

INTRODUCTION

In December 2002, the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense or EAAF) discovered a gruesome legacy of the country's so-called dirty war. After months of preliminary preparations, the team located a large common grave in Córdoba's San Vicente cemetery, in the city's gritty eastern neighborhoods. A subsequent analysis of genetic material of the remains matched blood samples taken from family members who had claimed missing relatives, confirming accusations of mass murder perpetrated by the former military government. Forensic evidence also revealed violent death for most, mainly by gunshot.¹

Established in 1984 under the tutelage of American forensic anthropologist Clyde Snow, the EAAF had emerged as a protagonist in the human rights cause since the early days of Argentina's restored democracy that followed more than seven years (1976–83) of military rule. During the government of Raúl Alfonsín (1983–89) it enjoyed a period of official tolerance if not outright support. The EAAF had earned its spurs in the search for the remains of the victims of the country's state terrorism in the 1980s, uncovering some large, ghastly sites. Then EAAF gained international notoriety as the premier forensic anthropological team in the world with expeditions to Guatemala, East Timor, Croatia, Bosnia, and elsewhere, including a successful search for the remains of fellow Argentine, Che Guevara, in Bolivia. As the human rights issue faded in their country under the government of Carlos Menem (1989–99), the EAAF developed new techniques, acquired additional experience, and trained a core of seasoned forensic anthropologists who lent their services to locate and document the many victims of the twentieth century's genocides and crimes against humanity.²

The election of Peronist Nestor Kirchner to the presidency in 2003 revived the human rights issue movement that had remained active at the societal level through the 1990s, which was a decade of official indifference. The Kirchner administration's resuscitation of human rights as state policy led to a period of renewed activity for the EAAF. One of the major areas of interest in this second round of activity was the industrial city of Córdoba, the site of thunderous social protests and political violence in the years preceding military rule. Córdoba had suffered grievously under the dictatorship. In the regime's notorious clandestine detention centers (CDCs), including the largest in the country's interior, La Perla, the military had detained, tortured, and murdered many thousands, and nearly a thousand in Córdoba alone.³ Yet unlike in other parts of the country, human rights groups and family members there had been unable to locate the remains of the *desaparecidos* (disappeared). Great hope therefore surrounded the arrival of the EAAF team, especially following the discovery and excavation in the San Vicente cemetery.

This early success was not destined to continue. Despite strong suspicions of the existence of a mass grave near the La Perla detention center, the EAAF failed in subsequent years to locate such remains. After years of searching, the forensic team made an important but modest discovery in late 2014 and early 2015 of the remains of several disappeared students and members of the Juventud Universitaria Peronista (JUP), located in a crude crematorium on the grounds of La Perla. Such findings nonetheless paled in comparison to the scale of the violence and the numbers of those actually murdered. The missing bones of Córdoba's experience with dictatorship and state terrorism would undoubtedly have provided valuable evidence to document precisely both the identities of the victims and the methods employed by the military dictatorship in their disappearance.⁴ In their stead, other methods and different kinds of evidence were needed to reconstruct the history of state terrorism in the city and the fate of the disappeared.

In September 2010 I attended in Córdoba the trials of the military and security forces accused of human rights violations during the dictatorship. Among the defendants were General Rafael Videla, the army commander and president of the country from 1976 to 1981, and General Luciano Benjamín Menéndez, commander of the army's Third Corps with its headquarters in Córdoba, who was responsible for undertaking the "war against subversion" in Córdoba and elsewhere in the country's interior. This was the third of such trials for Menéndez, all of which would lead to guilty verdicts and life sentences for him. This particular trial involved an especially terrible incident: the summary execution of some thirty political prisoners at the federal penitentiary there, under the direct orders of President Videla. The dynamics of the trial were themselves revealing. The defendants were all, save one accused woman police officer, old men now "withered and implausible avatars of their earlier selves" as defendants in such trials, often held years after their crimes, tend to be.⁵ Some were doddering now and unsteady on their feet. They sat

in rows in a hierarchy, intended or not, of authority and degree of culpability. In the front row sat the highest-ranking military officers, with Videla and Menéndez side by side, only rarely speaking to one another and never offering so much as a word to the police and junior officers seated behind them, undoubtedly regarded by the former military commanders as second-class underlings, former subordinates, not worthy of sharing the courtroom with them. In 2015 I returned for the fifth of what might be termed the Menéndez trials, the former commander of the Third Army Corps a defendant in each. This trial, one including Menéndez and some of the defendants from the 2010 trial but also new ones, involved charges of unlawful abduction and murder at the city's two largest detention centers, La Perla and the Campo de la Ribera. The trial proved to be the longest and most anguishing of the five, the numbers of victims unprecedented and the graphic testimony stretching out over a period of four years. These trials, the subject of chapter 6, revealed much about the military government's brutal methods in Córdoba but left as many questions unanswered, including the precise motivations and rationale compelling the state terrorism there.

Books on the so-called dirty war are legion but fail to address underlying causes for human rights abuses on such a scale. Only Peronism rivals the dirty war as a subject of inquiry in modern Argentine history. Yet unlike the case of the great populist movement, research and scholarship on the subject has been thin, the violence and human drama of those years more the preserve of investigative journalism than historical scholarship.⁶ In Argentina, only recently have historians begun to conduct research and publish on the period, producing a handful of studies based on archival and other evidence.⁷ Scholars of other disciplines such as anthropology and sociology have produced a substantial literature on memory, drawing largely on the oral testimonies of the victims of state terrorism and their families.⁸ Yet even the best of this nascent scholarship has focused more on questions of societal trauma and memory than on causation and methods. A provocative exception to the victim-centric literature is *Argentina's "Dirty War"* by Anglo-Argentine Trotskyist Donald Hodges. Hodges takes seriously the military's history, its strategic calculations and belief that Argentina had been converted into a battleground in a global war, albeit an unconventional and undeclared war. In his lengthy narrative on the history of the revolutionary Left, he argues that the armed Left's relatively small numbers were compensated by its verve and cultural influence, that it in effect constituted a formidable adversary to Argentina's armed forces, though he summarily rejects the military's outlandish claims of Argentina as a battleground of World War III. Hodges also sees at least as strong an influence of Catholic nationalism as Cold War ideologies and related geopolitical thinking on the Argentine officer corps.⁹

The very term *guerra sucia* ("dirty war") is roundly rejected now by all human rights groups in Argentina as morally indefensible, of lending credence to the

military's assertion that it was indeed waging a war and therefore its crimes were mere acts of war and legitimate. Yet the military did not hold a monopoly on the use of such terminology and the Left itself routinely referred to a "revolutionary war" being waged at the time against the reactionary forces, public and private. I employ the term *dirty war* for several reasons. First, since a major objective of this book is to examine the perpetrators of the violence and not just its victims, it is necessary to understand the military government's understanding of what constituted war and its applicability to conditions in Argentina. Aside from some passing references in often obscure, both right-wing ultranationalist and leftist publications to a "dirty war" being waged against the left during the 1973–76 Peronist government, it was the military that most appropriated the term but only belatedly, in the final stages of the dictatorship and early days of the reestablished democracy, to describe the methods employed in its campaign against the Left and then its defense of such tactics in criminal proceedings to defeat the so-called subversion. It did so publicly for the first time during the brief government of General Reynaldo Bignone (1982–83), the last of the military juntas, in a press conference given by Bignone, followed by letters to the editor of various newspapers, written by retired officers invoking the experience of the French in Algeria and French theories of counterrevolutionary war as a justification for its methods (methods now being severely questioned by society) and a besieged military regime in the wake of the Falklands-Malvinas conflict. The Argentine press soon appropriated the dirty war characterization and popularized it. I also employ the term because the current preferred term in Argentina, *the repression*, is both imprecise and contains its own assumptions about culpability and causation. Moreover, its very blandness makes it unlikely to replace the term *dirty war* widely used elsewhere in the world and likely enshrined for posterity in histories of Argentina dealing with the period. Even from a strictly juridical and moral point of view, the term *war* does not exonerate. There are rules in war, and those states, governments, and individuals that violate them can and should be held accountable. Indeed, during the clandestine so-called antisubversive campaign the military government deliberately avoided the term *war* since to acknowledge it as such it would have conferred certain rights on the belligerents (guerrillas) as defined by the Geneva convention. It employed the term only after the fall of the dictatorship as a defense of its actions. The human rights movement itself did not always reject the term, and the Permanent Assembly on Human Rights used it in its 1988 report ("Las cifras de la guerra sucia") on the numbers of disappeared, with a prologue written by journalist and human rights activist Horacio Verbitsky.

Why Córdoba? Águila's study of the dictatorship in Rosario demonstrated the significance of regional variations in the heretofore rather monochromatic story of the state terrorism of those years. The peculiarity of the experience of provinces like Chaco and Neuquén has also been noted, where the dictatorship attempted to

claim the mantle of protector of indigenous peoples' rights through a program of modernization and a "commodification of indigenous identity" marketing souvenirs and other supposed artifacts of indigenous culture at the same time it promoted Catholicism to better integrate the Toba, Mataco, Mapuche, and other tribes into the national community.¹⁰ Such policies were contemporary with a murderous campaign of state terrorism directed against the Left in those provinces.

The case of Córdoba in the pursuit of the regional dimension of the dirty war is particularly urgent since it loomed as one the worst sites of repression, a place not only that contributed a large number of the disappeared and many others unlawfully detained, tortured, and murdered but also where the military sought to erase an entire sociocultural milieu. Massive social protests in 1969 and 1971, a militant and in some sectors radicalized labor movement, site of an active Third World Priests movement, and contributor of many youthful recruits drawn from the city's large university population to guerrilla organizations such as the Montoneros and the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP), Córdoba seemed to incarnate in a single place all those supposedly corrosive influences that the military hierarchy wished to extirpate. The military was well positioned to undertake such a campaign. Not only was the army's Third Corps based in Córdoba, so too were other military units including air force, paratrooper, intelligence, and artillery brigades as well as one of the three regional headquarters of the federal constabulary (Gendarmería Nacional) subordinate to the army command. The dictatorship thus brought with it not only state terrorism and detention centers but also a thorough militarization of public administration and the judicial system, key components in the repressive architecture. A study of the dirty war in Córdoba, however, cannot be a mere exercise in regional history. Córdoba's experience with state terrorism goes beyond Córdoba itself, extending to French counterinsurgency theories essayed in Algeria, to Cold War strategies devised in Washington, to secret military cabals held in Buenos Aires to coordinate a national campaign against the Left, even to Mexico where an exile community was closely monitored by both the Argentine embassy and an obliging Mexican government.¹¹

The regime that terrorized Córdoba and Argentina perpetrated one of the twentieth century's many dirty wars—war in the dark, murderous yet deniable. War before the twentieth century lacked such qualities and was rather the confrontation on the battlefield of armies advancing the interests of kings, empires, and states, "the extension of politics by other means" to use Clausewitz's famous maxim. Even partisan guerrilla warfare produced dead bodies. In the twentieth century, the nature of war changed. It sometimes now involved not large armies but small groups of men, operating secretly, employing the most violent methods including torture to annihilate, demoralize, and defeat not only an enemy but an entire society, ethnic or religious group, or political sect deemed to have engendered such enemies. Its victims were as much ideas and cultures as flesh-and-blood human

beings. These wars too were Clausewitz's extension of politics by other means, but they were the politics of antipolitics, to dissemble, to expel, and to erase. The road to Argentina's experience with such a war is littered with the missing bones of Kenyans, Algerians, and others who had lived under similar regimes. One of the first such wars was the brutal British counterinsurgency in Ireland in the 1920s, much of it directed against the civilian population, complete with abductions and murders.¹² The Nazis took such tactics to new depths with their tactics, after Hitler's December 1941 "Nacht und Nebel" decree authorized the army and Gestapo to make underground resistance fighters disappear into the "night and fog," a chilling prequel to Argentina's dirty war.¹³ In Algeria, the French refined the techniques of mass detention, torture, and psychological warfare against a colonial people fighting for their independence.¹⁴ The British responded to an anticolonial struggle in Kenya with similar tactics.¹⁵ Argentina's experience departs from all these in the small number of combatants involved, and that the vast majority of the dirty war's victims were unarmed political and union activists. If Argentina suffered a war, it was above all a war of extermination of defenseless civilians.

In the dreary catalogue of twentieth-century genocides and crimes against humanity, Argentina's dirty war certainly ranks small. Not millions, not even hundreds of thousands died in the death camps of the dictatorship. The state terrorism in Argentina lasted but a few years, its victims numbered at most 30,000 and almost certainly a far smaller number.¹⁶ Yet it occupies a special place in the pantheon of the last century's horrors given the circumstances surrounding it. Argentina had not passed through the disruptions of prolonged war or anticolonial struggle; it had no serious ethnic, racial, or religious divisions; nor was it experiencing a particularly difficult economic conjuncture when the state terrorism occurred. Neither was it animated by a struggle over scarce resources such as land or aggravated by famine.¹⁷ Argentina was no stranger to military rule, but the turn to state terrorism was unprecedented, an apparent aberration in the military's culture and certainly that of the country generally. The violence of the 1970s therefore cannot be traced to some intrinsic national ethos, or Argentina's societal complexion, or an episodic cataclysm. The dirty war's explanation lies in the realm of history, of deep, unresolved conflicts of some kind. This book seeks to explain precisely which ones, at least in one particular place.

Argentina's dirty war, of course, forms part of the larger story of the global Cold War. Washington trained and financed repressive military governments throughout the hemisphere, and indeed Latin America provided a "workshop" of theories and practices applied elsewhere in the world by the United States before, during, and after its confrontation with the socialist bloc.¹⁸ The dirty war, however, cannot be reduced simply to Cold War dynamics, and indeed the Cold War in Latin America revealed a great diversity of influences, tactics, and methods. Too often the story has been told as a simple imposition of American power, with the Latin

American militaries as passive recipients of its indoctrination and training, overlooking the precise national contexts in which the violence occurred and the independent agency of the perpetrators of its crimes.¹⁹ In Argentina, the clandestine state terrorism with its death camps, black market in children, and bureaucratic-judicial scaffolding differed greatly from the more conventional counterinsurgency tactics implemented in Southeast Asia and even the Central American *monte*. Its ideological underpinnings were similarly an amalgam of influences, drawn from Argentina's history and the military's own institutional culture as well as diverse foreign sources.

I have long wanted to write this book. In the mid-1980s, while conducting dissertation research on a previous period in Córdoba's history, I heard many accounts of the recent experience of life under terror there. In many ways, with dictatorship having just ended, memories were fresher and the need to engage in reflection on that experience far greater than the period I was actually studying, which the traumatic experience of dictatorship almost seemed to have erased. These were the very days of the discovery of the first mass gravesites of the *desaparecidos*, of the Alfonsín government's trials of the fallen junta, of a furious, seditious military that staged several unsuccessful military rebellions against that same government. Unfolding events such as these were not yet the subject of history. Now, more than three decades later, they certainly seem to be.

THREATS

Apostles of the New Order

To combat day and night until annihilating these subversive criminals who want to subjugate the still standing Argentina to the bloody dictates of foreign regimes.

—GENERAL LUCIANO BENJAMÍN MENÉNDEZ

The military government that assumed power on March 24, 1976, did so with a determination to both transform the country and neutralize, indeed to annihilate, those who, so they believed, held radical agendas of their own that threatened Argentina's sovereignty and its national traditions, its cultural identity. A brutal dictatorship emerged in response to years of social mobilization and popular protest, but even more menacing, also of a Left confident of its ascendance within the working class, influential if not dominant in the new youth culture, and prepared to employ extreme measures to fashion a new society.¹ Antonius Robben has characterized the military's violence and the state terrorism of these years as a "cultural war," a war on an ensemble of ideas, beliefs, and ideologies that the military, forged in its own culture of *integralista* Catholic nationalism, found repugnant and destructive. The dirty war was certainly partly a cultural war, but it was also much more. The threats operated on levels beyond the ideational and eventual, were immediate, visible, and present in multiple sites. The armed Left encroached on the military's monopoly of violence and therefore threatened its institutional integrity. The Catholic Church posed another threat, a Church wracked by internal rifts caused by the Left's ascendance and in its growing influence in social spaces formerly the sole preserve of the secular Left. Working-class militancy in the workplace and outside of it threatened powerful business interests and Argentine capitalism itself. A revolution of the kind the Left envisioned jeopardized Argentina's international alliances and the web of interests tied to those alliances, everything from its links to international financial institutions to those strictly related to hemispheric defense.²

Political violence in Córdoba, even state-sanctioned terrorism, did not begin with the 1976 coup and the military government that followed. It had occurred