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The Quest for Identity: Human Rights in the Aftermath of El Proceso in Argentina

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The Quest for Identity: Human Rights in the Aftermath of El Proceso in Argentina

By

Jennifer F. Dalenta

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of the requirements for
Honors in the Department of Political Science

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ABSTRACT


My thesis involves an analytical study of the Madres and the Abuelas of the Plaza de Mayo and a documentary on these two human rights groups framed around the issues of identity and human rights and their importance for all individuals in both a political and personal respect.

Through my research, I concluded that the Madres must be conceptualized as a revolutionary organization that combines both feminine and feminist elements in order to achieve its ultimate goals. I argue that the Madres must be interpreted and understood as a combination of these two frameworks, and that due to the complexity of their work, they must not be pigeonholed into a single category.

Furthermore, I explored the concept of identity. Through my research and work with the Abuelas of the Plaza de Mayo, I concluded that one’s identity is the fundamental aspect that distinguishes him from his peers and designates a particular place for him within the public and private spheres. Identities can be conceived of as something as basic as one’s gender or one’s race, or on a much more complex level, such as one’s personal creeds or moral beliefs. In this respect, since one’s identity serves as a fundamental aspect of his being, the Abuelas’ efforts to return the true identities to these illegally “adopted” children is particularly urgent. As such, my project not only explores the importance of this identity recovery process, but my documentary also highlights the Abuelas’ project in hopes of spreading awareness about their work.
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A Tragic Era: A Brief Overview

During the 1970s and early 1980s, Argentine citizens endured a ruthlessly violent regime that kidnapped, tortured and murdered its own people. As a result, nearly everyone lived in fear of being “disappeared”, a term used by the military junta to explain what happened to the abducted citizens. No one was safe, not even inside of their own homes. The private and public spheres rapidly converged and privacy was nothing but a distant memory. An estimated 30,000 people, labeled as subversives, simply went missing during this period. The church as well as the government closed their doors to outraged parents in search of their children. Without answers, having exhausted all of their resources, a group of women took to the streets to protest the government’s actions. Bearing photographs of their children and donning white handkerchiefs, they demanded answers. These women, known as the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, many of whom had minimal educational backgrounds, collaborated to form a revolutionary political group that not only defended human rights, but also reinterpreted the role of women within this conservative society.

Thirty years after the struggle began, this organization, now divided into two groups, has begun to tackle other social dilemmas that plague Argentina. While some of their initial goals have been met and they have even been able to expand their focus, another activist group, Las Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo, its members originating from the Madres, is still working tirelessly to find answers concerning the whereabouts of their grandchildren. Some of the captives were pregnant during the time of their kidnappings, and were forced to give birth in the detention centers. Many of these women were subsequently murdered and their children were then given to families associated with the military regime; their biological families are still attempting to locate them today. As such, this group searches for these missing children in order to inform
them of their true identities and reconnect them with their biological families. To date, 88 have been found, but more than 400 still remain unidentified.

**An Abstract Overview: The Research Purpose and Problems**

And so, my thesis involves spreading awareness about the Abuelas’ and the Madres’ projects as a means of informing other students about Argentina’s ongoing struggle for closure and justice and of hopefully contributing to the identification of some of the missing children. My work is two pronged; the first part is comprised of a written background of this historical time period in Argentina as well as an analytical study of the two aforementioned human rights groups. The second part consists of filming a documentary on the group, framing it around the issue of identity and its importance for all individuals in both a political and personal respect. After compiling the documentary, I will write a brief conclusion about my experiences.

Since I believe that awareness is the only way to effect change, I am hoping to produce a work that can be sent to other colleges across the Northeast as an educational tool. Although much is written about the Abuelas and the Madres in Spanish, I hope that my interpretation can be a more widely accessible work, as I intend to include English subtitles. The interviews are a crucial part of my documentary, and I want to include them, as well as footage from the Madres’ marches in the Plaza de Mayo, the ESMA, the largest detention center in the country, the Park of Memory, and other landmarks in Buenos Aires in order to make the documentary as comprehensive and all encompassing as possible. While my project is untraditional, I believe that it not only provides me with the opportunity of a lifetime, but also ensures that my final contribution to this College is one that will leave a mark. I don’t intend for my connection to this group or to the nation of Argentina to end when my project does either; I am hoping to continue
to spread awareness about the dangers of oppressive governments long after I have graduated from Union.

There are two main components to the written portion. First, the historical background of these tragedies and a brief, concrete overview of the event will be provided. Then, the abstract and conceptual issues that resulted from El Proceso will be identified and explored. The two major research questions that will be addressed include: how the human rights organizations developed into both feminist and feminine movements, thereby forming a mutation of the two that can be deemed nothing other than a revolutionary effort, why identity is so crucial for humans in both political and social contexts, and why it is so important more specifically for the children of the “disappeared” that were denied this right. In this respect, identity is not only important on an individual level, but it also has a direct effect on the nation’s ability to reconcile these traumatic events and move forward in unity. While these questions can certainly be developed and dissected through the historical accounts that exist, they cannot be fully understood today through the context of yesterday’s studies.

As such, thirty years later, these issues, that are still prevalent within Argentine society today, must be addressed in the hopes of spreading awareness about the continuing struggle for resolution and justice. And so, in order to obtain a more recent understanding of these events through the eyes of the citizenry, another form of media is necessary. In this respect, a documentary serves as the best tool for engaging the audience in a comprehensive and current analysis of these issues since they still apply today. Furthermore, by using a different media to convey my message, I feel that the documentary also appeals to a larger audience. Since my main motivation for this project is to spread awareness, it is important that the information is disseminated to as many people as possible.
Part I. El Proceso y La Respuesta: The Influence of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo

The early 1970s in Argentina was a time of tumultuous government instability, as many individuals took power within the country, only to be swiftly ousted. Eventually this incessantly volatile condition culminated in a ruthless government coup. And so, March 24, 1976 marked the beginning of change with the promise of order for this chaotic nation. Under the triumvirate leadership of General Jorge Videla, Admiral Emilio Eduardo Massera, and Brigadier Ramón Agosti, Argentina was led into one of the most treacherous tyrannical regimes in its history, in which the government strategically, yet seemingly indiscriminately murdered its own people. By overturning all of the longstanding conventions within the government, including the entire judiciary branch, these men were able to construct and legitimize their own framework for a traditional, Catholic society. In doing so, they systematically removed all individuals that were considered “subversives” of this objective.

However, one group of women refused to be silenced by this authoritative and oppressive government, demanding answers about the disappearances of their children. A conglomeration of mostly uneducated housewives, these individuals united in their struggles, ignoring the strict societal conventions, and made their voices heard, even in the midst of blatant denial and outright rejection. Marching weekly in the Plaza de Mayo, the center of government power in Buenos Aires, donning white handkerchiefs, and proudly displaying photographs of their missing children, these women ultimately formed a growing movement that simply could not be ignored. Although the government and the church closed their doors to these courageous individuals, they continued to persevere in search of answers and explanations. While some researchers have been quick to label this movement as a Feminist one, since the women acted politically, reinterpreting, and thereby revolutionizing their voices within society, I believe that its
construction is far more complex. As such, I would posit that this movement must be conceived of in its stark duality as both a Feminist movement and a feminine one. Although these two interpretations are seemingly dichotomous and contradictory in nature, I believe that they can be reconciled through the Madres’ work.

In order to truly comprehend the magnitude of the Madres’ movement, one must understand the gravity of the political situation during this particular point in history, known as El Proceso, in which all individuals that threatened the regime’s control were silenced by whatever means necessary. The junta’s military takeover of the unstable Argentinean government resulted in the implementation of a conservative, invasive, and repressive power. President Juan Peron’s death on July 1, 1974, in the midst of economic inflation and political tumult, left his inexperienced wife, Isabel, to assume the presidency under what can only be described as tenuous circumstances (Bouvard 22). As political pressures heightened, Isabel eventually conceded her power, allowing the military to address the guerilla uprisings within the nation. Ultimately, its response was violent and swift, weeding out and disappearing thousands of subversives. However, due to the lack of strong leadership within the government, a factor that contributed greatly to the political tension and conflict within the country, less than two years after she came to power, Isabel was unseated by a military coup that catapulted a ruthless triumvirate to power. Furthermore, “...the myth that Argentine society was in imminent danger of a violent left-wing takeover triumphed easily in the media and helped justify the military coup of March 1976” (Femenía 9). As such, the constant uncertainty and anxiety within the political arena created an optimal opportunity for the military junta to capitalize on the government instability in order to seize political power within the nation.
Although it was the sixth time in history that such an event occurred, this time it was not just another coup, as the aftermath of the military’s regime would have far reaching and devastating repercussions that would continue to damage the citizenry for decades. Viewing itself as the guardian of Argentinean values, the junta stood strongly on the platform of reform as a means of protecting its loyal citizens from leftists, terrorists, and subversives. By referring to its ensuing government purge as a “Holy War” and a process of reorganization and salvation, these leaders, Videla, Massera and Agosti, insinuated that their efforts were something of a religious crusade in order to defend both the Argentine way of life and its overarching ideals, which they asserted were deeply imbedded in the Catholic faith.

The junta’s enemy, however, was not clearly delineated, creating a cloud of confusion and anxiety that loomed over all Argentineans, as no one was safe from persecution. “For two murdered bodies found, there were nine disappearances. Nobody was immune. Male and female; young and old, babies and teenagers; pregnant women, students, workers, lawyers, journalists, scientists, artists, and teachers; Argentine citizens and citizens of other countries; nuns and priests, progressive members of religious orders – all swelled the ranks of the disappeared” (Arditti 14). In this respect, “Statistics show that 30 percent of the disappeared were workers, 21 percent were students, 10 percent were professionals, the rest were any who happened to be caught in the net, including teenagers, housewives, and even babies” (Agosín 428). Thus, the stage was set for one of the worst periods of human rights violations and abuses in history (Bouvard 24). In order to secure unilateral control and governmental power, the military leaders replaced the constitution with the Statute for the Process of National Reorganization, giving themselves the authority to control all judicial, executive, and legislative activity (Arditti 8). “They immediately dissolved the existing political parties, intimidated the
judicial branch, and placed such public and private institutions as the trade unions and the universities under direct military control. No politically significant area of Argentine society was left untouched by the military regime” (Femenía 10). As a result, the junta took complete control over all public aspects of the country, leaving the citizens completely vulnerable to its whims.

Furthermore, the writ of habeas corpus was suspended, meaning that individuals who were imprisoned no longer were guaranteed to be charged. As such, anyone that was arrested or kidnapped could be held indefinitely without justification. The new government also instituted major censorship in all aspects of life as a means of preventing public criticism of its actions. Those that were brave enough to critique the junta were characterized as anti-Argentine, subversives that threatened the nation’s ideals of family, tradition, and prosperity (Arditti 8). Through these changes, the triumvirate established a repressive regime that would relentlessly dominate Argentina for almost an entire bloody and shameful decade.

The following seven years can be best described as a reign of terror, as an estimated 30,000 people simply went missing, the majority of whom were never seen again. During this period, the frightening concept of “being disappeared” was originated. Rather than describe their loved ones as having disappeared, implying that they controlled their actions, being disappeared evoked the helpless and forceful aspect of the event, thereby removing individual self determination. By conceiving of these kidnappings as entirely involuntary, they invalidated the government’s position that their loved ones simply ran away of their own accord. For those traumatized individuals that were lucky enough to survive and return to their families, they provided chilling accounts of their unimaginably horrendous experiences, as they endured countless torture sessions, full of gratuitous and perverted violence.
While much of the violence and many of the targets may have seemed indiscriminate or random, the junta leaders developed a systematic means of torturing suspects and disposing of their victims’ bodies, as if they simply vanished without a trace. As a disturbing preview of the years ahead, on the very morning of the coup, Bernardo Alberte, a well-known Peronista leader and thereby an unspoken enemy of the junta, was visited by a police unit that threw him out of his sixth floor apartment window in front of his terrified family (Arditti 7-8). And so, the military junta wasted no time in cleansing the nation of its subversives and imposing its own form of state terrorism on its population. All of the military members “…engaged in the different parts of the repressive operation – kidnapping, interrogation, torture, and murder – rotating the various activities to ensure silence and complicity” (Arditti 16). In this respect, these individuals could be as vicious and ruthless as they wanted, since their involvement was somewhat anonymous in nature and since these abuses typically occurred within the secure walls of one of the 340 secret detention centers scattered across the country. One of the most famous and largest clandestine concentration camps was the Navy Mechanics School (ESMA) in Buenos Aires. However, while there was an element of anonymity for the torturers with their victims, all were equally as implicated in these criminal activities, thereby assuring that no one was “more innocent” than anyone else, since all were guilty of being a party to each aspect of this violent system of confession.

Although many survivors indicated that there were a wide variety of torture methods, since the torturers used whatever means necessary to obtain confessions and information, there were several staple measures that were universally implemented. One of these common tactics was the *picana* (cattle prod), in which an electric current was applied to the sensitive spots on the victims’ bodies, typically to their heads, armpits, and sexual organs. During this “procedure”,

the torturers frequently doused the “subversives” with water in order to re-sensitize their bodies to the pain. Other prevalent methods were the submarino, in which the torturers held the victims’ heads under water in order to simulate drowning, and the piripipi, a type of noise torture. Furthermore, the torturers sought to produce the most physical discomfort and agony possible, hanging the victims by their feet, beating them with chains, and literally putting salt into their open wounds (Arditti 18). These detention centers were torture chambers for the prisoners “…where their fingers and toes were severed, and their eyes removed, where they had rats forced into their vaginas and rectums, to gnaw their way out, where they lay in timeless agonies between life and death” (Moshman 4). Such accounts can only be described as gratuitous acts of perverse violence. Even worse, there was no set limit to the length of the torture sessions, which could last for several days. Throughout the entirety of their horrific experiences, they were also blindfolded (la capucha) so that they could not visually identify any of the other victims or their attackers. However, as many of the victims accounted, by removing one of their senses, others were instinctively amplified.

Breaking their Hippocratic Oath, doctors often supervised these heinous procedures in order to warn the torturers when the victims were nearing death and to ensure that the victims remained alive, constantly checking their vital signs. The vicious abusers would then temporarily cease their torture in order to let the doctors revive them, thereby ensuring an indefinite continuance of the tortures if the victims refused to cooperate. After the doctors stabilized their patients, the torturing resumed. Many victims, unable to withstand the continual tortures and doctor-induced revivals, fell into comas. However, the doctors’ roles were not exclusively confined to resuscitation, as many actively participated in the removal of subversives as well. In order to destroy the evidence (the dead bodies) as a means of avoiding culpability,
the junta decided to begin throwing the corpses into large bodies of water, specifically the Atlantic Ocean. And so, the doctors, as passengers on the planes with the victims, would inject them with drugs in order to calm them and render them unable to struggle for their lives. Other military members would then throw them out of the aircrafts in hopes that they would drown and that their bodies would be swept off to sea, never to be seen again (Arditti 18-9).

Targeted violence was also common protocol during El Proceso, as specific individuals were kidnapped from their own houses. One such attack, on the night of September 16, 1976, will forever live in infamy in Argentinean history as the Night of the Pencils. On this particular evening, several teenagers were dragged out of their homes in La Plata and driven to undisclosed detention centers; the Ford Falcon became a symbol of these kidnappings because it typically served as the getaway car. These high school students were considered potential dissidents because they had been campaigning to have student transportation fees reduced. Of the adolescents kidnapped, only three were eventually released; the rest still remain disappeared (Arditti 21). Labeling the students as “subversives in the classroom”, the junta establishment believed that they were a threat to the conservative and obedient academic environment, as their protests served to incite others to question governmental decisions and petition it for change.

Since very little information was documented by the torturers, all of which was done in code by labeling the prisoners with numbers, rather than names, the testimonies serve as crucial evidence and irrefutable proof that such abuses actually occurred at the hands of the brutal and ruthless military regime. While all of these human rights abuses continued throughout the nation, the one organization with the political power to stop them, instead strongly and outspokenly aligned itself with the junta. In this respect, “Según el gobierno de facto, la única forma de ganar la paz en la Argentina era logrando la restauración de los ‘verdaderos’ y
'naturales' valores argentinos, aquellos que definían ‘la esencia del ser nacional’. Estos valores estaban encarnados en la triada ‘Dios, Patria, Hogar’, términos que remiten al integrismo católico…” (According to the de facto government, the only way to achieve peace in Argentina was by restoring the ‘true’ and ‘natural’ Argentinean values, those that defined ‘the essence of the national being’. These values were incarnated in the triad of ‘God, Country, Household’, three terms that directly referred to Catholic fundamentalism (Filc 34-5). The government was able to garner the Church’s support through its use of religious propaganda and its articulation of predetermined goals. As a result, the Catholic Church became an accomplice, closing its doors to all of the individuals that turned to it for assistance. Since the military junta presented itself as a defender of Christian values and morals, at the inevitable expense of other religions, criticisms from religious leaders would have caused serious problems for the legitimization of the regime (Arditti 26). Unfortunately, the majority of the Catholic Church instead supported the movement for these very reasons, regardless of the means that the military was using to achieve its ends. In a country where 90% of the population associated itself with this religion, the effects of this literal “deal with the devil” were catastrophic, especially for all non-Catholic prisoners, particularly the Jewish population.

However, this anti-Semitic air was not an entirely novel phenomenon in Argentina either. Only a few decades earlier, after World War II, the government opened its doors to many Nazis, allowing them to take refuge within the nation’s borders. As such, anti-Semitic sentiments raged throughout the nation that over 400,000 Argentine Jews called home (Timerman 71). Jacobo Timerman, a Jewish political journalist and the founder of the newspaper La Opinión, was kidnapped from his home in Buenos Aires in April 1977 (Timerman 9). He was one of the fortunate few that survived the horrific torture and was eventually released, incredibly
traumatized, but still alive. As a Jewish captive, Timerman described the targeted abuse that he endured because of his religious beliefs; as he detailed of one of his torture sessions, “No questions are asked. Merely a barrage of insults, which increase in intensity as the minutes pass. Suddenly, a hysterical voice begins shouting a single word: ‘Jew…Jew…Jew!’ Someone tries a variation while still clapping hands: ‘Clipped prick…clipped prick’” (60-1). Throughout this verbal attack, Timerman was physically assaulted with the electric prod as well. Although many of the torturers believed that their actions were out of a duty to their flag rather than out of any personal desire, Timerman argued that “Torturing a Jewish prisoner always yielded a moment of entertainment to the Argentine security forces, a certain pleasurable, leisurely moment” (66). In this respect, the prejudices that many of the torturers harbored for the Jews, a historically marginalized group within society, were acted out physically and mercilessly on the helpless, frequently innocent victims.

Even women were not exempt from the torture; in fact, they were actually targeted in extremely violent and sexual manners. As one survivor accounted of her friend, “I know how they tortured her. I know that they knocked out her top teeth. I know that they raped her. I know in what kind of conditions she was kept” (Moshman 6). And so, both physical and sexual abuses were not uncommon; these women were viewed as subversives that had to be punished. Frighteningly, even pregnant women were abused; the repressors invented a torture method with a spoon: they inserted into the women’s vaginas until it touched the fetus, they then sent electric waves through the metallic instrument, shocking the unborn child in the womb (Arditti 22). As one survivor retold of a fellow victim’s devastating experience, “Había hecho un aborto porque estaba embarazada de dos meses, y por las torturas creo, había hecho un aborto…” (She had a miscarriage because she was two months pregnant, and I believe that the tortures are the reason
that she had a miscarriage) (Silva 39). And so, these perverse tactics not only resulted in horrible consequences for the victim, both physically and emotionally, but also destroyed the life of an innocent, unborn child.

Those that did not miscarry were sometimes forced to give birth in captivity, many of whom never saw their children again, as they were “adopted” by torturers, “oficiales de policía o [por] parejas que tenían alguna conexión con el aparato represivo clandestino, y que deseaban adoptar” (police officials or couples that had some connection with the repressive, clandestine apparatus, and that wanted to adopt) (Filc 38). One military physician, for instance, was known to have kept two of the children born from women prisoners and registered them as his own (Arditti 25). The Abuelas of the Plaza de Mayo estimate that approximately five hundred of these cases exist. Other accounts indicate that many of these women were misled into believing that their children would be sent to their families. As two survivors from the ESMA relayed,

“On our arrival at the Navy Mechanics School we saw many women laid out on the floor on cushions awaiting the birth of their children…Once the child was born the mother was ‘invited’ to write a letter to her relatives where the child was allegedly going to be taken. The then director of the School, navy Captain Ruben Jacinto Chamorro, personally accompanied visitors, generally senior navy officers, to the place where the pregnant women were being held, boasting that conditions established in the prison were as good as those in the Sarda (the best known maternity hospital in Buenos Aires). From the comments made we learnt that in the Navy Hospital there was a list of married couples in the navy who could not have children of their own, and who were prepared to adopt one of the children of people who had disappeared. The man who drew up the list was a gynecologist attached to the Navy Mechanics School” (Arditti 24).

And so, these prisoners were manipulated into believing that their families would have custody of their children until they were released from the detention centers. However, these torturers knowingly planned on giving the children away to their friends and coworkers instead and typically killed the mother shortly after she gave birth. This human black market was left
unimpeded for years, allowing for hundreds of unlawful adoptions to transpire, while simultaneously robbing innocent children of their identities.

On the other hand, there were a fortunate few that were able to keep their children and were eventually freed from the detention centers. Adriana Calvo de Laborde was one such example; she bravely retold her experiences of being tortured and held captive while pregnant, and was even forced to give birth in one of the filthy rooms of the detention center without any proper medical care or assistance. Her moving testimony not only depicts the humiliation that she suffered, but also emphasizes the unsanitary conditions that she endured. As she testified about her actual delivery and the unpleasant circumstances afterwards, “Una vez que me sacó la placenta y la tiró al piso…Mi beba la habían apoyado en la mesada, estaba sucia, lloraba, tenía frió…Me hicieron limpiar todo…Cuando terminé de limpiar todo me dieron mi vestido para que lo lavara” (One time that he removed the placenta and threw it on the floor…They supported my baby on the table, she was dirty, crying, cold…They made me clean everything…When I finished cleaning everything, they gave me my dress so that I could dry everything) (Silva 38-9). In this respect, Calvo de Laborde experienced humiliation, degradation, and a total invasion of her privacy during what was supposed to be one of the most important and intimate days of her life. Rather than receiving proper medical attention at a sterile hospital, she was condemned to give birth in a filthy room, surrounded by strangers and was then forced to clean up the mess afterwards even though she was still completely naked and had just endured childbirth. In her testimony, Calvo de Laborde also described her baby’s physical condition before they were released from the detention center. “Me dieron mi beba, que me la habían sacado por unos minutos a pesar de mis gritos. Mi bebe, mi beba estaba llena de piojos igual que yo. Mi beba estaba desnuda…Se llenó de pulgas” (They gave me my baby, they had taken her from me for a
few minutes regardless of my screams. My baby, my baby girl was full of louses like I was. My baby was naked...She was full of fleas) (Silva 42). Unfortunately, since she was a prisoner, her child was condemned to the same treacherous environment that she endured. This detailed depiction highlights the extent of the unsanitary and inhumane conditions that every prisoner was subject to, regardless of gender or age.

Although the Catholic Church and all government organizations closed their doors to the confused and terrified public, one group of brave individuals refused to be silenced. A conglomeration of women, who identified themselves as the Madres of the Plaza de Mayo, united in order to cooperatively vocalize their demands in an effort to unmask the grave abuses and the obscene violations of human rights that the military junta was committing against its own people. Defiantly challenging the conventions of the traditional, patriarchal society that they were condemned to temporarily accept, these women organized politically as a means of affecting change and demanding answers regarding the whereabouts of their disappeared children. Incredibly, “Most of the Mothers were housewives, and those who had worked were employed in areas reserved for women, such as primary-school education, social work, and retail sales” (Bouvard 1). And so, these women, with minimal educational background and no political experience, dared to defy their positions within society and waged a verbal war against the military junta through peaceful protest.

Initially, the mothers whose children had been disappeared felt as though they were completely alone, that they were the only ones that had to endure such a traumatic loss. However, as their search continued through military barracks and police stations, the women began to recognize each other, as the same worried and distraught faces continued to appear in lines, searching for answers to the same question: where is my child? Eventually, “They began
to talk to each other, comparing notes” (Bouvard 68). And so, they began to network amongst one another in an effort to secure as much information as possible about the whereabouts of their children and the circumstances of their disappearances. The mothers began by meeting in churches to conduct their business, as it served as a safe haven from the repressive government since many of the women were terrified about their involvement with such an organization. After recruiting as many women as possible, they began to hold Friday meetings in the Plaza de Mayo; by the third week, they delivered a collective letter to the president. Although he initially refused to see them, their persistence eventually paid off; however, the president’s message was short and dishonest, telling them that their children had simply left the country (Bouvard 69). Clearly dissatisfied with such a response, the women continued to demand answers and protested the disappearances.

Eventually, these women began to demonstrate every Thursday in the Plaza de Mayo, donning white handkerchiefs, carrying the photographs of their disappeared children, and waging peaceful protests for answers (Femenía 15). However, “The decision to install a permanent weekly presence in Plaza de Mayo was an act of desperation rather than one of calculated political resistance”, as they hoped that public awareness of their efforts to solicit explanations of the whereabouts of their children would prompt an immediate response (Fisher 52). Since this tactic did not accomplish their goal, their struggle did not end there; the Madres, labeled by the government as the Madwomen of the Plaza de Mayo, continued to invent several different techniques to keep their children’s memories alive. With the help of young militants, they constructed life-sized paper silhouettes, labeling each one with the name of a desaparecido; they then hung these posters on buildings in Buenos Aires. “In another campaign, they circulated paper cutouts shaped like human hands to symbolize the actual hands of their missing loved
ones. They released balloons with the names of the disappeared attached to them. Later, they paraded wearing identical masks, to symbolize the common plight of all the victims of state terrorism” (Femenía 15). And so, there was a gradual shift in the representation of loss, from a highly individualized one, to a more collective one. However, at this moment, this group of strong women was completely unaware that its actions would serve to revolutionize the role of women within society, empowering them with a voice, and would eventually lead to their ultimate goal of justice in the face of repression, and defiance of a terrorist state.

By 1978, the Madres decided that they needed to spread awareness for their cause and took their operation to the United States and Europe in hopes of gaining recognition, which proved to be a daunting project for them. “Not only did they have to raise funds, but they also had to organize the trip, arrange for contacts, establish connections with politicians, and solve the worrisome problem of languages; none of the Mothers spoke a foreign language, but they were nevertheless undeterred” in their efforts (Bouvard 87). And so, by visiting places from New York City to Rome, they were able to successfully utilize the international media as a means of disseminating information about the horrific disappearances that were occurring within the Argentinean border at the direct request of the military junta. “Clearly, the women called international attention to civil rights violations taking place in Argentina” (Taylor 201). In this respect, they intruded not only into the political arena within their own nation, but demanded that their voices be heard on a much broader scale as well.

Through all of their struggles, they maintained the hope that their children were still alive, referring to them even today as disappeared, rather than deceased, since to make such a concession about their deaths implied that some semblance of acceptance of the circumstances existed, and thus, that they should end their struggle for answers and accept the information that
they have as some sort of resolution. As Matilde Mellibovsky articulates about the difference between death and disappearance, she explains that

“When a person dies, his survivors know the story in all its details and colors: they can tell and describe chronologically all that happened until the final end. Everything is known. And there is the need for the survivors to describe and to listen to all of those details over and over again. When someone disappears by force, everything remains surrounded with a tangle of conjectures, indeterminacies, doubts” (27).

In this respect, the Madres were caught in an unfortunate and damned situation in which the admittance of their children’s death meant that they would have to come to grips with the fact that they were never going to return. On the other hand, however, continuing to consider them disappeared was an equally traumatizing experience, for it left them riddled with constant doubt and uncertainty and forced them to address the foreboding reality that the whereabouts and experiences of their children would forever remain an eternal mystery. Furthermore,

“There was another reason that they could not concede that the disappeared were actually dead during the years of the military regime. ‘We cannot and do not want to admit it,’ said one Mother. ‘To admit their death would be to kill them a second time, and it would play into the hands of the assassins.’ Given the public silence about the fate of the disappeared, the relatives alone carried the burden of keeping the memories of their loved ones alive, documenting that they had names, jobs, homes, children, and friends. They managed to preserve a presence for the disappeared in the life of the family and community through the fragile process of memory” (Femenía 13).

In order to combat forgetfulness, these women and their families had to maintain the hope that their children were still alive. By admitting that they were killed, these women believed that they were only empowering the military to continue to abuse its high position without being regulated or punished for its crimes against humanity.

Throughout the last three decades, the Madres of the Plaza de Mayo have experienced many successes and setbacks in their quest for answers. However, through all of the difficulties
and challenges, this organization has been able to survive, eventually splitting into two factions, La Asociación and La Línea Fundadora, in order to accommodate opposing interests and goals. Although their initial objective of providing justice for their disappeared children has been and continues to be met through their unrelenting efforts, they have not simply ended their struggle; they continue to work for progress in other social dilemmas even today, refocusing their efforts more broadly on the issue of human rights. Hebe Bonafini, the leader of La Asociación, through her connections with government officials, and even the Argentine President, has become a key figure in many movements for social and political change, traveling the world to promote their ideas and goals and protesting the disappearance of Julio Lopez, a political prisoner during El Proceso, that was disappeared on September 18, 2006, a few hours before he was scheduled to testify against the former police investigator, Miguel Etchevolatz, who ran a detention center during the dictatorship and oversaw the torture sessions (Dangl).

Today, celebrating the thirty-one year anniversary of the organization’s creation, the Madres of the Plaza de Mayo have been a source of interest for many writers seeking to categorize and analyze their work, since they served as one of the most visible and outspoken groups during El Proceso. Some authors argue that this human rights movement can be conceptualized as Feminist in nature, since these women dared to question their rigid position within the political realm in order to find their missing children, thereby not only creating, but also revolutionizing the feminine voice within the public sphere. Conversely, others believe that the Madres of the Plaza de Mayo instead represent a feminine movement, since this group seemed to actually reinforce the women’s position within the home, as traditional mothers that were simply concerned with the whereabouts and well beings of their children. However, I will argue that in fact the Madres must be interpreted and understood as a combination of these two
frameworks, and that due to the complexity of their work, they must not be pigeonholed into a single, defined category. Furthermore, in order to truly grasp the role of these influential women, I believe that the political environment that they struggled in must be perceived of in an abstract fashion.

The line between the public and private spheres became blurred during this tumultuous period, as the government sought to control and manipulate all elements of the citizens’ lives. Furthermore, since the nation became synonymous with family, the women had a very conservative role within this structure as the homemakers and the guardians of tradition, while the men served as the bosses and authority figures within the household. In this respect, the mother represented the fertile nation and the father symbolized the state and government control over this territory. The good women were those that supported the military’s missions and encouraged it to take the necessary steps to protect the public good. And so, “Del mismo modo, el Estado-padre debe mantener orden, dado que es el que puede distinguir el bien del mal” (In this manner, the State-father ought to maintain order, given that he is able to distinguish the good from the bad) while “La madre aparece como una figura completamente pasiva que recibe el ‘sentido de la familia’ del esposo” (The mother appears as the completely passive figure that receives the ‘sense of family’ from her husband) (Filc 48, 52). With this understanding, the military junta created a model of the good and proper family, designating all families with “subversive” members as subversive as well. As such, bad children became a direct result of bad parenting since “La dictadura señalaba a los padres como responsables últimos de impedir que sus hijos se transformaran en subversivos” (The dictatorship designated the parents as ultimately responsible in preventing their children from becoming subversives) (Filc 58). Thus, the regime created a standard for good families, which it asserted that all Argentineans should strive to
follow. Those that did not comply were deemed to be bad and subversive, punishable characteristics under the iron fist of national reorganization, which was directly guided by religious undertones.

Although the Madres were accused by the regime of being bad mothers because their children had been disappeared, they were able to ignore this character assassination in order to continue to fight for justice, rather than revenge. Since motherhood was viewed as sacred within Argentinean society, many individuals questioned how the junta was able to reconcile its dismissal of the Madres, who portrayed themselves as concerned mothers. And so, it seemed that “…the junta was trapped in a patriarchal discourse that honored motherhood” (Taylor 83). However, it “…tried to sidestep the issue by claiming that the women had renounced their right to motherhood by being bad mothers, mothers of subversives” (Taylor 83). As a result, the Madres were forced to confront this harsh characterization and combat the negative image that the military regime had created in order to make their voices heard.

And so, in one respect, they represented themselves as nothing more than a group of mothers desperately searching for the whereabouts of their children. However, their role within society still maintained a stark duality, for “Although the Madres undoubtedly proved the role of women as activists and broke down numerous boundaries, they faced criticism in certain quarters for exploiting and inhabiting the traditional role of women as guardians of the home and family that Latin American feminists were so desperate to deconstruct” (Howe 44). In this respect, they not only represented feminist elements through their position, but also maintained the traditional feminine characteristics of dutiful, caring mothers.

While the Madres explained that they, rather than their husbands, marched in protest because it was safer for women to publicly oppose the government than for men to do so,
especially since they were able to create a sympathetic image of themselves as concerned mothers, it can also be interpreted from a tactical and calculated angle. In this respect, “The fact that this membership is designated exclusively as the *mothers* of the ‘disappeared’ reinforces the assumption that child raising, and indeed the responsibility for the welfare of the child, is the preserve of the women” (Howe 45). This role and identity endowed them not only with the right, but also the obligation to protect and locate their children.

And so, the Madres were able to utilize their identities for strategic purposes, as “The image of woman as the traditional mother, dedicating herself to the care of her home and family, was one encouraged and promoted by many military regimes, including that of Argentina…As a result, by protesting within this role assigned by the regime itself, the Madres found a degree of impunity that would have been denied other human rights or feminist groups” (Howe 45). As such, by publicly performing this role, the Madres were able to achieve visibility under a system that typically rendered them invisible, while also precariously maintaining a modified form of their accepted position within society as loving mothers and diligent homemakers. However, at the same time, they were constantly walking on eggshells, since they risked being drawn too deeply into the stereotype, part of which they hoped to differentiate themselves from in an effort to effect change within the strict societal conventions and in hopes of reinforcing the fact that their demands should be taken seriously by the military junta. Nonetheless, although the feminine approach was somewhat strategic in nature, it still conformed to traditional gender roles as the basis for its success within the political arena, something that feminists staunchly opposed. These women believed that such a tactic came at the expense of hindering the progress of the women’s movement for equality.
As a feminist movement, this organization created a deep schism between evolving rights and traditional beliefs within Argentina. While many feminists criticize the maternalist approach as restrictive and narrow, as it confines the woman to a single category, it was still effective in providing the Madres with a united voice in a society that had completely silenced them. However, the manner in which the women politicized their roles as mothers by relocating themselves from the private sphere to the public realm and utilized them as a means of breaking down the restrictive social constructions that had dominated their lives, allowed them to be viewed from a perspective that defined them as a feminist movement. “By taking their sorrow and frustration out of the traditional confines and isolation of the home, and manifesting them collectively in the most public of public spaces, the women were able to transform the conceptualisation of traditionally female roles” (Howe 46). While they initially took on the role of the pleading, hysterical mothers, they were able to transform their positions by becoming more assertive in their demands and not only utilized the Plaza de Mayo as a place of protest, but used the international media to achieve their ends as well in order to subvert their traditional role within society (Howe 46). And so, “They had to suppress their own anguish, partly because of the urgency of creating a political space for themselves and partly because of the hope that their daughters and sons would reappear” (Femenía 12). In this respect, they were able to alter the traditional perceptions of women as submissive and apolitical by displaying themselves as a well organized association committed to the obtainment of justice. While they initially utilized their femininity and maternal standpoint as a means of making their voices heard, they later assumed a more confident and untraditional role within the political system, thereby challenging the previously constructed paradigm and forcing the society to re-conceptualize women’s ability to effect change within a stagnant and rigid framework.
As such, I believe that the Madres of the Plaza de Mayo must be viewed as revolutionary voices in the repressive abyss of silence. A revolutionary movement is thus understood as one that creates radical change within a society, or within the political (public) arena through altering its rigid, traditional constructions that leave many of its members marginalized. In this respect, the Madres must not be pigeonholed into either the category of a feminine movement or a Feminist one since their contributions and actions can not be so exclusively and narrowly defined. In fact, they actually represent a conglomeration of these two aspects, thereby creating an entirely new concept from an amalgamation of the two.

Therefore, by conceptualizing them as a revolutionary movement, individuals are able to understand them for the complexities of their goals and strategies and in the entirety of their work as human rights defenders. Furthermore, “Their [later] transgression of traditional roles made evident how restrictive and oppressive those roles had been. Thus their performance of mothers as activists challenged traditional maternal roles and called attention to the fact that motherhood was a social, not just biological, construct” (Taylor 185). In this respect, they not only created a new voice for women as female activists within a male dominated society, but they also revolutionized their position within that framework so that motherhood was no longer viewed as merely a biological condition and an inevitability for women, but as an aspect that had to be conceived of as socially constructed, and thereby mutable.

And so, the Madres’ unwavering effort to find their children metamorphosed into a political movement that resulted in not only the eventual obtainment of some information from their collective demands, but the broader benefit of revolutionizing the female voice within the rigid Argentine societal framework. In the end, no matter what label they are given, these women have played an influential role in the political arena, transforming the feminine position
within society, and showing the strength not only of solidarity, but also of family. And so, “The Mothers have a close acquaintance with death, but they are completely committed to life” (Agosín 435). This proximity to such opposing circumstances has helped the Madres to continue their battle for human rights throughout the years.

**Part II. Thirty Years Later, the Struggle Continues: The Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo**

According to Gershan Kaufman, “Identity is the essential core of who we are as individuals, the conscious experience of the self inside”. In this respect, one’s identity shapes his entire life, both publicly and privately and thus, is inextricably tied to his being. “In other words, the need to know one’s identity is an inseparable part of being human, and is a basic human right” (Penchaszadeh 302). In this chaotic world, people can only truly control their own actions. As such, their identities become the fundamental aspects that distinguish them from their peers and designate a particular place for them within the public and private spheres. Identities can be conceived of as something as basic as one’s gender or one’s race, or on a much more complex level, such as one’s personal creeds or moral beliefs. And so, this individuality plays a particularly important role for every person because it helps them to clearly identify and understand their position within the world in relation to their peers.

However, when someone’s identity is altered or destroyed without his permission, the personal security that each person feels is completely jeopardized, as he loses power over the only aspect in his life that he can truly control; as a result, such an action becomes a violation of the individual’s rights. While many still believe that identity is something that is owned by the individual, an element that he controls, that only he has the ability to alter, and one that cannot be robbed by anyone else, the military junta during El Proceso managed to do just that. Since one of the major tactics of this brutal regime was the destruction of its victims’ identities as a means
of degrading and devaluing them, these self-conceptualizations clearly served as integral elements of individuals’ lives. The detainees were not only denied the ability to speak, but they were also not addressed by their names, rather were referred to as numbers, thereby stripping them of one of their defining and identifying features. Furthermore, by not keeping records of the victims, the torturers were able to kill them and dispose of their bodies without consequence, telling their families and loved ones that they had no information about their whereabouts. In this respect, the victims were denied the ability to be active members of the political and social realms, as they were not even viewed as existent; they had been effectively erased by the military regime in order to serve its ultimate purpose of reorganizing the national government by eliminating subversives.

Unfortunately, the junta’s reign of terror and identity theft were not exclusively targeted at the “guilty” victims. Children that were born in captivity were typically adopted by torturers. In order to understand the prevalence of this violation, one must turn to the statistics. “It has been determined that a quarter of the disappeared were women, and of those, 10 percent were pregnant at the time of their arrest” (Agosín 429). However, this number does not even account for those women that were raped and impregnated by the torturers while they were imprisoned nor does it account for the children that were abducted during home invasions. In this respect, “…most commonly these infants and young children were either kept as ‘war booty’ by someone within the security forces, handed over to childless couples associated with the repressive apparatus, or simply sold as objects to people who would not ask questions” (Penchaszadeh 292). As a result, in order to conceal this illegal human market, these innocent babies were never informed of their true identities and for many years, lived their lives in blissful ignorance, unaware of who their families were or what their adopted parents had done.
Some may argue that the benefits that could potentially result from uncovering the truth about their identities could simply not supersede the emotional trauma and damage that such information would create. However, one’s true identity, as it is the essence of his being, is arguably so crucial that to live a lie is a more damning condition than to be overwhelmed by the truth, for to live in the darkness can never be as fulfilling as life in the light. As such, someone is never truly able to express his legitimate identity if he is simply unaware of it. On the other hand, the moral implications of such enlightenment must also be considered, as the irreparable damage of this knowledge could have far reaching and devastating repercussions for these innocent individuals. And so, people must ask themselves when considering the proper course of action: What happens when one lacks or is unaware of his true identity and is it acceptable to live a lie, and is this then, in fact a moral question, rather than a political one?

One human rights organization, the Association of the Abuelas of the Plaza de Mayo, founded in October of 1977 with originally only twelve members, dared to address this dilemma and directly confront the issue, searching for those children that had been kidnapped in an effort to restore them to their legitimate families (Penchaszadeh 293, Arditti 55). As such, “The Grandmothers see this reunion as an act of truth, a vuelta a la vida (return to life) that will restore to them their proper identity, allowing them to grow up without secrets or lies” (Arditti 103). They began compiling information about the missing children through reports from neighbors, anonymous calls, visits to orphanages, research on suspicious adoptions, and reports from witnesses of birth deliveries in military hospitals and detention centers. However, the collection of data was just the beginning of the battle, as they still had to locate these children and prove that they were in fact the offspring of disappeared people. This definitive verification of identity could only be gleaned through genetics. As such, the Abuelas began to consult with scientists in
order to determine the effectiveness of such a technique, considering that their parents’ DNA was not available for testing. They learned that “The fact that the parents were dead should not be an absolute obstacle, since all the genetic traits passed by parents to their children come from the grandparents” (Pechaszadeh 294). And so, with this new information and restored hope, they demanded “…that the government establish a genetic information bank to preserve genetic data about the families of the disappeared. This would make it possible for the next generation, the children born to the desaparecidos in captivity [and today presumably being raised by families with ties to the military] to learn the truth about their origins, even after the death of their grandmothers” (Femenía 17). In May of 1987, this request was granted through the enactment of a law passed by Congress. A provision of this law also stipulated that judges were responsible for ordering testing on any children whose identities were in doubt. In the same year, for the first time, “a child born in captivity was returned to her family of origin after genetic analysis carried out at the National Genetic Data Bank gave proof of her identity” (Arditti 73). This event served as major motivation for the Abuelas’ continuing efforts and provided them with hope that their project would inevitably be successful in returning the appropriated children to their rightful, biological families.

With the junta unseated and democracy on the rise, the Abuelas continued their offensive to recover the kidnapped children that they had managed to locate through their efforts. With the help of their “medico-psychological and legal teams, they assembled information on many children and presented it to the courts” (Penchaszadeh 297). The process was arduous; in each case, the Abuelas presented a demand to the courts with sufficient evidence about a particular child, proving that he was not legally adopted, but rather unlawfully appropriated. Most of this evidence was gathered by the Abuelas themselves and was based on many factors like historical
information and physical resemblance (Penchaszadeh 298). Once the judge had reviewed the materials, he determined whether or not there was cause for genetic testing. If he believed that there was, he contacted the family and informed them. “In most instances, the alleged parents would admit that the child as not theirs but adopted, so that the crucial proof was the matching between the genetic make-up of the children and that of the possible grandparents” (Penchaszadeh 298). Since the genetic relationship is not a 100% accurate indication of a familial tie between the child and the grandparents, circumstantial evidence became particularly important in order to verify that the child’s identity was correct. If a match was found, the Abuelas were understandably ambivalent because the wellbeing of the children had to be considered and the damaging effects of such information could not be ignored. As such, psychologists became a vital part of the process, working with both the Abuelas and the courts to ensure that the children experienced no further psychological trauma. With the basic understanding that the appropriated child had a right to know his true identity and family history, “It was also recognized that the child had a right to live with his or her biological family. In some cases, however, missing children were found living with loving families who had adopted them in good faith, sometimes not even knowing that they were children of disappeared persons. In all these cases, the adoptive and biological families would reach agreements that would preserve the best interests of the child. In some instances this meant that the child would continue to live with the adoptive family, but having gained psychologically by learning his or her true identity and history, and incorporating the biological family in his or her life” (Penchaszadeh 299).

And so, the process was a rigorous one that always maintained the best interests of the children as its priority while also reinforcing the importance of one’s right to know about his true identity. However, this process was not a simple or straightforward one by any means, since many of the adoptive parents were security officers that still maintained power within the legal system. As such, they were able to slow the proceedings or simply flee the country with their
appropriated children. In a famous case, Samuel Miara, a police officer accused of the rapes and tortures of female detainees, abducted two twin boys in 1978. When the Abuelas took the case to court in 1986, he fled to Paraguay with the children. The DNA tests later proved, after he was extradited back to Argentina nearly three years later, that the twins were the sons of the Reggiardo-Tolosa couple, who had disappeared in 1977. Incredibly, however,

> “…with the identity of the children proven and the appropriators found guilty of forgery of their birth certificates, abduction of minors, and escaping from justice, the Miaras live comfortably in their home and the twins remain abducted under a de facto court’s ‘protection,’ in spite of the fact that members of their legitimate family have been claiming them ever since their identity was proven” (Penchaszadeh 299).

In this respect, such a situation demonstrated the complicity of the judges in their attempt to maintain the status quo by erasing from public memory the treacherous crimes that were committed by the military junta. Over a decade after their biological parents’ disappearances, a judge ruled that the children had to be moved to foster care and that they should maintain their first names, but that they should carry the last name of their true parents, prohibiting any further contact with the Miaras (Arditti 136).

Frustrated with the rulings, particularly since the twins had a strained relationship with their uncle who had custody of them, they rejected their biological family and began to appear on conservative broadcasts on national television, expressing their desire to live with the Miaras because ‘they gave them all of their love’, clearly demonstrating that they preferred to maintain their assumed identities, having been raised by a torturer, rather than to accept the circumstances and work to create a relationship with their real parents’ remaining family members (Arditti 137). Their comments created a public outcry; the Grandmothers were negatively portrayed and even the judge’s life was threatened. “Soon thereafter, the judge reversed his decision. The twins went to live with a foster family, were allowed to visit the Miaras, and returned to the
private school they had previously attended” (Arditti 137). However, what they failed to recognize was that they too were victims of the military regime, just like their biological parents. As a result, the twins asserted their right to not only maintain false identities, but to accept them as their true selves.

However, this case was an extreme, as the majority of the other children have been much more receptive to their newly found identities. In fact, the membership of HIJOS (Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia, contra el Olvido y el Silencio – Children for Identity and Justice, against Oblivion and Silence), an organization that unites these children in order to empower them in their basic demand for the prosecution of their parents’ murderers, is direct proof of this circumstance. Their struggle for answers and for justice, like that of the Abuelas, however, has not been in vain. To date, records indicate that around eighty-eight of these abducted children have been found through the efforts of the Abuelas, but over four hundred are still missing. Furthermore, the goals of the HIJOS are slowly being realized, as pardons have been recently overturned, allowing for the torturers to finally be properly prosecuted and punished for their crimes, providing these children and their families with long awaited justice for their disappeared loved ones.

**Part III. Hoy en Día: Justice is finally served after Thirty Years of Impunity**

After the disastrous defeat of the Argentine military by Great Britain in the Malvinas (Falkland) Islands, the junta lost much of its power and was quickly forced to loosen its grip on the nation, allowing a return to a constitutional government through elections. On December 12, 1983, Raúl Alfonsín took office as President of the Argentine government. His first measures were dedicated to the arrangement of a trial for the top nine military leaders and the establishment of the National Commission on Disappeared People in order to investigate what
had happened during El Proceso. And so, “Over 1,300 members of the armed forces were implicated in crimes of illegal repression in the trials and hearings of 1984-86. At this point, the Mothers argued that trying only the top nine military commanders was insufficient” (Femenía 16). In this respect, although the major players were punished for their crimes against humanity, all of the “minor” torturers remained unscathed. The Madres’ demands persisted, even though they fell on the deaf ears of the government. After searching the concentration camps, the asylums, and the mental hospitals, it became very clear that there were simply no survivors. In order to appease the Madres, the government suggested that the remains of the disappeared be returned to their families and that economic reparations be paid to the affected families for their losses, to which Hebe Bonafini, the leader of the La Asociación faction of the Madres, replied, “‘We need to the know who the murderers were, not the murdered’” and “‘Our children’s lives cannot be exchanged for money’” (Femenía 17). For years, the effects of El Proceso remained unsettled and the punishments inefficiently distributed, disallowing the traumatized citizens to secure closure and move forward.

The election of President Menem only worsened the situation in his attempts to unify the country and move toward reconciliation. In 1989, he pardoned high-ranking officers and in 1990, he pardoned all of the members of the junta that had been tried in 1985 and were still serving their sentences (Arditti 49). Although many citizens protested, these pardons made moot the legal redress of most human rights violations. “Barely twenty-four hours after leaving prison, General Videla demanded an apology and full recognition from society for his work on behalf of ‘democracy’” (Arditti 49). The Argentines would remain in limbo for decades, held back by the past, suffering in the present, and battling for a brighter future.
However, regardless of the amnesty laws and presidential pardons, a new democracy, although its benefits were not immediately visible, eventually brought the promise of long awaited justice. In August of 2007, trials continued in the prosecution of the unpunished torturers. One of the most famous proceedings during this time was against former Chaplin Christian Von Wernich. On October 9, 2007, he was sentenced to life in prison for committing crimes against humanity and was the first Catholic priest to be charged with human rights abuses in connection with El Proceso; he was formally convicted of collaborating with state security agents and covering up crimes in seven deaths, 31 cases of torture, and 42 cases of unlawful imprisonment (Trigona). Currently, 256 former members of the military regime have been accused of crimes against humanity and are now awaiting trial. “This is only the third trial held since Argentina's Supreme Court struck down amnesty laws in 2005 protecting military personnel who served during the seven-year dictatorship. So far, two police officers and a priest have been tried – not a single military officer has been slated for trial” (Trigona). However, these small steps are still an indication of progress in the quest for justice and closure.

Since these trials have just begun, only a handful of the torturers and other officials associated with the military regime have been punished for their crimes against humanity, leaving many still free to roam the streets of Buenos Aires without consequence. And so, “Even today, under Argentina’s new democracy, with all the evidence that has been made public through the trials of the top junta leaders, it remains impossible for many citizens to full grasp the scale of the holocaust” (Femenía 14). This event has been an agonizing and festering wound on the nation for decades; many individuals have not been able to comprehend the magnitude of repression and violence that the citizens endured, since so much evidence has been lost over time or never recorded in the first place. However, the struggle for justice wages on without any end.
in sight; with this steadfast and faithful mentality, the human rights organizations press on, because “As María Antokoletz has stated: ‘The guilty must be punished so that no mother anywhere in the world has to suffer what we have suffered since the disappearance of our children. We will never forget’” (Femenia 17-8). And so, the Madres and the Abuelas of the Plaza de Mayo refuse to allow the memory of the disappeared to fade, working to ensure that the past never repeats itself and fighting to provide a brighter future for a renewed and restored Argentina.

Conclusions: The Necessity of a Current Documentary

Since this tragedy continues to affect the Argentine population even today, as the path to justice has been slow and arduous, El Proceso cannot simply be forgotten or completely placed in the past. And so, although over thirty years have passed since the torturous military junta took power, the identity crisis is still an open, festering wound for the nation. While some conclusions can be drawn from the historical data and personal accounts that exist, particularly insight into the Madres’ revolutionary role, much still remains a mystery and many questions are still left unanswered. As such, El Proceso must continue to be explored in order to spread awareness about the continuing search for children in an effort to inform them about their true identities. Although the books and articles on this topic have certainly served to inform the masses about this tragic period in Argentine history, other forms of media must be explored, since written works are one-dimensional in nature and simply cannot depict the entire story. By utilizing film, the producer is able to personalize the victims and provide a visual conceptualization of the events, two beneficial factors that written works rely on the human imagination to create. Furthermore, videos can be disseminated to the masses and are a faster way of spreading information; while it may take several hours or even a few days to read one of
the books on El Proceso, the images and the interviews depicted in a documentary can convey the same message through audio and visual effects in only a few, short minutes. As such, there is a necessity to create an updated documentary on El Proceso.

**Final Thoughts: My Personal Statement**

This documentary has developed beyond anything that I could have ever anticipated. I began this process in hopes of spreading awareness in the United States about the atrocities that occurred in Argentina from 1976-83. However, after meeting these inspirational women who have dedicated their lives to seeking justice for their disappeared children, my project seems much more meaningful now. Many of us cannot even imagine what these women’s lives have been like: full of terror, misery, defeat, frustration, and loss. The relatively small problems that the majority of Americans experience in their lifetimes do not even come close to what the Madres have endured. We tend to get caught up in the small difficulties that challenge us, so engrossed in our own dilemmas that we lose sight of the greater suffering that exists in the world. These women’s strength and courage reminded me that life is simply too short to spend even a single moment unhappy, as many of us will thankfully never know what it is to experience true sorrow. These women’s whole lives have been as one Madre explained, “una vida sin vida”, a life without life.

The opportunity to watch the Madres march in the Plaza de Mayo was a monumental experience, as these elderly women mark the end of an era. They have been walking in front of the Casa Rosada every Thursday for over thirty years; however, as many of these women are aging and unable to walk, this tradition is coming to a close. As such, I feel blessed to have had the opportunity to watch them make their famous “ronda”. Furthermore, although I know that my thesis does not contribute any revolutionary insight into the realm of political science, I
believe that it does something even more powerful – it gives a voice to these women who have spent literally decades fighting for justice for their disappeared children.

Moreover, my documentary seeks to inform its viewers about the American government’s responsibility for this tragedy, as well as about the horrifying repercussions of political indifference. However, it must also be noted that my documentary’s purpose is not to prevent genocide from occurring again, as this goal seems entirely unrealistic, but rather it serves as a reminder that an engaged citizenry is less likely to be implicated in genocide. And so, I hope that the viewer is not left with a feeling of resolution or closure when the video ends, as I am striving to instill an uneasy reaction in them so that questions will continue to remain open, begging for the tragedy to be re-examined over and over again. On the other hand, as a political scientist, this project has served quite another purpose; it has challenged me to revisit a historical event and attempt to not only analyze it, but to categorize and present it through a personally unfamiliar form of media: a camera lens. Sometimes simple words on paper do not express one’s understanding and connection with a certain subject; extending myself behind what is comfortable has allowed me to delve into concepts on a much more profound level, exposing the suffering of these women to a generally uniformed public.

Sadly, however, regardless of my efforts, the Madres will probably die without ever receiving closure about the murders of their children. While many question whether or not El Proceso should be deemed genocide, I hold that only such a term truly captures the magnitude of this atrocity. Furthermore, from a purely logistical standpoint, it can be classified as genocide because a national, specific group was systemically targeted and exterminated, that group being the intellectual and academic communities. Although any genocide is a tragedy, Argentina’s plight is unique from many other nations, as its citizens have been left without any knowledge
about what happened to their children, and even worse, will probably never see the day that those responsible for their children’s deaths are punished for these heinous crimes. And so, the aftermath of El Proceso continues to haunt me, begging the question: what have the Madres spent their lives fighting for when the killers walk free and they have no more information about their children’s murders than they did thirty-one years ago? Where do they find the hope and the faith to keep pushing on? In these questions, that I still do not have sufficient answers for, I find my own hope and conviction for the future that such an atrocity may never occur again. They have dedicated their lives to tomorrow, fighting in today for their loss in the past. They continue to struggle for change; this documentary tells these women’s stories in their own words, through their own eyes.
Bibliography


