

# Cleaning Up the Dirty War

By Travis Lea

## BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA

Justice in South America tends to mimic the pace of life: slow. That's why Rosa Roisinblit considers it a victory to see eight leaders of Argentina's "Dirty War" behind bars, 15 years after the repressive military government lost power.

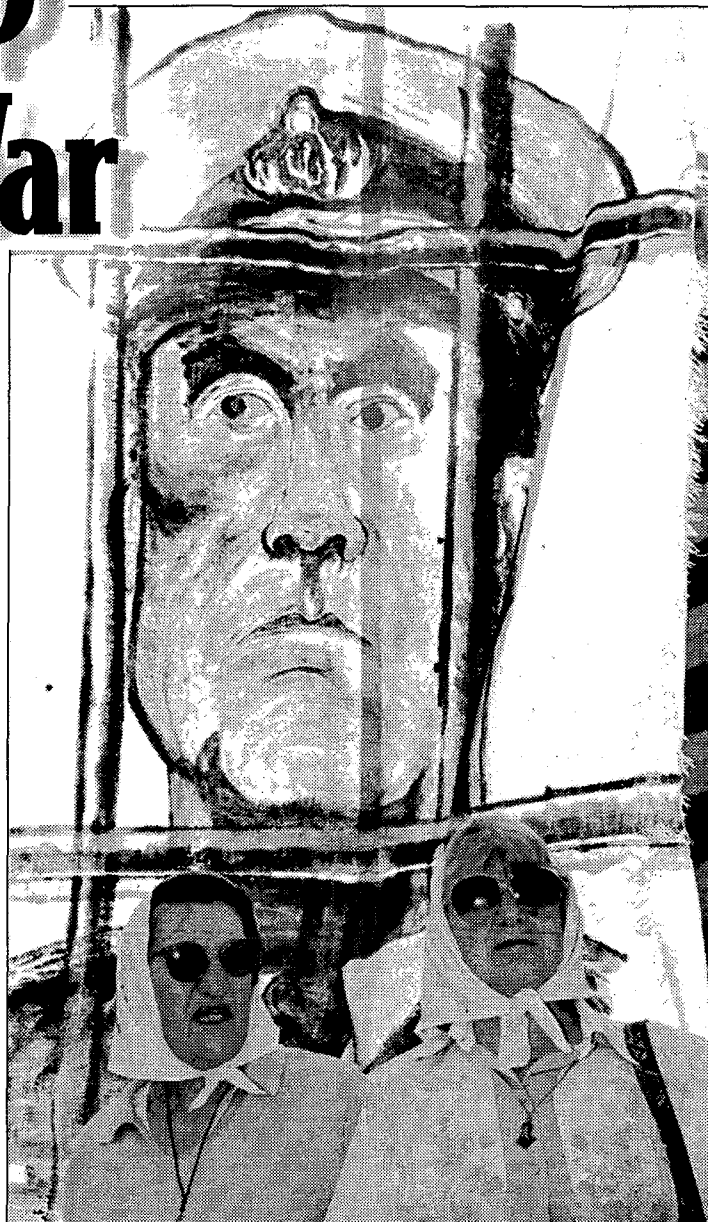
Roisinblit never intended to lead the life of a human rights crusader. Her daughter Patricia was eight months pregnant when she was kidnapped on Oct. 6, 1978. Like many mothers whose family members disappeared during Argentina's military dictatorship from 1976 to 1983, Roisinblit went to hospitals and police stations in search of her missing family. "I went to maternity wards to see if the child had been born there," says the 79-year-old. "Then I started going to orphanages and foundling homes ... but to no avail."

The Dirty War followed a century of vacillations between dictatorship and democracy in Argentina. In 1973, Juan Domingo Peron—the only leader with the influence to stabilize the country—had returned to lead the nation after nearly 20 years in exile. But his 1974 death left his inept wife Isabel in power until the beginning of 1976. In a void of leadership, amidst guerrilla activity and triple digit inflation, the military took power in an orchestrated coup.

The new regime promised order and economic stability. Then it began covert operations that coordinated the capture, torture, incarceration and execution of "subversives." By 1983, 30,000 Argentines had disappeared or been murdered.

In April 1977, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo began a weekly protest outside of the central government building that continues to this day. They demand a full accounting of the Dirty War's victims—their sons, daughters and grandchildren. With time, the protesters split into more distinct groups of directly affected victims: mothers, grandmothers, family and now children of the disappeared. During their protests, the mothers and grandmothers circle the square silently, dressed in characteristic white scarves and carrying large pictures of their missing family members.

In 1982, Argentina's weakening dictatorship—criticized for corruption and exponential inflation—suffered a fatal blow. England obliterated Argentine troops in the Falkland Islands, and the military regime quickly crumbled. It was succeeded by freely elected president Raúl Alfonsín, who initiated trials of the generals just months after they had been in power. The trials focused on the masterminds and archi-



The Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo want Emilio Massera, head of the infamous Naval Mechanics School, to stay behind bars.

ects of the military regime. By 1985, scores of military officers and their accomplices were behind bars for atrocities—torture, rape and murder. As the trials began to reach deeper into the ranks of soldiers, however, mid-level officers and functionaries rose up in violent demonstrations throughout the country, and Alfonsín backpedaled, passing laws that limited the scope of the trials.

In 1989, Carlos Menem was elected president. Menem, a flamboyant governor who was illegally imprisoned during the Dirty War along with many other *Peronistas*, didn't seem likely to sympathize with the military. But in 1990, he granted a full pardon to all the old military leaders in the name of national reconciliation.

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Menem's pardon was a debilitating blow to the human rights movement in the entire region. It reinforced the cynicism that had been growing in the face of compromises and impunity in Chile, Paraguay and Bolivia. But the families of the disappeared rallied their forces, and eventually came up with a legal means to launch a new crusade for justice.

The theft of babies was not included in the amnesty law that Menem authored since those crimes were considered rare. In the mid-'90s, human rights groups picked up on this omission. They have worked to solve the disappearances despite obstacles set up by the political establishment. "We have been able to demonstrate that there was a systematic methodology," Roisinblit says. "Children were taken by written order from the highest to the lowest functionaries. So, we have been able to initiate lawsuits against those who had already been tried, condemned and freed by the [amnesty] laws."

As the grandmothers tell it, the dictatorship set up clandestine prisons to detain and question "subversives" about their activities. Some detainees, like Roisinblit's daughter Patricia, were pregnant when they were abducted, and gave birth in prison. Others, imprisoned for long periods, were impregnated in rapes by military guards or other prisoners. The military apparently did not have the heart to throw the babies out of planes and into the sea—as they'd done with their mothers, who they brazenly referred to as "incubators." Military officials established a formal system of forging the newborns' papers and giving them up for adoption. The Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo have documented more than 300 such cases, and thanks to their investigations, 63 adolescent Argentines have discovered their true identities as children of the disappeared.

Many of the babies were given to military families or their supporters. Often, these couples were sterile and childless, overjoyed at the chance to raise a child. Many youths, content with a good upbringing, are not willing to take a DNA test to determine who their biological parents are. In most of the adoptions, the parents knew what they were getting wrapped up in. But in 14 of the 63 resolved cases, the parents adopted the children through legitimate means, and were unknowing accomplices in the kidnapping. These children continue to live with their adopted families, but they know their real identities.

Roisinblit says she will follow that example when her grandchild is finally found. "After 21 years, I can't hold out hope that I'll find my daughter living," she says. "But my grandchild and all the other children, I'm sure they're still alive. The proof is that we're finding them. It's a tiring struggle." She repeats her daily resolve: "We'll continue looking for our children until the last days of our lives, no matter how old they are."

**Gen. Cristino Nicolaidis, one of the former leaders of Argentina's military dictatorship, has been indicted for his role in the systematic stealing of babies born to "subversives" during the Dirty War.**

**"We'll continue looking for our children until the last days of our lives, no matter how old they are."**

As a result of the new wave of investigations spearheaded by the grandmothers, some military leaders of the Dirty War have been put on trial. Eight of the highest ranking men have been given life sentences for kidnapping. Some of the most notable figures are Jorge Videla, the first dictator who came to power after the 1976 coup, and Emilio Massera, the head of the infamous Naval Mechanics School, the largest illegal detention and torture center, which also housed a birthing ward.

The Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo have used lesser crimes to bring down major criminals. "It's like Al Capone. After all the crimes he committed, he was imprisoned for tax evasion," says Tati Almeida, whose son disappeared in 1975. "In the case of Massera, who's being tried for kidnapping, he's being prosecuted for just two cases. But these two cases corroborate the genocide he's accused of. One kidnapping allows us to prove all the crimes he has committed."

The federal judge assigned to the case, Adolfo Bagnasco, is hesitant to admit its potentially broad scope. "I don't want this to be an instrument for other ends, something other than simply investigating the truth," he says.

The case of systematic kidnappings could explode in many new directions. The Catholic Church—believed by most to be a willing accomplice to the military's disappearance campaign—is considering opening its files on the Dirty War well before the required 30-year waiting period in a good-faith effort to help the courts in their search. And recent revelations by Jewish groups in Argentina and Israel suggest that the repression disproportionately targeted Jews. While they made up only 1 percent of the population, an estimated 12 percent of those who disappeared were Jewish. "I hope that Argentina can show that we have justice here," Bagnasco says, "All of the people involved have been or are being tried."

Although it is suspected that the regime kept meticulous records on the "subversives," investigators have failed to uncover those documents. Former Gen. Cristino Nicolaidis, who played a role in the final years of the military government,



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admitted earlier this year to having issued a command to burn such documents, but all other military personnel have denied knowledge of the order. The current army chief testified last month that Nicolaides is simply trying to shift the blame to his subordinates. But Nicolaides' testimony and damning words from some of the doctors who performed births at the Naval Mechanics School are giving hope to many South Americans that justice will be served.

Others are not so optimistic. Adolfo Perez-Esquivel, who was illegally imprisoned and tortured for nearly 14 months during Argentina's last military regime, was freed under international pressure and won the 1980 Nobel Peace Prize. Seated behind an old desk in his Buenos Aires office at SERPAJ, the Service for Peace and Justice, he stresses that the importance of the trials in Argentina is that they focus on systematic abuse. "If we think that Videla and Massera committed crimes because they were messed up in the head ... that's not how it is," Perez-Esquivel warns. "There was the complicity of business, of politicians, of journalists. It's a serious mistake to say there were a few evil leaders who committed crimes against their people."

Perez-Esquivel is trying to convince other human rights workers that the focus of governments and activists must shift to the systematic nature of the abuses carried out by the dictators. "What was the objective behind the torture and the disappearances? Where did the perpetrators of torture and genocide come from? Where did it all come from?"

He answers his own question: "It came from the world's so-called leader in democracy, the United States. The United States trained more than 80,000 personnel in the School of the Americas and in the military academies of the United States. They were the ones responsible for the coups, to protect the United States from political fears and to safeguard economic interests."

Human rights groups in Argentina contend the CIA continually provided logistical support to the dictatorships throughout the Southern Cone—coordinated via "Operation Condor," a covert international alliance of military regimes—to maintain governments that would cater to American priorities. From the U.S. perspective, the effort was overwhelmingly successful, as evidenced by strong new trade relationships that developed between North and South America during the '70s and '80s.

Bagnasco hopes that the precedent set by the kidnapping cases will prevent the free circulation of ex-dictators. The arrest of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet seems to support his theory. But other recent events stand in contradiction: On March 29, Paraguay's notorious ex-army chief Lino Oviedo obtained asylum in Argentina. Oviedo is wanted in his country for a 1996 coup attempt and for the recent murder of the vice president. And last month, Argentina denied an extradition request by Switzerland for Massera, claiming the application was tardy.

Still, most Argentines now support the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, whom they used to dismiss as "crazies." Argentines understand that they can't forget the Dirty War. "A people who loses its memory runs the risk that things will repeat themselves," Roisinblit says. "And we don't want these things to happen again." ■

Travis Lea is a writer and radio producer based in Buenos Aires.

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# Laissez-Faire No More

By Kim Phillips-Fein

I never dared be radical when young for fear it would make me conservative when old," wrote Robert Frost, and with good reason. From David Horowitz to Jay Lovestone, Whittaker Chambers to Germaine Greer, there have been more

**False Dawn: The Delusions of Global Capitalism**

By John Gray  
The New Press  
262 pages, \$25

**Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market**

By Pierre Bourdieu  
The New Press  
108 pages, \$12.95

than enough turncoat firebrands fervently denouncing their youthful foolishness to give anyone pause. It is rare, though, that one sees the opposite movement; after all, the right has money and power.

At first glance, John Gray, professor of European thought at the London School of Economics, appears to be a genuine ex-conservative. A decade ago, he was penning paeans to private property and the free market. He was an expert on Friedrich Hayek and wrote for Thatcherite think tanks. He celebrated Michael Oakeshott's vision of a "limited government under the rule of law that imposes no ideal on its subjects" and castigated Britain's Green Party for espousing "a Utopian disregard for economic laws." He was fond of noting that "market capitalism" is "the only successful variety" of modern industrial society.

But now the Cold War's over, and times have changed. Gray's new book, *False Dawn*, is a savage broadside attacking laissez-faire idealism. Though Gray once saw centralized economic planning as the paramount threat to liberal society, he now argues that the real danger facing the world is the unregulated global market.

*False Dawn* is a clumsily written book. The short paragraphs and arguments left hanging suggest the heavy hand of an editor who mistakes brevity for clarity, especially since Gray's articles on politics in the *Guardian* and the *Times* tend to be

much better written and more clearly argued. But somehow the book's awkwardness only makes it seem more authentic. Gray passionately argues that Thatcher's assault on the British welfare state exacerbated inequality in Britain and was a catastrophe for the poor. He's blisteringly critical of austerity in Mexico, saying it has inflicted "massive social and political damage with little, if any, benefit to the economy as a whole." His vision of post-Soviet Russia is an appropriately bleak one of free-market fanatics fighting with Mafiosos to preside over a shrinking population and collapsing economy.

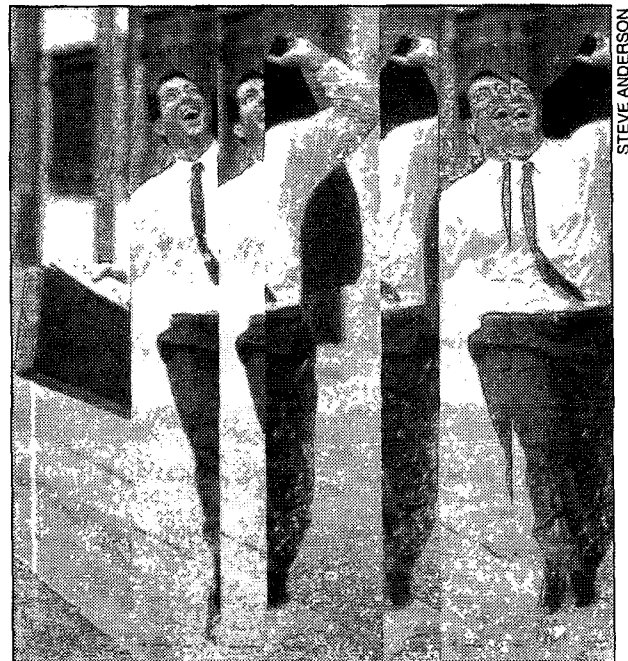
Yet Gray reserves his harshest jeremiads for the United States, which he sees as a society on the brink of disintegration. He denounces it as a society with "levels of economic inequality unknown since the 1920s and far in excess of those found in any other advanced industrial society today. [It is] an experiment in mass incarceration, accompanied by an elite retreat into walled proprietary communities."

The critique of neoliberalism is welcome, the image of the United States damning, and it's hard to complain when a Hayek fan comes to see the errors of his ways. But if one looks a little closer, it becomes clear that *False Dawn* is a fundamentally conservative work. On a deeper level, Gray hasn't changed his goals; he has just re-evaluated his tactics. For *False Dawn* is less a call to arms to the dispossessed than it is a wake-up call to the ruling class.

What drives Gray is not a genuine hatred of inequality, injustice or poverty, but a deep fear of political instability. His real fear about market society is that it erodes the social hierarchies it depends upon to reproduce itself, creating conditions ripe for war and political

upheaval. Internationally, conflicts between states cannot be resolved via commerce; the global marketplace is no substitute for imperialism. The United States' reluctance to commit troops around the world—one senses Gray would not be impressed by Kosovo—is testimony that the free market rots the martial ethos, producing a culture too weak to withstand the acid test of battle. "The liberal international order of the pre-1914 world depended on the ability and willingness of Britain to use naval power anywhere in the world," he writes. "No such willingness exists on the part of the United States today. ... Its population is unwilling to bear the financial and human costs of being an imperial regime."

At home, too, it's no longer so clear who's in control. Echoing Joseph Schumpeter, who thought capitalism's failure to found family dynasties was its most profound contradiction, Gray anxiously suggests that "the innermost



STEVE ANDERSON

contradiction of the free market is that it works to weaken the traditional social institutions on which it had depended in the past." The prosperous professional class, long a source of stability, is being squeezed into oblivion, as the bulwarks of middle-class morality—the secure career, the bourgeois family—are destroyed. Culture, ceasing to be a province of the virtuous classes, is becoming "antinomian and proletarian." The predicable hierar-