

June 1, 2009

## Argentina's Collective Memory: *Challenges in Accepting a Violent Past*



by Saskia van Alphen  
- Argentina -

The current Argentinean government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner has made *Justicia* or human rights one of the main items on its political agenda, so much so that it aims to judge and imprison all military staff involved in the army's illegal activities during the country's latest dictatorship (1976-1983). It also intends to give (financial) reparations to the victims or their surviving relatives. With this *Juicios por la Verdad* or Judgements for Truth campaign, Fernández de Kirchner continues the work of her husband, former president Néstor Kirchner, who converted the ESMA, a navy school that operated as one of the biggest clandestine detention and torture centers during those years, into state property and a [Space for Memory](#). By pursuing these initiatives, Fernández de Kirchner hopes to establish a collective memory for this tragic episode in Argentinean history.



- In the last few years, memorial tiles, like this one for Nora's brother, have been placed in sidewalks in front of the houses where people were kidnapped during the dictatorship. Photograph by Saskia van Alphen. ●

In the 3 years that I've lived here, I've found that the memories and opinions of the country's population are extremely disparate – a factor

that has stymied the administration's current efforts. One contingent labels it as the period in which military forces executed state terrorism, systematically kidnapping, torturing and killing thousands of people. The other still feels a strong aversion to all socialist movements and believes that the military coup was necessary to safeguard the country's democratic and catholic values.

To get an understanding of the latter, I talk with Laura, a former school dean, who is now in her sixties. At the time she had many friends in military positions. "The years prior to the coup were far worse than the years under military government," she explains. "There was great economic and social instability, extreme inflation and many products were unavailable. There were frequent assaults by guerrilla groups upon CEOs of international companies or military officials and institutions that terrified the whole society. When the army took power in March 1976, people celebrated in the streets."

Vera Carnovale, a history scholar with many publications on political violence and state terrorism, provides me with some historical context. "Most people didn't know what was coming," she says. "They thought that the army would bring order and peace. Don't forget that Argentina had already seen various dictatorships. To them, military rule didn't necessarily mean something bad. They believed that it would put an end to the social chaos."

To truly understand what happened in the seventies, we have to examine the first government of Juan Domingo Perón (1946-1955), who stimulated the organization of workers unions and factory owners, improving the lives of the country's working class considerably. He became very popular with a large part of the population, to the displeasure of the conservative classes. When Perón was finally overthrown by the army (supported by the conservatives), the Peronist party was prohibited from the public sphere. Even mentioning Perón's name or that of his wife, Evita, became illegal.

The ban on the Peronist party continued for 18 years. This suppression and censure lead to the formation of various organizations with socialist goals inspired by the Cuban revolution and the ideals of revolutionary Che Guevarra. They were mainly anti-capitalism (also meaning anti-United States), against the dominant local oligarchy and against everyone that limited the rights and power of the working class. These groups believed that violence was the only way to reach their goals, and they wanted Perón back as president. When he finally returned in 1973, he didn't respond to their expectations and moved

to more right-wing interests. Disappointed, the organizations continued their violent attacks.

Another clandestine organization, the Triple A, soon became active. Allegedly formed by a government official, this anti-communist organization started to organize attacks against key members of the socialist militant movements. By 1975, Perón had died and the country was left in institutional chaos, despite or as a consequence of the weak presidency of Perón's second wife, Isabel. The different illegal organizations dominated Argentinean daily life with their violence, aiming to destroying each other and gain power. On top of that, the country suffered a severe economic crisis, and the military forces decided to take over the country in a coup on March 24, 1976.

Following in the footsteps of the Triple A, the army expanded the systematic assaults, torture and killing of socialist militants with a war against all "subversive" citizens, where the definition of subversive was left ambiguous in order to justify any and all of its illegal activities.

Nora was kidnapped in July 1977 from her house, which was situated on a busy avenue in the middle of the day. A young university student, she wasn't involved in any political party. The only militancy she could be accused of was participating in student activities such as demonstrations against the government. Two of her cousins had been arrested a few months earlier and her brother and his girlfriend hours before her own disappearance. She is the only one that survived.

Nora was released a few days after her kidnapping and fled the country immediately, afraid that she would be kidnapped again. After traveling through various countries, not knowing what to do or where to go, she finally settled in Canada to start a career in literature and human rights. "The dictatorship destroyed my family, my relationships and my life," she says. "After the rupture of all my reference points, I turned into one more exile in this world and that is a condition I will never overcome."

With such opposing experiences, how can the *Judgements for Truth* and the *Space for Memory* reconcile the country's past? Laura believes that her country's current situation requires a different political priority. "What happened during the seventies is of lesser importance at the moment. There are far more urgent matters. People today are worried if they will have enough food on the table and if their children are safe on the streets," she explains. "The president should assure

the basic 'human' rights of *today's* people, not the trial and judgement of things that happened 30 years ago!"

When I ask Vera about it, she says, "Argentina is a paradoxical society. People claim human rights while they are not willing to fight for them. They don't feel responsible, reasoning that the whole country is corrupt and that it is impossible to change anything."

Today, after a long process of recovery from trauma, Nora feels differently. "The destruction of my reference points made me the person I am now, a person with a new identity that feels responsible to show what is invisible to many. I want to be a voice for the voiceless and tell my story and that of other victims to show the consequences of totalitarian regimes. I have made this an indestructible reference point for the rest of my life."

Though the government is trying to create public discourse with the installation of the *Space for Memory* and *Judgements for Truth*, Vera foresees a long process.

"The first step is for people to recognize the role they assumed during the years of dictatorship. A lot of people let it happen," she says. "[During] the first years of military domination, the middle class lived very well. The Argentinean peso became very strong and the US dollar cheap, which allowed them to travel and buy foreign luxuries. Some preferred not to know and [turned a blind eye] so they could enjoy the 'fat' years while they lasted. Afterwards, one's [ambivalence] might have been hard to accept. The same goes for the guerilla organizations. They have a very heroic discourse on the actions of their leaders and are not willing to see it any other way. They still believe that violence was the only way and with that they justify the attacks."

She also recognizes the same stubborn tendencies in the dictatorship's victims. "It is one of the reasons why the project of a *Space for Memory* doesn't progress," she explains. "Most organizations involved in the construction of the *Space for Memory* were formed by survivors of the illegal detention centers or family members of the disappeared. They do not want to show any other version of history but their own, and even among them, those histories differ greatly."

What will it take for Argentina to heal? As the government, Vera and many others continue discussing the years in question, perhaps one day Argentina will be able to accept its violent past.

This is Saskia's second article in a [series](#) that explores the consequences of Argentina's last dictatorship through the personal perspectives of people whose lives were permanently marked in different ways by the military regime. - Ed.

### ***About the Author***

**Saskia van Alphen** started her professional career in accounting and worked with one of the top 5 firms in the Netherlands, but was soon drawn to work that allowed greater participation in the social fabric of her country. For several years she worked for the Dutch government managing projects on the integration and participation of immigrant youth.

Saskia immigrated to Buenos Aires, Argentina in 2006 to broaden her horizons and immerse herself in Latin American culture. She is currently in her second year of Social Studies with a specialization in Art History at Universidad de Palermo and utilizes her language, communication and organizational skills as a freelancer for various organizations.