Exploration

Justice Wrought? Toward an Argentinese Reconciliation

Edwin Daniel Jacob

This October marks the opening of the most significant trials to date against the perpetrators of Argentina’s “Dirty War” (1976-1983). Sixty-one defendants are charged with the deaths of approximately 30,000 people at the Navy Mechanic School (ESMA), the naval facility in Buenos Aires that was used as a detention center during the Dirty War. Eight hundred victims will be represented at the trials, which will take place at the University of Buenos Aires School of Law to accommodate the expected turnout.

In order to increase public awareness and understanding of the trials taking place in Argentina, the Center for the Study of Genocide and Human Rights and the Center for Genocide Studies at the Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero will cover proceedings via the Argentina Trial Monitor (ATM). This online project will be published in both English and Spanish and will provide its users with the ability to access material on the trials, including background briefs and weekly synopses of proceedings. ATM will also feature additional policy briefs and trial-related materials, such as a compilation of news sources, images, and videos pertaining to the trials and their historical origins.

The Dirty War was conducted under the auspices of President Jorge Videla, Argentina’s right-wing dictator, who usurped power in a military coup d’état in 1976. Accordingly, Videla’s targets were members of Argentina’s various left-wing circles, including Argentinean students, trade unionists, and other leftist groups. The agents of Videla’s crusade against revolutionary forces were the Junta, his personal military regime.

Argentina’s Dirty War was marked by various atrocities on both a mass scale and, perhaps more insidiously, a micro level. Large-scale “disappearances” took place at ESMA, where up to 18,000 political dissidents were held within a year of Videla’s rise to power, F.A. Godfrey writes in Armed Forces and Modern Counter-Insurgency.

The term “Dirty War” itself was coined by the Videla regime because the means employed in the civil war were against a nationally homogenous enemy and included non-traditional forms of warfare (e.g., torture, sexual exploitation, and the rounding up of dissidents’ progeny). Indeed, military leaders were not solely responsible for the atrocities committed. The acts of individuals facilitate collective crimes against humanity. True justice can only be achieved when the perpetrators of these crimes — even lowly military men following their superiors’ orders — are held to account for their actions.

Those of us involved in the creation of the ATM hope the 2012 trials will contribute to the search for truth and justice in the aftermath of mass violence. Rutgers members of the ATM include Claudia Casal-Cordero, Edwin Daniel Jacob, Professor Nela Navarro, Professor Humberto Schettino, Anna Sverdlick and Mariam Zaidi. Professor Navarro serves as the Project Supervisor, while Ms. Sverdlick is the Project Leader. Ms. Zaidi is a member of the project staff and Mr. Jacob is developing and maintaining the project’s website.

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