

The Dirty War; Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo

It is April 30, 1977, and the sky is gray, as it has been the last few months. One by one, a few women leave their quiet house and walk to the street silently. Fourteen depressed middle-aged women begin to march in pairs. A few strangers glance at them but quickly speed away in case they are thought to be associated with this particular group. Others, look at the brave women and begin to weep because of missing loved ones. All the women are wearing identical white headscarves to represent their children. Each lady is proudly holding their own designed sign. One poster reads “Niños Desaparecido”(Wulff), which translates to ‘missing children.’ In Argentina, these mothers were protesting the sudden disappearance of their children. It has been a few months since the military junta has kidnapped their family members. By circling the Plaza de Mayo, which is located in front of the presidential palace, the women are declaring their hatred for the military government. The mothers gained support once more women volunteered to protest the abduction of their own children. By joining the activist group known as “Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo”, the women in Argentina emphasized the importance of standing up for human rights. The mothers of the Plaza de Mayo created multiple protests in order to find their children; these women helped with the reconstruction of Argentina’s society, proved a significant moral impact, and transformed into a political group which aided the country in the transition to democracy.

While researching the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, I discovered many helpful sources. For my background information on the topic, I got most of my information from two different places. The main website I used was *The International Center on Nonviolent Conflict*, which explains the timeline of Argentina. While reading through the information, I came across the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights. To learn more about the APDH, I looked up the topic and used *Asamblea Permanente por Los Derechos Humanos* which is not a reliable website. *History in Context* is the other source I used for my background information, and it is a

database. The book *Revolutionizing Motherhood: the mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, by Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, provides a deep explanation of the dirty war. It shows how the mothers stood together no matter what happened. Another interesting source is from *Infobase: Modern World History*. Although I gained information from some aspects of the mother's organization, the website does not contain a large amount of information on the topic. These sources show how the mothers are affected by the government, and the history before and after the children disappeared. A recommended site by the Scarsdale library is Britannica, and I have found it to be very useful. The article, "Dirty War" provided me with a deep understanding of Argentina's government. An article from *The New York Times*, "Children of Argentina's 'Disappeared' Reclaim Past, With Help", gives a lot of information on the laws created because of the protests of the mothers de Plaza de Mayo. From *Gale* databases, an article known as "Argentina's Dirty War Begins: 1976" explains the military coup, and how an internal war was created. Another useful source is from a website, "what-when-how", that is not totally reliable. It gave different opinions on the mother's protests. The last tertiary source I used was from *The Guardian*. This site gave information on what happened after the Dirty War.

A more personal story told through *The New York Times*, "Missing or Dead," is about an Argentinian mother whose child is taken away from her. Because she explains her hopefulness and sadness, it is a great way to understand how the mothers are affected. Three more of the primary sources I used are from *The New York Times*. One of the sources is a letter to the editor, from Jacobo Timerman. This gave me information on the mother's protest. The second article, "Argentine Judge Steps Up His 'Dirty War' Kidnapping Inquiry," gives in-depth details on the arrests of junta officials. The third article from the *New York Times* I used explained the military's role in the Dirty War. My last primary source is a picture from one of the mother's protests. It is an image of middle-aged women, with white scarves, carrying signs.

I used two secondary sources throughout my paper. The first one, "Los Desaparecidos", helped with the small details that are usually overlooked. This academic journal is interesting and consists of a lot of information. The second source in my paper is "Lessons on constructing democracy and reconstructing memory." This article gives multiple examples of the suppression of the citizens in Argentina, and it is very reliable.

Argentina becomes a powerful military government that controls its citizens until the people learn to rebel against the military's unethical behavior; the junta abducts the children in order to stop the leftist ideologies from spreading. In 1966, General Juan Carlos Onganía overthrew the president. With his newly found power, he banned all political activities and parties. General Onganía attempted to shield the country from the "exotic ideologies" that he believed may lead to the subversion of the state(Bouvard). When there were labor strikes he used military force to stop the workers from protesting. The manner in which General Onganía used the Argentine military upset the country. The suppression of the citizen's opinions initiated the appearance of leftist armed guerrilla activity, riots, and civil disruptions(Bouvard). Because the civil liberties were broken in Argentina, three left-wing groups combined to fight conservatives and the military. The group was known as the Montoneros and it consisted of students, and professionals from middle-class families. The left-wing groups kidnapped conservative leaders and set off car bombs in order to prove the government could not keep the city of Buenos Aires safe. In response to these violent actions, the right-wing groups abducted radicals and tortured them. Because of the increase in violence General Onganía left his power to another leader.

In order to stop an internal war from advancing, the military government created a democracy because of the public pressure(Reinbold). In 1973, General Alejandro Lanusse got rid of the ban on political parties and scheduled a presidential election for October. Juan

Domingo Perón became president again, with the support of both democratic and republican groups. During his presidency, the left and right wing sides continued to separate into extremes. Guerrilla activity against the police and army became popular again, while the right-wing violence increased. In 1974, President Perón died and his widow, Isabel Perón, became president. She gave the military the responsibility of dealing with the guerrillas. One year later, five thousand troops were sent to attack one hundred and twenty guerrillas in Argentina. The military began to capture anyone who disagreed with the political parties, press, or universities(Bouvard). On March 24, 1976, Argentina became a military dictatorship. This occurred only five days after President Isabel Peron was forced out of office (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica).

The junta was lead a few men who completely gained possession of the country; they created an internal war, which resulted in the disappearance and murdering of thousands(Bouvard). The new commanders suspended congress, installed a new supreme court, banned union trades, and dismissed members of the judiciary. General Jorge Rafael Videla, from Argentina's military, was one of the new leaders of the country(Stock). Ultimately, he started the "National Reorganization process". This system separated the subversives of the country out from the normal population(World History Context). The targeting of the left-wing groups started the Dirty War(Stock). The government utilized terror as a way to create fear and awareness of the militaries power(Reinbold). Commanders wanted to limit the resistance of the citizens so they tortured, arrested, and killed the left-wing supporters(Pauchulo). The policemen who found the dead bodies would identify who the victim was, but they would not look for the murderer(Do Onis). One of the extreme left-oriented groups known as the AAA, the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance, played a large role in the slaughtering of the Argentinians(World History Context). The brutality throughout the Dirty War increased and became more vulgar. Many

citizens of Argentina began to suddenly disappear without an explanation. Around ten thousand to thirty thousand Argentinians went missing because they spoke against the junta(Haberman).

All of the disappearing people were known as the “Desaparecidos”, which directly translates to “the disappeared”(Hoeffel, Montalvo). The abducted victims were put in detention camps, buried in mass graves, and dropped off of planes unconscious(Haberman). If the women were pregnant they were kept alive to give birth. Once the baby was born, the mother was murdered, and the baby was illegally adopted or given to the Argentine military (Haberman). There have been around five hundred birth certificates falsified(Haberman). The junta wanted to keep the children of subversives, in order to teach the kids conservative values before the genetic parents could. The country became enraged because of the mystery, fear, and sadness that followed their missing children. Some of the Argentinians became terrified, and would not pay attention to those who disappeared in fear of danger of their lives(Fraser).

After the disappearance of the Argentine children, the mothers lead a movement in order to find their loved ones; these women went against their usual roles and campaigned for the Desaparecidos. The first protest took place on April 30, 1977. At the time, it was illegal to gather in groups of three or more, so the women walked in pairs(World History Context). By the next year, there were hundreds of participants marching at the Presidential palace, including “Las Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo”(Reinbold). All the women wore matching white scarves decorated with the names of the Desaparecidos. The scarves represented the diapers of the missing children(Fraser). Every Thursday, the mothers assembled together to protest the military regime(Haberman) The junta disapproved of the women’s demonstration and attempted to make them known as “las locas”, which means crazy women(World History Context). The military even went to the extent to capture the President, Azucena Villaflor De Vincenti, of the Madres de Plaza(Fraser). When questioned about the kidnapping, the government claimed it

was the guerrillas. The mothers were supported by the “servicio v Paz y Justicia” organization, which works with peace and justice issues(Cardozo). This group helped defend the mother’s lives and human rights. In 1981, on the 113th newspaper anniversary of “La Prensa” newspaper, the mothers printed two full pages of the names of missing people(Timerman). This shows the dedication the mothers had to find their children.

The Argentine society has changed dramatically because many mothers and grandmothers have formed a community which inspires each other, and spreads the awareness of the disappeared children. The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo empowered other women around them to stand up against the corrupt government and find the truth about their children. Some of the women received awards for furthering human rights(Schroeder). When the Argentinians were first taken, the government assumed the mothers would do nothing about it because they were women. In contrast, the mothers created a countrywide movement that influenced others to speak their mind. Their determination to make a change came from the love and desire to find their children(MPDM World History Context). These strong women provide a model of resistance because they did not let the junta take advantage of them. A memorial was created in order to honor the victims in the Dirty War. The Argentine community continues on marching every Thursday at 3:30, in remembrance of those who have disappeared(MPDM World History Context). Argentina’s society has made huge progress in finding those who were taken because of new technology. The National Bank of genetics plays a huge role in discovering the abducted citizens. Advanced DNA test analysis has the ability to match a person to their grandparent(Haberman). There has been a total of 10,000 young adults who got tested because they were kidnapped as babies. As of now, there are 117 grandchildren discovered(Haberman). The mothers of la Plaza de Mayo have made a huge impact on Argentine society, and other parts of the world.

Because of the women's protests, the government began to punish the people who committed immoral acts against citizens; more laws were created as the dictatorship transformed into a democracy. In 1998, nine officers were brought to court as suspects for the involvement in the abduction of the babies(Krauss). There was a list containing thirty names of possible kidnappers and murderers. Since 2016, more than one thousand killers have been tried, and seven hundred sentenced(Goñi). One of the laws established to prevent a similar situation from happening again was made in 1989. It states that nations must "respect the right of the child to preserve his or her identity"(Haberman). Also, any forced disappearance of civilians is now considered a crime against humanity. The government has changed dramatically because of the switch to democracy in 1983. Now, the killers are punished for their crimes, and the mothers continue to protest hoping their children will come back to them one day.

Although the Argentine women have made a huge impact on the Nation's society, some feminist scholars believe the women did not challenge the patriarchal structures to a large extent(what-when-how). In Argentina during the 1970s, women were thought to be either a housewife or prostitute. When they began silently protesting in the streets, they attracted attention. One of the problems is the women did not prove themselves equal to men. Instead of taking this chance to show the strength of women, they protested the loss of their children. The mothers demanded their family back because they love them; it was not the gender inequality that influenced their protest. Also, the struggle the mothers went through while protesting reinforced the idea of suffering, self-sacrificing housewives(what-when-how). The Argentine women created a difference in the country, but did not use their full potential.

The various protests of the mothers of la Plaza de Mayo have affected the society and government of Argentina. New laws have been created, many citizens have been returned to

their original home, and democracy is established. This movement is very important because it was created by women. These mothers not only protested in order to find their children, but they stood up against the forceful military government. The mothers took a step in the right direction for gender equality. The women change their reputation from uselessness to someone who can make a difference in the world. Protesting the Argentine government has been proven successful because of the difference in the military regime.

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