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The "Process," 1976–1983

The Genocide

On March 24, 1976, the Junta commanders-in-chief, General Jorge Rafael Videla, Admiral Emilio Eduardo Massera, and Air Force Brigadier Orlando Ramón Agosti, assumed power. They immediately issued the legal instruments of the so-called Process of National Reorganization and designated General Videla president of the nation; he also continued as army commander until 1978.

The economic crisis of 1975, the crisis in leadership, the factional struggles and the daily presence of death, the spectacular actions of the guerrilla organizations—which had failed in two major operations against military installations in the provinces of Buenos Aires and Formosa—the terror sown by the Triple A, all created the conditions for the acceptance of a military coup that promised to reestablish order and ensure the state's monopoly on violence. The program of the military—which had done little to prevent the chaos from reaching this extreme—went beyond these goals and consisted of eliminating the root of the problem, which according to its diagnosis was found in society itself and in the unresolved nature of society's conflicts. The nature of the proposed solution could be read in the metaphors employed by the

new government to describe that society—sickness, tumor, surgical removal, major surgery—all summed up in one proposal that was unambiguous and conclusive: The military had come to cut the Gordian knot with a sword.

The cutting with the sword was in reality an integral operation of terror, carefully planned by the leadership of the three service branches, rehearsed first in Tucumán—where the army officially intervened in 1975—and then executed in a systematic fashion throughout the country. These were the 1984 findings of the *Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas* (National Commission of Disappeared Persons, or CONADEP) created by President Raúl Alfonsín in 1984 and then by the justice system that found the military guilty and condemned many of its members to prison. The military commanders concentrated in their hands all the activities of this operation; the various paramilitary groups that had been operating in the years before the coup were dissolved and incorporated into the government's state terrorist machinery. The three branches of the military assigned themselves different areas of responsibility and even maintained a certain degree of competition between one another to show who was the most effective, a competition that gave their operations an anarchic and factional character. Nonetheless, such anarchy did not mean that the terrorism unleashed was by chance and lacked supervision, a view that formed part of the general population's conception of the horrendous operation.

The general planning and tactical supervision were in the hands of the highest levels of military leadership, and the ranking officers did not refrain from personally participating in the acts, a fact that highlighted the institutional character of the policy and the military's collective commitment to it. Orders came down through the chain of command until reaching those entrusted with carrying out the actions, the so-called 'Task Groups—principally young military officers, along with some noncommissioned officers, civilians, and off-duty police—who also had their own organization. The execution of their acts required a complex administrative apparatus because they were supposed to follow the movement—the entries, moves, and departures—of a vast array of people. Anyone arrested, from the moment he or she entered the list of suspects, was assigned his or her own number and file, with a follow-up, an evaluation of the case, after which a final decision would be taken, which always was the preserve of the highest levels of the military. The repression was, in sum, a systematic action carried out by the state.

The acts of terror were divided into four principal moments: abduction, torture, arrest, and execution. For the abductions, each group organized for that purpose—commonly known as “the gang” (*la patota*)—preferred to operate at night, to arrive at the victims’ homes, with the family as witnesses; in many cases, family members became victims themselves in the operation. But many arrests also occurred in factories or workplaces or in the street, and sometimes in neighboring countries, with the collaboration of local authorities. Such operations were realized in unmarked but well-recognized cars—the ominous green Ford Falcons were the favorite—a lavish display of men and arms, combining anonymity with ostentation, all of which heightened the desired terrorizing effect. The kidnapping was followed by ransacking the home, a practice that was subsequently refined so that the victims were forced to surrender their furniture and other possessions, which became the booty of the horrendous operation.

The fate of those who were abducted was, first, systematic and prolonged torture. The electric prod and the so-called submarine—a practice in which the tortured individual’s head was submerged under water to the point of unconsciousness—and sexual abuse were the most common forms of torture. To these were added others that combined technology with the refined sadism of the specialized personnel in the service of an institutionalized operation, in which it was not unusual to have the highest-ranking officers participating. Physical torture, of indefinite duration, was combined with psychological torture. The victims might suffer mock executions or witness friends, children, or spouses pleading for mercy—all these were proof that all ties with the outside world were cut off, that there was no one to intercede between the victim and the torturer. In principle, torture served to extract information and reveal the names, places of residence, and planned operations of the guerrilla organizations, but more generally it served to break the resistance of the abducted persons, to annul their defenses, to destroy their dignity and personality.

Many died under torture, “staying on,” in the vernacular of their executioners. The survivors began a more or less prolonged detention in one of some 340 clandestine centers of arrest—the so-called *chupaderos* (literally, places that “sucked” their victims out of thin air)—operating in those years, although the authorities repeatedly denied their existence. These detention

centers were sometimes located on military installations—the navy mechanics' school, the Campo de Mayo, the bases of the various army corps—but were generally found on police grounds and were given macabre names: Olympus, Vesuvius, the Pearl, the Little School, the Reformatory, the Basque Post, the Banfield Pit. The administration and control of the activities of this vast group of detention centers give an idea of the complexity of the operation and the number of people involved, as well as the determination necessary to keep their existence a secret. In this final stage of torment of varying duration, the victims' degradation was completed. Often badly wounded and without medical care, they remained permanently hooded or in solitary confinement, badly fed and without sanitary services. Many pregnant detainees gave birth in those conditions, only to be immediately stripped of their babies, many of whom were confiscated by their captors. It is not surprising then that in this truly desperate situation, some of those arrested may have chosen to cooperate with their captors, doing odd jobs for them or even accompanying them to identify on the streets former comrades still free. But for the majority, the final destiny was the "move", that is, their execution.

The decision to execute was the most important step and was taken at the highest levels of operation, such as the commander of each of the army corps, after a careful analysis of the detainee's background, possible usefulness, or potential "rehabilitation." Despite the fact that the military junta established the death penalty, it never applied it, and all the executions were clandestine. At times, the bodies appeared on the streets, as if people had been killed in combat or in attempting to flee. In some cases, piles of dead bodies were dynamited in reprisal for some action by the guerrillas. But in the majority of cases, the bodies were hidden, buried in unmarked graves, burned in collective graves dug by the victims themselves before execution, or cast into the sea weighted with cement blocks, after the victim was sedated with an injection. In that way, there were no dead, only the "disappeared."

The disappearances occurred in massive numbers between 1976 and 1978, a somber three years, and then were drastically reduced. It was a true genocide. The CONADEP commission that investigated them documented 9,000 cases, but it indicated that many more could have been unreported. Human rights organizations claimed 30,000 disappeared persons, mainly young people, between fifteen and thirty-five years old. Some belonged to armed organizations: The *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP) was

decimated between 1975 and 1976, and after the death of its leader, Roberto Santucho, in July 1976, little remained of the organization. The *Montoneros* organization, which also suffered numerous casualties in its ranks, continued operating, though it had to limit itself to terrorist acts—with well-publicized assassinations such as the chief of the federal police—unrelated to political objectives, at the same time that the leadership and the principal members immigrated to Mexico. When the real threat from the guerrilla organizations ceased, the repression continued its course.

There were casualties from social and political organizations, union leaders in factory shop-stewards' commissions—some factory owners tended to cooperate with the military to eliminate "troublemakers"—together with political activists of various tendencies, priests, intellectuals, lawyers representing political prisoners, human rights activists, and many others detained solely because they were someone's relative, appeared in someone's address book, or were mentioned in a torture session. But beyond the accidents and mistakes, the victims were often those sought after. Using the argument of confronting and destroying the armed organizations on their own terrain, the operations sought to eliminate all political activism, including social protest—even a modest demand over school bus fares, as happened on one occasion—any expression of critical thinking, and any possible political outlet for the popular movements that had been evolving since the middle of the previous decade. In that sense, the results were exactly those desired.

There were many victims, but the true objective was to reach the living, the whole of society that, before undertaking a total transformation, had to be controlled and dominated by terror and by language. The state became divided in two. One-half, practicing terrorism and operating clandestinely, unleashed an indiscriminate repression free from any accountability. The other, public and justifying its authority in laws that it had enacted, silenced all other voices. Not only did the country's political institutions disappear, but the dictatorship also shut off in authoritarian fashion the free play of ideas, indeed their very expression. The parties and all political activity were prohibited, as were the labor movement and trade-union activity. The press was subject to an explicit censorship that prevented any mention of state terrorism and its victims. Artists and intellectuals were watched over. Only the voice of the state remained, addressing itself to an atomized collection of inhabitants.

The military government's propaganda, massive and overwhelming, picked up traditional themes of Argentine political culture and took them to their final, terrible consequences. The adversary—demonized and referring to any possible dissident—was a nonperson, a “subversive without a country,” without a right to express an opinion or even to exist, somebody who could and deserved to be exterminated. Against the violence no arguments were made in favor of a popularly supported rule of law, as would be appropriate in a republic and a democratic society, but only in favor of an order that was in reality another version of the same violent and authoritarian equation.

Terror ran through all of society. With outlets shut off for individuals to join broader collectivities, everyone became isolated and defenseless against a terrorist state; and in a paralyzed society incapable of reacting there was established what Juan Corradi called a “culture of fear.” Some could not accept the situation and fled abroad—compelled by a combination of political and professional considerations—or took refuge in internal exile, in hidden spaces, blending into the surroundings while waiting for the breach that would allow a return to the surface. The majority of the population, however, justified the little of the repression that simply could not be ignored with the argument that “they must have done something” or took refuge in a deliberate ignorance of what was happening in sight of everyone. What was most notable, however, was an appropriation and internalization of the state's actions, translated into self-control, self-censorship, and spying on one's neighbors. Society patrolled itself and became full of informants, and through a collection of practices—from the family to the manner of dressing to its beliefs—revealed just how deeply rooted in it was the authoritarianism that the state discourse legitimized.

The military government never managed either to arouse enthusiasm or to garner explicit support among the whole of society. It attempted to do so in mid-1978, when Argentina hosted the World Cup soccer championship and the government's highest officials attended the matches, with Argentina winning. The military government attempted to exploit dark nationalistic sentiments in this event as it did in late 1978 when the country came close to going to war with Chile. It encountered only passivity in society, but that was enough to permit it to undertake the deep changes that, in its estimation, would definitively eliminate the conflicts in society and whose first consequences, the speculation fever, contributed to the atomization of society and the elimination of any possible response.