dirty War, el proceso meant ridding Argentina of its dissidents—members of the armed resistance and those who supported the resistance efforts—through the engagement of state-sponsored terrorism. Approximately 5,000 of the total 30,000 “disappeared” met their fate when they entered through ESMA’s doors.

It is that most recent part of ESMA’s history that is currently represented in its reconfiguration from a military clandestine detention center to a space for memory. This paper demonstrates, however, that within the context of memory-truth-justice supported by human rights groups and families of the disappeared, there exists a conflicting narrative: the one told by the military junta. This unpopular narrative is absent from the memory-work conducted in ESMA, and thus offers a different lens through which the inherent difficulties of ESMA’s memory construction can be viewed. As a result, the ownership and use of ESMA as a space for memory has been, and continues to be, heavily disputed.

Prior to el proceso, ESMA was a symbol of honor and pride. Its position within the elite barrio of Nunez, in the city of Buenos Aires, gave credence to its civilized role within Argentine society. Students came from all over the world to study in ESMA’s prestigious classrooms, while the surrounding community looked on with undeniable pride.
ESMA’s changing role from a beacon of dignity and honor to that of repression was influenced by events that began in the late 1960s and lasted through the mid-to-late 1970s, when terrorist activities from the radicalized left increased in magnitude and frequency against the armed forces and police. The military and police, in an effort to suppress this violent trend, began to implement severe repressive tactics to counteract the attacks. This paper aims to chronologically document these events, beginning with a brief account of ESMA’s rise from Talleres de Marina (Naval Garages) to a world-renowned Naval military school in the heart of Buenos Aires, to the important role President Onganía played in the advancement of repression, which ultimately led to the events of the Cordobazo in 1969—a violent civil uprising in Cordoba that brought student movements and union workers together against police repression—that progressed into the 1970s with terrorist activities sanctioned from the armed left. I argue that the terrorist activities that ensued played a prominent role in the development of military and police repression leading up to the Dirty War. It is here that the theory “between two demons,” a rhetorical device used to negate the moral equivalent of violent political subversion with state-sponsored terrorism, is most pronounced in the memory battle over ESMA, where human rights groups and the families of the disappeared adamantly deny its validity.

ESMA: Loyalty and Efficiency

The importance of ESMA to the military can be viewed through its transition from Talleres de Marina (Naval Garages) in the town of Tigre along the Paraná Delta in the Greater Buenos Aires Province, to its placement as a world-renowned Naval military school in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, where its presence symbolized Argentina’s strength as a nation through formation of Naval identity. ESMA’s history dates to the late 19th century’s Belle Époque (Beautiful era), a time of political, economic and social growth in Argentina. During this time, Argentina was the tenth wealthiest country in the world; in many ways Argentina’s role as a global leader looked promising. Buildings in Buenos Aires mimicked those of Paris, and the introduction of steam propulsion engines and artillery (torpedoes) within sailing vessels proved to be the impetus for ESMA’s construction within the autonomous city of Buenos Aires.

Argentina’s Naval fleet was significantly transformed by the new technology. Along with significantly increased naval power, the Talleres de Marina were transformed first into a technical training ground and ultimately to a prestigious naval academy and relocated in Buenos Aires. Eric Fabian Lopez, author of Escuela de Mecanica de La Armada stated “from the new location began to surge construction that contributed to the progress and well-being of the Nation,” indicating the importance that buildings like ESMA had on the population and on Argentina as a growing sovereign nation.

On December 19, 1924, the Executive Department of the city of Buenos Aires was authorized to transfer over 14.5 hectares (35 acres) of land to the Navy. A condition of the transfer, as stated by the Deliberative Council of President Marcelo T. de Alvear, required the land and everything on it to be immediately transferred back to the state without indemnification if the land were used for anything other than its original intent. The condition, set by the Deliberative Council, proved to be an important factor after the Dirty War and for ESMA’s reconfiguration as a space for memory, as ESMA changed hands again.

ESMA’s placement in the city of Buenos Aires during a time when Argentina’s economic growth was at its peak is important to understand. The architect Raul J. Alvarex designed ESMA’s neoclassical architecture to fit effortlessly within its new elite surroundings. At the time of ESMA’s construction, Buenos Aires became the “civilized” center of the nation, where it stood symbolic of Argentina’s respectability and elite standing throughout the globe. Its placement
within this realm of society was noted by Eric Fabian Lopez when he stated, “ESMA’s splendid simplicity represents the nobility and chivalry of this world-renowned educational venue.” Local residents embraced the school and referred to it as the “The University of Tin,” where the school’s motto became “Loyalty and Efficiency.” By 1929, the school grew to include 350 apprentices in residence. The Second World War brought the obligation to incorporate enlisted men to the school, which brought the school size to over 1,200 men.

In 1947, during ESMA’s 50th anniversary, the school was recognized as more modernized, more efficient, and more celebrated than it had been at any other time in its history. There were “tributes and plaques made in its honor and there were grand military parades, where local families and neighbors looked on with pride.” ESMA represented all that was good with the nation. The students who were accepted into ESMA’s rigorous program took pride in their school and the camaraderie that was built under “Loyalty and Efficiency.”

Memory of the 1960s and 1970s: Events leading to the Dirty War
The terrorist activities that grew from the 1960s to the 1970s throughout Argentina instigated the intensification of military and police repression. The level of violence that ensued from terrorist organizations framed the military’s view that the Dirty War did not begin in 1976, but instead was rooted in the 1960s with the Cuban Revolution, Liberation Theology and terrorist insurrection.

The 1959 Cuban Revolution caused a series of revolutionary and anti-revolutionary activities throughout Latin America. Journalist-author John Dinges noted that “revolution was concrete reality…it was a revolution that would spread and spread, by example, by ideology, by house-to-house and factory-to-factory organizing, and--most of all—by what they called la lucha armada, armed struggle.” Based on such a realization, the military and police prepared to initiate combat with any internal enemy whose main objective was the annihilation of police and military forces.

In 1961, John F. Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress aimed to promote socioeconomic development, while expanding military training programs for Latin American officers that were packed with ideological indoctrination. The “traditional concept of territorial defense was replaced with that of ideological frontiers.” Peronismo’s extreme left came to be considered a subversive threat to both the U.S. and the Argentine military as labor unions; students and faculty in universities opposed the implementation of a neoliberalism model—a laissez-faire structure for economic development as Argentina’s economic model. The violence that ensued from Peronismo’s radical left became a growing concern for the U.S and Argentine militaries as it threatened civilian lives, as well as the economic aims of the military.

The 1960s also provided new social and intellectual movements that produced the “New Left” along with pivotal reforms within the Catholic Church through Pope Pius XIII’s Vatican II, which supported democracy and human rights. In 1968, Vatican II gave rise to the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) at Medellin, Colombia, where issues surrounding economic equality gained considerable ground, and where the Bishops attending the conference expressed a “commitment to a preferential option for the poor…and the need of establishing justice and peace.” Members of the religious orders were once again committed to a vow of poverty based upon the doctrine of Liberation Theology, which interpreted the Bible and key Christian doctrines through the experiences of the poor. Peruvian theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez, explained Liberation Theology as a “critical reflection on praxis in the light of the word of God.” However, Liberationists became increasingly politicized to the extent that the movement was caricatured in the phrase “If Jesus were alive today he would be a Marxist revolutionary.” The movement called for the transformation of society through radical
change for the purpose of finding one’s own destiny. The movement embodied organization: it called for action and social change. It also insinuated that violence be used when necessary.

Changes within the military forces also occurred during this time. The military ideology shifted from German geopolitical thinking—which housed social-Darwinist theories—to theories influenced by French “Revolutionary War” advocates. The French doctrine viewed international communism as a key threat, where streets and plazas became the principle field of battle. In the article “Internal Missions: Argentina, Brazil, and Chile” political sociologists Larry Jay Diamond, and Marc. F. Plattner, argue that international communism “emanated from domestic left-wing movements that would try to exploit social, economic, and political problems in their effort to undermine the state, the Catholic Church, and the military itself.” We see this during the 1970s in Argentina, as the ERP (The People's Revolutionary Army), a Trotskyite organization with ties to Cuba, and the Montoneros, followers of Liberation theology and of left-wing Peronism, launched a full attack on those they vehemently opposed namely the military, businesspeople, and anyone who supported U.S. imperialism.

The actions of the ERP and the Montoneros were influenced by Fidel Castro, who brought together leadership from the Latin American, African and Asian Marxist communities to the TriContinental Conference held in Cuba on 16 February 1966. The conference, which provoked concern between the Argentine military and its right wing supporters, was centered upon the dissemination of Marxist ideas throughout Latin America and the world. Che Guevara, a physician, author and famous Argentine guerilla revolutionary, stated in his “Message to the TriContinental” the following: “How close we could look into a bright future should two, three or many Vietnams flourish throughout the world with their share of deaths and their immense tragedies, their everyday heroism and their repeated blows against imperialism.” Che Guevara’s words resonated throughout the military, and caused great concern that violence would soon escalate The Montoneros, a radical offshoot of Peronismo, became a key player in the military and civilian struggles that plagued the late 1960s and 1970s. The basis of the group’s ideology was liberation theology. Politically, the Montoneros supported the left-wing Peronism of the “descamisados (the shirtless)” —a term they adopted from the followers of the 19th century caudillos from the exterior provinces Throughout this time, the Montoneros’ activities grew from demands for the return of Juan Peron from his exile in Spain, to armed militancy once they aligned with the Trotskyist Ejercito Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP, People’s Revolutionary Army), where the socialist aspects of Liberation Theology overshadowed the Christian and national elements of the doctrine they followed. The Montoneros’ alliance with the ERP and other revolutionary organizations proved to be a major threat to the military, as these armed groups developed strategies intent upon defeating the military dictatorships at all costs. Ricardo Angoso, the author of Jorge Rafael Videla se confiesa quotes Pablo Giusanni, a political essayist and reporter, who stated, “Thousands, and I say thousands of Latin American youth were sent to their deaths the last 20 years in the service of this monumental distortion, like a tribute paid in blood to the narcissistic revolutionary of Havana.” President Juan Carlos Onganía’s rise to the presidency on 29 June 1966 instigated the use of severe oppressive measures to put down, and or eliminate, the subversive threat the military thought was seeping into the Argentine society.

1964: Onganía’s New Order
On 6 August 1964, during the 5th Conference of the American Military meeting in West Point, General Juan Carlos Onganía stated that the Armed Forces “cannot be reduced to simple respect for constitutional obedience” and added that “the preservation of moral and spiritual values of the Christian civilization” should be an
important objective. Ongania’s “West Point Doctrine,” a precursor to the Doctrine of National Security established before the Dirty War began, achieved the idea that the “real threat to Argentina came from within, from subversives who sought to destroy the traditional values of Argentine society through communism.” Ongania, a member of the *Cursillo de Cristiandad* movement whose ‘theological vision consisted of a ‘moral armament’ and a reconstruction of the Christian world,” believed that moral order would safeguard against Marxist subversion associated with immorality and the decline of a nation. The Catholic Church approved of Ongania, as they would other junta leaders who came after Ongania.

On June 29, 1966, the military chose Ongania to assume the role of Argentina’s de facto president, after executing a bloodless coup d'état named *La Revolución Argentina*, which ousted the democratically elected president Arturo Umberto Illia and set the tone for the repression that would soon follow. On July 8, 1966, U.S. Time Magazine published “Argentina: No. 31,” which stated, “The armed forces, whose duty it is to protect the nation’s liberties, cannot stand aside and watch our patient and generous people suffer a state of anarchy. This revolution will strive to heal the divisions of our people as well as restore our deserved grandeur in the eyes of the world.”

Ongania immediately consolidated his power by banning political parties and political activity. He imposed his will upon provincial governments and universities, and even dissolved the congress and dismissed the Supreme Court. The coup d'état was unique in that prior military coups focused their attention on establishing temporary and transitional juntas, where Onganía’s coup seemed keenly focused on a new political and social order.

Education became the main recipient of Ongania's wrath. The actions of leftist students, either through their opposition to U.S. policies or through their support of Fidel Castro, left the military uneasy and with an impression that universities were responsible for the diffusion of communist ideology, and as such, their autonomy should be questioned.

On July 29, 1966, The Night of the Long Batons gave the Argentine people a clear understanding of Ongania’s opposition to communism, when police directed by the Deputy Chief, forcefully entered the Facultad de Ciencias Exactas within the University of Buenos Aires with the intention of mercilessly beating professors and students, especially those who studied and conducted research in the sciences. The events of that night resulted in the expulsion of Argentina’s intellectual elite. The event began a level of repression with the aim of eliminating all semblances of “immorality” from Argentine society.

In September of 1966, Juan Garcia Elorrio, a supporter of the Movement of Priests in the Third World (priests who supported left-wing Peronism and Marxism from 1966 to 1976) published the first edition of *Cristianismo y Revolución* (Christianity and Revolution). In his article “Ongania: Un Testigo,” Elorrio wrote that the ‘cursillistas’ should now incorporate in their meditation the topic of violence and absurd death to consolidate ‘order’, ‘hierarchy’, and their ‘sense of authority.’ The regime has begun to use its only reason: force.” Elorrio proceeded by stating “simply, the revolution we need is the only one capable of giving food to the hungry, to give a home to those without a roof, to give health to those who are sick, to give dignity to those who are sick, to give dignity to the poor…this [our] revolution, although sometimes necessarily violent is not desperate…it is the only way to rescue Humanity, Hope and Love.”  Agustin Tosco, the general secretary for *Luz y Fuerza* (Light and Power utilities workers) issued a statement in August of 1966 titled, “Negative Signs” in which *Luz y Fuerza* documented the Cordoba Federation of Power and Light's opposition to the Ongania regime and its policy of repression in order to achieve “modernization and transformation.” However, not everyone in trade
unions or even those within the pueblo shared these views.

In September of 1966, the editor of the anarchist periodical, Boletin Informativo de los 32 Gremios Democraticos, Jose Grunfeld, published an article that denounced the actions of the revolutionary left. Grunfeld states, “It always hurts us badly their notion of “unity” among the Argentine pueblo. It has the flavor of a totalitarian “unity” or a sole center. The pueblo is comprised of men, women, children, young adults and the aged of diverse beliefs and infinite lived experiences. It is not about placing a record in each person’s head that repeats the same things and has the same tastes.” It is equally important to observe the growing violence generated from various factions within Peronismo (guerillas, union leaders, etc.) in order to understand why, from the military perspective and in many instances with civilian support, the military had to increase its methods of repression, which took root after the Cordobazo in 1969.

In 1969, a set of violent riots occurred throughout Argentina. Student fatalities in the Corrientazo and the Rosariazo protests culminated in events experienced on May 29, 1969 (Army Day) that resulted in the Cordobazo. According to historian Robert A. Potash the Cordobazo was a result of a number of factors: 1) the organizing efforts of labor and student leadership 2) the encouragement of certain politicians and Catholic priests 3) the spontaneous involvement of a number of people who gave vent to their personal frustrations 4) the underdetermined number of professional agitators 5) the failure of the authorities-provincial and nation-to defuse the situation. The Cordobazo riots shattered the image of Ongania’s government, whose purported aim was peace, tranquility and consensus. More importantly, the armed revolutionary groups that emerged during this time, namely The People’s Revolutionary Army (ERP), the Revolutionary Armed Forces and the Montoneros became powerful adversaries to the military and police as they gained considerable momentum in their offensive against these forces.

The military responded with brute force, and it was not long before reports of excessive repression by the military and police began to surface. Alain Rouquie, author of The Military and the State in Latin America, stated that, “arbitrary arrests, the torture of suspects and the pure and simple disappearance of leaders of the extreme left by the military and police were not uncommon in combating guerilla warfare. In contrast, the Argentine government remained primarily legal and non-violent. However, in October of 1966, the National Defense law passed the legislature, which made the propagation of communist ideology punishable by imprisonment. Other laws were also implemented to authorize security forces to conduct raids and arrests when strong indicators or convincing proof of guilt existed. By May of 1971, a decree-law created a federal court to deal with criminal acts outside of Argentina’s standard regional courts.

On August 15, 1972, an attempted escape of over 100 political prisoners from Rawson penitentiary resulted in the Massacre at Trelew (the airport from which the escaped prisoners were to fly), which provided the incentive for implementing a military combat unit in ESM A. The massacre refers to the gunning down of 19 of the original 100 who made the attempt; only three of the 19 survived. The six founding members of the Montoneros, the ERP and FAR were able to escape by plane. As remembered by Rodolfo Walsh, a writer, investigative journalist and Montonero, the Naval military reneged its promise to guarantee the safety of the escapees who were apprehended at the airport. Originally, the captured revolutionaries were to be taken back to Rawson penitentiary without threat to their safety. Instead, they were taken to a military base where they were ultimately shot and killed on August 22, 1972. In an interview with ERP leader Enrique Gorriaran Merlo, who had escaped on the first plane that left Trelew, we
learn that the escapees caught that day were also well armed.

As a result of the Trelew massacre, several attempts were made to kill Naval personal in Buenos Aires. The officers at ESMA decided that the 2nd Naval Infantry Battalion, stationed in the Puerto Belgrano Naval base in Bahia Blanca, would come to ESMA to help protect its superior command. Until 1973, the officers’ duties included night patrols around the homes of Captains and Generals situated outside of ESMA, while another patrols stayed within ESMA to provide surveillance. The military, after failing to revive a declining economy and suppress escalating terrorism, decided to return general elections to the country, but not before giving a severe warning to the new democratically elected president.

On March 11, 1973, the military government relented its control of the Argentine government to Dr. Hector Campora, but not before the military hierarchy placed limitations on the new government through a document, titled Los Cinco Puntos (The Five Points). The document demanded that the new government comply with Argentine laws and its constitution, and warned against amnesties for those who had committed crimes through subversion and terrorism. On May 3, 1973, naval officer, Admiral Mayorga, stated the following comment to journalists before handing over power to the Campora government:

“The Navy makes known the presence of an enemy to us all: of peronists and anti-peronists, the presence of a violent left who can sink us in the process of killing, if ours are dead, then it will be the law of the jungle (v. La Nacion, 3 May 1973).”

On May 27, 1973, President Campora, supported an amnesty law that pardoned guerrillas from all past crimes committed. The action taken by Campora solidified the military’s view that more drastic measures were needed to permanently eliminate terrorist and guerrilla activity. The amnesty also deepened the military’s view that justice would not be served through legal channels.

Campora relinquished the presidency to Juan Peron on October 12, 1973. Following Perón’s death on July 1, 1974, Isabel Martinez de Perón, his widow and Vice-President, assumed the presidency. Her term unleashed the brutality that would ensue from The Anti-Communist Argentine Alliance (Triple A), a combined force between the Federal police and Paramilitary forces, led by the Minister of Social Welfare and Peron’s personal confidant, José López Rega, In November 1974, before her presidency had deteriorated, Isabel implemented a state-of-siege declaration, which suspended constitutional rights. She signed a decree (S 261) launching “Operation Independence” that gave license to the military to do “whatever military operations may be necessary to neutralize or annihilate the actions of the subversive elements.” Deborah L. Norden notes in her book, Military Rebellion in Argentina: Between Coups and Consolidation, that according to General Ramón Genaro Diaz Bessone, a Division General, close to 600 guerrillas were condemned and hundreds more were put on trial in two hundred years of work. Although the Triple A were aggressive in their fight against terrorism, the violence within the country continued to escalate and offered no signs of relief in-sight.

As the Triple A searched for rebels throughout Argentina, the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP) with the Montoneros guerrillas attacked a number of economic installations. Scores of union leaders, popular activists, journalists, scientists, lawyers and intellectuals, as well as public servants, military men and business people were targeted. The violence surrounding the citizens of Buenos Aires, the dismal economic reality that existed in Argentina and the Montoneros’ kidnapping and murder of former military president, Army General Pedro Eugenio Aramburu, who overthrew Peron in 1955, began to shift public support toward the military. A shift also occurred within ESMA as a permanent
military company (consisting of two officials, three officers 10 corporals from the Naval Infantry and 117 conscripts) replaced the 2nd Infantry Battalion of the Navy positioned in ESMA to protect the superior command against subversive threats two years prior.

ESMA and the United States
The U.S. anticipated the actions of the Argentine military and supported their methods for dealing with the “problem” as long as it was done quickly. U.S. financial interests justified allowing the Argentine military to continue on its destructive path. For the U.S., the coup provided a financial opportunity that was equally beneficial in the junta’s eyes. General Ramon J.A. Camps, the head of the Buenos Aires provincial police, supported this assessment when he stated, “Look, I publicly sustain that Argentina during a long period, did not want to recognize that the nation was living in a war, to safeguard its exterior image and to not compromise international economic assistance. The reality had to be minimized with the continuation of credit in mind.” Questions regarding the manner, in which the Argentine military would eliminate terrorist threats, without upsetting the delicate issue of human rights, became a concern to both the U.S. and the Argentine junta.

When compared to documents released by the National Security Archives in the United States, the nature of the junta’s concern over human rights is evident. On February 16, 1976,

Diego Medus, Chief of the North American desk at the Foreign Ministry, discussed the Argentine military planning group’s request for a study to be conducted with recommendation as to “how the future military government can minimize the sort of problems the Chilean and Uruguayan governments are having with the U.S. over human rights issues.” Within the document, the military warned that “some executions would…probably be necessary” and that “they wish to minimize any resulting problems with the U.S.” During a private session with Ambassador Hill on March 16, 1976, Admiral Massera stated, “they will not follow in the lines of the Pinochet takeover in Chile…they will try to proceed within the law and with full respect for human rights.”

During a cabinet meeting between Secretary of State Kissinger and his staff on 26 March 1976, William Rogers, a cabinet officer, stated that the junta is “testing the basic proposition that Argentina is not governable, so they’re going to succeed where everybody else has failed.” Rogers warned, "We've (the U.S.) got to expect a fair amount of repression, probably a good deal of blood, in Argentina before too long." What is interesting to note is that the U.S. kept a long arm from events that began to unfold in Argentina. The U.S. supported the junta as long as they did not create a human rights issue, as did the Chilean and Uruguayan governments. This is suggested by Rogers when he states that the U.S. "ought not at this moment rush out and embrace this new regime--that three-six months later will be considerably less popular with the press." Considering that the military junta was sensitive to the perceptions of international actors, primarily the U.S., it is reasonable to suggest that the military junta viewed the U.S. inactiveness as support.

A documented conversation from 6 October 1976 between Argentine Foreign Minister, Admiral Cesar Augusto Guzzetti, and U.S. Secretary of State, Charles W. Robinson, exposed the complicity of the U.S. in the issues involving human rights abuse. During the conversation Robinson stated:

The problem is that the United States is an idealistic and moral country and its citizens…There is a tendency to apply our moral standards abroad and Argentina must understand the reaction of Congress with regard to loans and military assistance. The American people, right or wrong, have the perception that today there exists in Argentina a pattern of gross violations of human rights.

For the military junta, ESMA presented a means to an end. It was a structure utilized to
“disappear” the enemies of the state in a manner that would not disturb the Argentine people, nor bring attention to the actions taken by the junta in its “war against subversion.” By using torture methods within clandestine spaces, like ESMA, the military was able to make the allegations of torture less credible since there was nothing to show for it; therefore avoiding a crisis of legitimacy. Darius Rejali, author of *Torture and Democracy* stated, “Public monitoring leads to institutions that favor painful coercion to use and combine clean torture techniques (picana, water-boarding, etc.) to evade detection.” Though torture was not foreign to Argentina and its citizens, during the Dirty War, the use of torture had to be done discreetly as to not provoke a problem with the U.S. over human rights issues that had besieged Chile and Uruguay.

**ESMA Joins the War Against Subversion**

In May of 1976, under direct orders from Admiral Emilio Eduardo Massera and with the support of the entire junta, the Grupo de Tareas 3.3.2 (GT 3.3.2) was introduced to ESMA. Captain Jorge Eduardo “Tigre” Acosta, as chief of intelligence was also the chief of the GT 3.3.2 that ran ESMA. The Triple A that formed under Peron and Regas disbanded and merged within the ranks of the GT 3.3.2. ESMA continued to function as a military school during this change, where 7 technical specialties were taught, including: sea, electrician, machinists, artillery, communication, radar and supply technicians. After the infantry unit was introduced, three more specialties were added to the curriculum: Intelligence; Operation and Logistics.

Information gathered by the Centro de Estudios Legales Sociales (CELS) stated that the Grupo de Tareas 3.3.2 (GT 3.3.2) was a critical component in the military’s war against subversion. According to CELS, GT 3.3.2 was divided into four sectors—Intelligence, Operations, Logistics, and Guards, where each sector were assigned specific duties (see original thesis for more information). The main objective for these sectors was to “recuperate” the dissidents so that they could be reintegrated back into society with “Western and Christian values.” Incorporating the GT 3.3.2 within ESMA made it possible for Massera to escalate the fight against subversion.

On November 2, 1976, Admiral Emilio Massera laid claim to the war that had formed between the military and the terrorists when he gave his famous “Dead for the Fatherland” speech on ESMA’s grounds. A portion of his speech helps us understand why ESMA became an important tool for the eradication of terrorism that plagued Argentina. Massera asserted:

> We are fighting against nihilists, against agents of destruction whose only objective is destruction itself, although they disguise this with social crusades...We are not going to fight to death, we are going to fight beyond death, unto victory...death will not triumph here...Because all of our dead...each and every one died for triumph of life.”

Marguerite Feitlowitz, author of *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture*, notes that the subtext to this speech being: “the military were not murdering people, they were vanquishing death.” Feitlowitz’s assessment presents an opportunity for the exploration of other meanings that may exist within Massera’s speech, more importantly, how those meanings relate to ESMA.

Massera’s speech linked his words to the atrocities that began to take place within the clandestine detention center, where the eradication of the “plague” of communism set the tone for how ESMA would operate. Massera stated, “For those of us who are in favor of life, we are not going to tolerate any pact, any conversation, and those ambitious dreamers—if they exist—who dream of alleviating the impossible, they will not only be considered an offender of high treason against the Fatherland, but also an offender of life.” Those who entered...
ESMA’s doors were offenders of life, and thus, would be treated accordingly.

The Argentine military’s devastating loss in the Malvinas War (April 1982-June 1982) ended the eradication of “subversives.” In an effort to reclaim public support and build nationalistic ardor, the Argentine military declared war against Britain over the sovereignty of the Malvinas Island. The island off of Argentina’s shores quickly became the battlefield between Argentine and British military forces, where Britain would rise as the victor. Shortly after the Argentine military surrendered, it fell from power. During Argentina’s transition from military rule to democracy, ESMA returned to its origins as a military school. The school continued to function while investigations regarding its use during the Dirty War, and against those who had committed crimes against humanity, were still ongoing.

CONADEP, Human Rights and the Restoration of Democracy

During 1983, many human rights organizations began to prepare for Argentina’s return to democracy. Human rights groups that organized during the dictatorship—including Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared for Political Reasons—continued to search for their disappeared family members. Members of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo gained national attention through their protests at Plaza de Mayo and their called for the return of their children. “You took them alive…we want them back alive.”

On January 6, 1998, with reconciliation in mind, Carlos Menem attempted to transfer the military from ESMA to the Naval Base of Puerto Belgrano and convert ESMA into a park for public use through decree 8/98. The decree destined the territory of the ESMA to be “a green space of public use that would be a ‘symbol of national union,’ after the demolition of the building.” In February of 2001, after outcries from human rights groups and the families of the disappeared, the Supreme Court reaffirmed the unconstitutionality of Menem’s decree. ESMA would remain a part of the “country’s cultural heritage.” The human rights groups and families of the disappeared felt that Menem’s attempt to demolish ESMA was a way to silence what had happened in ESMA during the Dirty War.

CONADEP was limited to state-sponsored crimes, which neglected the terrorist activities that led to the Dirty War, as well as the
testimony of those who were victims of terrorist attacks. This omission obscured events that occurred during the 1970s that offer a different narrative, a different memory-truth-justice to that which the human rights groups and the families of the disappeared are attempting to construct within ESMA today. The road to ESMA’s reconfiguration as a space for memory was not an easy one. Several protests occurred as a result of the approval of Law No. 961, passed on December 5, 2002 by the Legislature of the City of Buenos Aires, in which ESMA was selected as the emblematic site for state repression, and became the ideal site for a future museum. On March 24, 2004, President Nestor Kirchner signed an agreement with the Buenos Aires city government and the national government towards the development of a “Space for Memory and for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights” that would operate within ESMA. By December 31, 2004, Kirchner confirmed ESMA’s planned reconfiguration from a site of repression to a space for memory. The institute would be the “safeguard and the transmission of the memory and history of the events that took place during the State terrorism of the 70s and the early 80s through the recovery of the state of rights, as well as the antecedents, later stages, and consequences.” Protests began before Kirchner’s confirmation of ESMA’s future use, which culminated in growing concerns over Kirchner’s real motives for ESMA’s reconfiguration. On November 2, 2004, La Nacion published that a “group of people had gathered in front of ESMA to protest against the construction project named Museum of Memory.” According to the article, a protestor commented “It’s a joke to the entire community to assume the installation of a museum of false memories, that only generates more anger and resentfulness regarding the decade of the 70s in our country.”

A wire on March 26, 2004 from a London Times correspondent, Tom Hennigan, stated, “Last week Senor Kirchner dismissed the head of ESMA for allowing parents of navy cadets to protest over the school’s closure during a private visit by the President, who was accompanied by former detainees of the center.” President Kirchner was criticized for using the Anniversary of the coup for “ideological purposes” by focusing solely on the crimes of the military. It was argued that Kirchner was supporting a “half-memory” by purposely ignoring the “role of leftist guerillas and right-wing death squads, both of which originated from within his own Peronist Party.”

Where UNESCO stated that it is “necessary to know and remember how the dictatorship functioned,” the military and its supporters suggest that is equally important to understand why the military was needed in the first place. There are military officials prosecuted during mega cases, of which ESMA is a current case (ESMA-Case 14.217/203), as well as organizations like Centro de Estudios Legales Sobre el Terrorismo y sus Victimas (CELTYV), who shares a similar viewpoint situated within the milieu of memory-truth-justice stemming from events that occurred during the early and mid 1970’s.

Today, human rights groups involved in ESMA’s reconfiguration view ESMA as a site where the memory of those kidnapped, tortured, killed and disappeared by the military will be continually remembered—where “Never Again” (a term taken from a commercially published book, Nunca Más: Informe de la Comision nacional sobre la Desaparicion de Personas and derived from a report compiled by Argentina’s truth commission, CONADEP) has become the cornerstone in the development of programs and memorialization to ensure that what happened during the Dirty War will never happen again. Through testimonies given by victims who survived ESMA, and by Naval officers who shared their experiences while at ESMA, human rights groups and families of the disappeared gave credence to the belief that their truth had finally been unveiled.

Members of the military junta sentenced for “crimes against humanity” argued that the
terrorists whom they detained in ESMA had an equal burden to share. During an interview with Spanish journalist, Ricardo Angoso, General Jorge Rafael Videla noted that Argentina faced civil war or complete anarchy, unless someone intervened. He continued by saying that the military had to confront a situation characterized by a political void (Isabel Peron stepped down from office due to illness), paralyzed institutions, growing anarchy and increased actions by the terrorists.

A primary point of contention discussed by the military and its supporters was the CONADEP report issued by former president, Raul Ricardo Alfonsin. They argued, that the construction of the report containing only the testimonies of the surviving “subversives” and families of those disappeared, was not in condition to open exact and clear justice involving the complicity of the victims with subversive actions. Because deaths from terrorists attacks were not within the scope of the report’s function, those victims would never gain the same justice that victims of torture in ESMA would gain.

On June 24, 2011, Victoria Villaruel, an Argentine lawyer and founder of the Center for Legal Studies on Terrorism and its Victims (CELTYV), spoke at the Oslo Freedom Forum in defense of victims of terrorist attacks. Within the speech, Villaruel exposed a “lesser-known” part of Argentine history: the terrorism that took place primarily during the 70s.” She recalled the history of ERP and Montoneros’ insurgency, while also supporting Videla’s view that the “assailants have not been brought to justice: some even enjoy positions in the government.”

Villaruel continued: “Because the terrorists enjoy impunity, the youth of Argentina receive the message that terrorism is a viable way to achieve political aims.”

On October 14, 2011, Alfredo Astiz, an operative of GT 3.3.2, spoke his final words during the ESMA trials where he faced charges of crimes against humanity. He stated that he considered himself a “political prisoner” and denied the validity of “universal justice” for the crimes committed during the last dictatorship.” He continued by saying that the “trial did not represent justice, but a lynching.” He attacked the prosecution for not doing its job and for working outside the preview of justice. He later stated that the reason behind the government’s return to the memory of Dirty War is completely politically driven. His final punch came when he stated that “the left considered the military mediocre and they never admitted that they were beaten by a mediocre military.”

Clarín posted an article on October 21, 2011, where Jorge “Tigre” Acosta claimed that he considered himself a combatant of the war and that he would never do something that was not within the preview of human rights.” According to Acosta, “I never thought that I was doing something that supported human rights, and no one communicated to me otherwise.” In the same article, Ricardo “Serpico” Cavallo, an operative with GT 3.3.2 stated, “the tribunals are the grupos de tareas (intelligence and operative team) of this century and the judges are an immense operative of vengeance.” The feeling did not change among the 18 ESMA military officers tried for crimes against humanity beginning on December 11, 2009 until their fate was sealed on October 27, 2011. Alfredo Astiz, commented, “the government doesn’t hesitate in its revenge against the people who combated terrorism.” For Astiz and the officers convicted that day, ESMA carries the memory of their victory over subversion. A memory they will not soon forget, as their supporters have now begun the process to bring terrorists from the 1970s to justice. Maria Cristina Picón, General Viola’s widow, petitioned on December 12, 2009 bring to justice the ERP insurgents who killed her husband and young daughter Maria Cristina Viola (3 years old) during an attack on January 12, 1974. Another victim of terrorism Ana Maria Carolina Lucioni petitioned on September 7, 2009 to reactivate the cases against members of the Montoneros for crimes committed during the
The struggle between two memories continues.

Conclusion

This paper does not condone the atrocities committed by the military junta throughout the Dirty War. The severity of repression inflicted upon “subversives” and within Argentine society exceeded the limits of human dignity and respect. ESMA, the military school that once symbolized everything that was good with Argentina and its military forces, became the emblem of terror and state-sponsored repression during the most violent period in Argentine history. The memory of torture and disappearance marked ESMA’s walls; however, as with all memory, there are details that will be remembered and others that will be forgotten.

Our engagement with the past and the extent to which it informs discussion and debate is of interest here, as ESMA’s reconfiguration into a space for memory has brought about an opposition from areas of society, primarily the military, who argue that the past does not only belong to the human rights groups and the families of the disappeared, but also to the victims of subversion. Elizabeth Jenlin in The Politics of Memory suggests that “those who have suffered directly or through their immediate relatives define themselves as the bearers of pain and memory...they unwillingly claim a type of symbolic authority and power based on their ‘monopoly’ of meanings of truth and memory.” The memory that human rights groups and families of the disappeared represented in ESMA does not align with the memory recalled by the military forces and their supporters. For the military, the “space for memory” represents a half-memory and a half-truth, where the terrorist activities that influenced ESMA’s use were purposely not mentioned or remembered.

Influence from the international community, specifically the U.S, greatly affected the decisions made by the junta before and during the war. In an effort to keep human rights issues from becoming a problem in U.S. eyes, the military used ESMA as a way to get the job done, so to speak, without sacrificing its image in the global community, and without threatening the economic assistance that the military sought from the U.S. Although the U.S. knew what was happening in Argentina, it did nothing to stop it. In fact, the U.S. encouraged the military’s tactics as long as the “problem” was taken care of quickly.

Finally, after the transition from military rule to democracy in 1983, ESMA became a battleground for memory between the armed forces and the human rights groups and the families of the disappeared. Though the military declare that they had won the war against subversion, they could not claim to win the psychological war that ensued. Human rights groups did not structure their position within the memory fight as combatants; instead, they structured their claims to ESMA within the context of being a “victim.” The military did not support the depiction of those who had disappeared as “victims.” In the military’s eyes, the people who came through ESMA’s doors were terrorists and did not represent true victims. Those who had died at the hands of terrorism were the true victims. The military have maintained that their actions were for God and country, and that they were at war with terrorism, period. For them, ESMA was not a place for mourning, but a place to celebrate the living, because with every subversive that was eliminated, a life was saved within Argentine society.

Bibliography

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During our quarter break (March 23-30), I traveled to Buenos Aires to attend the 1st International Course on Human Rights held in ESMA. Through the course, I was able to tour the areas where these offenses had been committed. On March 22, 2012, I was able to speak directly to, Victor Basterra, an ESMA survivor who had smuggled pictures taken of the “disappeared” out of ESMA, which aided in the conviction of the perpetrators of these offenses during what is known as the ESMA trials. During our conversation, Mr. Basterra described the offenses I listed in the paragraph. "Victor Basterra." Interview by author. March 22, 2012.

Mr.Basterra explained the inner-workings of ESMA during the dirty war from a personal perspective once I finished my tour of the Casino de Oficiales.

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