

Of Silence and Defiance:

A Case Study of the Argentine Press during the “Proceso” of 1976-1983*

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.: Introduction

Due to a regime of strict censorship controls imposed by the military government, many Argentines were convinced that they were on the verge of winning the Falklands War of 1982, la Guerra de Malvinas, with Great Britain. Relying on information disseminated through a handful of nationalized television stations as well as radio networks and print media, which varied in independence, the Argentine populace was largely ignorant to the events of the war. The return of Argentina's defeated troops with news of a swift, embarrassing defeat at the hands of the British was a shocking and bitter pill to swallow, an experience that left many Argentines feeling betrayed and incensed. Even in 2003, when the commanding officer of the military government at the time of the war, General Leopoldo Galtieri, died, reflections on his decisions sparked harsh recollections of the military's leadership in the Argentine and international press.¹

Combined with wretched economic performance and popular dissatisfaction on many levels, the defeat hastened the military's move to relinquish power. But the astonishing nature of Argentina's ignorance to the events of the Proceso was not unique to the Falklands War, nor was it a mere glitch in the media apparatus. Rather, this moment came as the culmination of a long, steady march towards the weakening and worsening of the Argentine press establishment. Under the military dictatorship the media failed to report gross human rights violations – torture, kidnapping, assassinations, and the disappearance of tens of thousands of people – carried out as a response to domestic terrorism. As a result, a National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons was deemed necessary for the sake of clarifying Argentina's clandestine history from the seven-year military dictatorship from 1976-83, known as the Process of National Reorganization, El Proceso de Reorganización Nacional, or “Proceso.”

This case study will focus on the Argentine print media during the Proceso and the parallel “Dirty War,”² focusing on journalism and press policies during this period. Special attention will be given to the *Buenos Aires Herald*, the English-language daily newspaper in Buenos Aires, in an attempt to explore the exceptional role it played in covering the violence that occurred during the dictatorship.³ In doing so, the inquiry will rely on primary sources, such as the archives of the *Buenos Aires Herald*, as well as *Decíamos Ayer*, an extensive compilation of Spanish-language press documents and articles published during the Proceso. Interviews and personal accounts by key figures in Argentine journalism will also be considered alongside academic work.

The case study attempts to develop a discussion around two general questions. First, how was the behavior of the press during the dictatorship shaped and affected by political, historical and journalistic considerations? And regarding exceptions to the silent tendency of the press – namely the *Buenos Aires Herald* and *La Opinión* – how did these sources behave and how did the military government deal with them? This discussion then leads into an analysis of the role of the Argentine press during the Proceso.

.: The Argentine Press in Context

Before examining the dynamics of journalism during the “Dirty War,” the historical and political context of the Argentine press deserves discussion for its inextricable role in shaping the behavior of politicians, military officials and journalists alike. Argentina’s long-standing traditions of journalism have roots as far back as the nineteenth century. The oldest existing newspaper in Argentina is *La Capital de Rosario*, which was founded on November 15, 1867. José C. Paz founded *La Prensa* in 1869 and a year later, Bartolomé Mitre, president of Argentina from 1862 to 1868, founded *La Nación*. The *Buenos Aires*

Herald, founded in 1876 by the Scotsman William Cathcart, originally named the *Buenos Ayres Herald*, was founded to facilitate trade while serving the growing Anglo community. Between 1880 and 1910, along with a sustained immigration boom, the Argentine press experienced massive growth. In 1880 there were 165 newspapers in Argentina; in 1895 there were 345.⁴ During these years, the Argentine press expanded to cater to an increasingly urban and complex society developing primarily around the federal capital, Buenos Aires.

Argentina has long enjoyed one of the most prominent and vigorous media industries in all of Latin America. Unlike some Latin American countries such as Guatemala, Bolivia or Peru, in which large segments of the population do not communicate in Spanish, Argentina's media has not faced a significant language barrier. Rather, the print media has thrived in a society known for avid consumption of literature and media products.

Press freedoms were legally established as early on as the Constitution of 1853, which stipulated liberties of expression for the Argentine people, "...to publish their ideas through the press without prior censorship."⁵ Nonetheless, during the first part of the twentieth century, the principle of press freedom had already wavered as it was molded by legislation, court decisions and government interference. The most recent Constitution of 1949, "...left these provisions intact, but the protection they furnished proved eggshell thin."⁶

By far the single most significant development in the history of the modern Argentine press and its relationship with national politics was Peronism, through the impact and legacy of Colonel Juan Domingo Perón and his wife, María Eva Duarte de Perón, "Evita." Though Juan Perón did not become president until February 24, 1946, in one of

the era's cleanest elections, he was an influential actor in the relationship between the media and government even earlier on, during his term in the Secretariat of Labor. By 1943, all radio stations had been monopolized by the military government from which Perón emerged, "...with 1,600 journalists and writers dedicated exclusively, it later turned out, to promoting Perón and his wife, Evita."⁷

The Perón regime was the first government to fully realize the power of the Argentine media towards political ends, exerting sway over the mass media through direct expropriation, selective advertising, propaganda, nationalization policies, censorship and at times, thuggish intimidation. No doubt aided by the charismatic abilities of both Juan Perón and Evita, these efforts were largely successful in stifling opposition in the press and creating a dominant propaganda apparatus. As early as May of 1945, a year before Perón became president, a U.S. military attaché reported that, "...Evita was virtually running the government agency charged with censorship."⁸ The report determined that Evita's influence in the Government Press Office was surpassed only by that of Colonel Perón himself.

According to Joseph Page, the "...most effective strategy Perón utilized to debilitate his political opponents was to deny them any means of communicating with the electorate. This he accomplished by closing their access to the radio and newspapers."⁹ Indeed, the *peronistas* were largely successful in controlling, directly and indirectly, the stance of a majority of newspapers and nearly all radio stations. Evita, a highly photogenic woman and former actress, played a major role in the Peronist publicity machine with her frequent public appearances and appeal to the *descamisados*, "shirtless ones" of Argentina. However, both Juan Domingo and Evita were compelling orators, often delivering fervent speeches for hours on end.

With a loan orchestrated by the Peronist Party, Evita's activities in propaganda escalated when she bought the mediocre newspaper, *La Democracia*, which quickly became an unofficial publicity tool of the Perón regime. The newspaper actually increased its readership with tabloid-style coverage of sports and petty crime along with unwavering support for the Perón regime. Photographs of Evita and glittering human-interest tales were also dominant characteristics of the paper's staple coverage. Meanwhile Peronist propaganda invaded all walks of Argentine life, exemplified by Peronist sportscasters and tango singers as well as Evita's "ghost-written autobiography," *La razón de mi vida*, which became a required text in Argentine schools.¹⁰

A lesser-known but significant connection to the propaganda machine was Evita's association with Carlos V. Aloé, director of the giant publishing conglomerate Alea S.A., which held a multitude of newspapers, magazines and a radio network. Aloé, a man with no experience in journalism, maintained his post in the Perón administration despite his position as director of the publishing giant. As a result, *La Prensa*, *La Nación*, and afternoon paper *Clarín* were left as the only significant Spanish-language newspapers with autonomy from the Perón regime.

The most dramatic example of Perón's intervention in the press was the government's confiscation of *La Prensa* on January 26, 1951. Founded by the Paz family in 1869, *La Prensa* remained under the ownership and control of the wealthy family until its confiscation. The publishers maintained tightly prescribed command over the editorial stance, which, as an established land-owning family, primarily identified with cattle-raising and agricultural interests as well as the preservation of the social status quo. Predictably, the editorial stance of *La Prensa* did not approve of Perón's policies or his "oligarquía" rhetoric that called attention to class inequality in Argentina. After employing a variety of

tactics aimed at crippling the newspaper, the clash culminated in a direct confiscation of *La Prensa*.¹¹

Policies and actions during the Perón regime left the Argentine press a frail, monotone institution by the time a military coup forced his exile in 1955. Large portions of the press were under state-control though some expropriations were reversed, like *La Prensa*, which was returned to the Paz family. But despite the lifting of certain restrictions after Perón's ouster, an ambiance of fear had already set in. Furthermore, Perón's relations with the media set a highly flexible precedent that left press freedoms convoluted and flimsy.

However, press freedoms did not improve in the absence of Perón. As political instability and violence worsened in the 70s, the press came under increasingly direct threats from illegal guerilla and paramilitary groups.¹² Forbidden by the government to mention these organizations by name, the press referred to them ambiguously as illegal groups, "la banda declarada ilegal." Relations between the press and these guerilla, paramilitary and terrorist organizations were rocky, as the groups often preferred direct action in dealing with unfavorable coverage of their activities.

Press ethics were also deficient as journalists enjoyed publicly provided benefits and maintained excessively "cozy relations" with public officials, contributing to what journalist Robert Cox considers "fuzzy" press ethics.¹³ The mainstream press was dependent on publicly funded advertising and later, a monopolized paper supply that the largest newspapers shared with the government, Papel Prensa, when they were not directly censored or controlled by the government itself. These factors contributed to an intersection of interests that undermined the function a free press as a vehicle for criticism and civic commentary vis-à-vis the government. As such, the Argentine press earned the

reputation as a feeble onlooker of events, lacking teeth and allied with whoever was in power.

.: El Proceso de Reorganización Nacional, 1976-83

“The Armed Forces assume power; detained the President,” announced the front page of *La Nación* on March 24, 1976. News of a military coup, or *golpe militar*, was not always extraordinary in Argentina, a nation that had experienced 26 military coups and 24 presidents (16 of them military officers) between 1930 and 1983.¹⁴ The Armed Forces were an acknowledged political actor, with a lengthy tradition of involvement in Argentina’s domestic affairs. Many officers of the Armed Forces actually considered the institution a guiding, “tutelary” influence in the greater Argentine destiny.

The Golpe of March 1976 was perceived by many sectors of society as a potential relief for a country tormented by daily political violence, with few other alternatives. Jo Fisher observes, “The press had done more than predict the coup; many newspapers had been calling for the takeover for months.”¹⁵ After the death of Perón in 1974, his third wife María Estela Martínez (Isabel) assumed the presidency as a figurehead leader, becoming the first woman to hold office as a president in the Americas. But by then, the civilian government’s grip on power was already in precarious condition.

Between 1973 and 1976, civilian governments were unable to stabilize the country as political violence escalated beyond control. Extremist groups of the Left and the Right defied the State’s monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, committing acts of terrorism and routinely carrying out kidnappings and assassinations. Acknowledged as an underestimate, but one of the few figures available, 1,100 people may have died as part of political violence in the year before the Golpe.¹⁶ Due to a combination of factors including

unrestrained violence, severe economic problems, institutional instability, and a profound lack of systemic legitimacy, Argentine democracy found itself – once again – on the brink of collapse.¹⁷

With an arrival that was nearly as tranquil and bloodless as a military coup can be, the transfer of power was hardly resisted. Generally, the takeover – expected to bring a swift return of law and order to the country – was well received by the Argentine press and international observers alike, seen then as the only potential for economic relief and political stability in Argentina. Thus began the Process of National Reorganization, (Proceso de Reorganización Nacional, or “Proceso”), as it was dubbed by the military leaders.

∴ Dangerous Journalists, or Journalists In Danger?

Perceived by the Junta as a potential liability and a challenging group of professionals to deal with gracefully, journalists were among the first sectors of society to suffer from a reinvigorated wave of state repression. The Junta considered the capacity to produce the “news” and influence public discourse as a great insecurity, or perhaps in favorable conditions – a vital tool. Journalists and media outlets were painstakingly scrutinized with preemptive suspicion from the first moments of the Proceso.

According to the report by the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP), *Nunca Más*, “There was nothing casual or mistaken about the fact that the number of victims in proportion to the number of professionals working in this field was extremely high.”¹⁸ The report also indicates that the government took over the Argentine Journalist’s Federation in addition to expelling foreign correspondents while seizing and burning media deemed as “subversive” literature.

Although a precise figure for the number of people disappeared during the Proceso is not available, the official figure from *Nunca Más*, compiled in 1984, confirms nearly 9,000 cases of disappearance. However, CONADEP declared that the figure produced by *Nunca Más* significantly underestimates the actual figure.¹⁹ Human rights organizations propose that the number of people disappeared during the Proceso amounts to a figure around 30,000.

Of the official figure cited in *Nunca Más*, 1.6 percent of all disappeared persons were journalists. The report elaborates, “In the course of 1976 at least forty-five journalists were detained in illegal fashion, and to this day nothing has been heard from them. In the first eight months of 1977, a further thirty journalists disappeared...”²⁰ In addition to supplying a list of many disappeared journalists by name, the report includes some specific cases with detailed accounts like that of the writer and political militant, Rodolfo Walsh. In total, an estimated 100 journalists were assassinated while another 100 were illegally imprisoned after the beginning of the Proceso. It is also necessary to consider, in addition to these figures, that a great number of journalists were expelled from Argentina or fled the country in the face of death threats.²¹

As a medium of information and opinion, the press assumes a clearly significant role in modern society. The press is a vehicle for the expression of every public sentiment, from satisfaction to discontent. When free, the press should reflect society: its reactions, feelings, and other opinions. Furthermore, as a news source, the press is responsible for reporting “the truth” in providing information with which society makes decisions. Hence, the power – or perhaps, the threat – which the press exercises is that of public analysis and discourse. In theory, the press has the ability to stain the image of political leaders,

undermine the legitimacy of their policies and interfere with their public relations strategies and propaganda. For these reasons, the press remained a primary concern for the Junta.

Although it did not approach radio news in terms of sheer consumption volume, the Argentine print media possessed a distinct credibility in forming a part of the “reality” perceived by the public at large. Many people from both elite and working classes turn to the print media for more exhaustive and detailed news coverage. Moreover, at the time of the Proceso, televised news consisted exclusively of nationalized sources such as “60 Minutos” from the state-owned Channel 7, *Argentina Televisora Color* (Canal 7). Television and radio programming was, by and large, severely restricted when not managed directly by the state.

Another profound distinction of print media is the editorial, which allows for detailed analysis and arguments, providing another dimension for political criticism. For this reason, the editorial constitutes the spirit of a newspaper – or potentially – the lack thereof. One Argentine journalist describes the editorial as, “the open conscience of a newspaper, the distillation of its essence.”²²

With the ability to reinforce the Junta’s actions, or to delegitimize them publicly, the Argentine press had potential to be either a useful ally or a formidable opponent for military leaders. The role of the press became even more substantial as the government engaged in “unspeakable” activities and clandestine operations that, if divulged, could have severely damaged the Junta’s credibility. In other words, as repression intensified, so did the need to silence the public voice. Given the scope and brutality of state-sponsored repression, this need – to muzzle the press – was enormous.

∴ Posture of the Junta: Journalism During the Proceso

During the day of the military takeover, the Armed Forces sent over thirty communiqués, *comunicados*, directed at the media that declared intentions and announced instructions throughout the “state of siege.” Prior censorship, *precensura*, was enforced and everything had to be submitted for approval by the Press Secretariat before printing. In public announcements, however, the Junta immediately endeavored to portray itself – on both national and international levels – as a moderate and sensible solution to Argentina’s problems. The government vowed to quell political violence and erase communism along with other “subversive” elements of society.

Speaking at a press conference comprised of Argentine journalists and foreign correspondents, General Videla, de facto President of the Junta, assured a swift return to democracy and a warm respect for the function of the press. In similar public statements, Videla asserted that the Junta did not want a “compliant and unobjective press,” but rather, a “free press.”²³

The Junta released a set of directives by which the media would avoid contributing to “subversion” and the erosion of morals in Argentine society. They dealt with “Christian values, combat against vice and irresponsibility, defense of the family and honor, elimination of inappropriate terms as well as the opinions of unqualified people...”²⁴ Not only were the directives moral in tone, but they were shrouded in ambiguity, which left room for interpretation on both sides of their application: enforcement and observation. In other words, the same ambiguity that allowed security forces to raid the offices of a newspaper or arrest its journalists without substantive charges also allowed the editors of the *Herald* to stretch the limits of these ambiguities and test the patience of their enforcers.

The Junta's abrupt and brutal campaign to convert the press into a submissive institution was largely successful from the beginning, due in part to the weak state of the Argentine press before the Golpe, in addition to the unprecedented wave of repression that accompanied the military's rise to power. Therefore, despite the declared benevolent posture of the Junta vis-à-vis media freedoms, the mainstream press was quickly and effectively muzzled, allowing the military to act without a great deal of public scrutiny. Official denial thus remained plausible – even convincing – to large segments of the Argentine public that did not care to believe in the disappearance of thousands.

.: Posture of the Press: Silence or Defiance?

Generally speaking, Argentina's newspapers consented to censorship without a whimper and remained silent on the topic of disappearance and torture, quickly assuming a submissive posture in response to the Junta's measures. These restrictions were accepted without question by a majority of private media sources of commercial importance while those who did resist limited their criticism to economic policies or to minor administrative matters.²⁵ The only exceptions to the silent majority were the *Herald* and, at times, *La Opinión*.

By April, only a month after the Proceso was initiated, five newspapers had already been closed. Located in the provinces of Argentina, these newspapers were closed for alleged ties to “subversive” groups or “inappropriate content.” One such paper, *El Independiente*, was closed for “tendentious reporting”, an alleged attempt to denigrate the military's public image.²⁶ Meanwhile, numerous journalists had already been disappeared or arrested. Circulating rumors about detention centers and cruel torture practices served to intensify the already stifling climate of fear amongst journalists and citizens alike.

The foremost Leftist daily at the beginning of the Proceso, *La Opinión*, directed by the outspoken Jacobo Timerman, at times published instances of disappearance while cautiously questioning the Junta's practices of censorship and repression. *La Opinión* usually reprinted articles from the *Herald* when publishing about disappearances and kidnappings. According to Argentine journalists, Eduardo Blaustein and Martín Zubieta, "one must recognize that Timerman, without achieving the heights of Robert Cox (editor of the *Herald*) had the minimum dose of courage to question some aspects of the repressive government, at least with respect to the disappeared..."²⁷

While publishing some degree of criticism about the Junta's actions – an act that certainly distinguished the daily from other Argentine newspapers – *La Opinión* simply did not compare with the *Herald's* coverage and editorial stance during the Proceso. "Looked at objectively now that the terror has abated, *La Opinión* seems to have been timid in its reporting, especially in comparison with the *Buenos Aires Herald*..."²⁸

The coverage of *La Opinión* was often contradictory: one day supporting the Junta's policies – the next day questioning them. These contradictions might be an indication of the newspaper's attempt to criticize the Junta while avoiding expropriation or putting its journalists in extreme danger. In any case, it was a delicate line to walk, coming to an abrupt halt when Timerman was abducted and jailed as *La Opinión* fell into the hands of military. Some accounts of the event suggest that anti-Semitism on the part of the Argentine military played a role in the arrest of Timerman, a prominent member of Argentina's Jewish community.²⁹

It is clear that the *Herald's* coverage of the "Dirty War" and its editorial stance towards the Junta were far more potent than any other Argentine daily, including *La Opinión*. However, it should be considered that *La Opinión* was published in Spanish, with

a considerably higher circulation rate than the *Herald*, which could have made it a more pressing concern in the eyes of the Junta than the less-circulated English paper.

Despite the *Herald's* lower circulation, the daily editorial, printed in English and Spanish, was a considerable voice in Argentina and overseas. The *Herald's* editorial was quickly recognized for its unrivaled, outspoken stance on political issues. In fact, the Spanish version of the editorial was circulated and distributed on its own.³⁰ Many people who did not necessarily have a perfect grasp of the English language would pick up the *Herald* anyway for a taste of the distinctly critical editorials. Articles by *Herald* staff, like Robert Cox and Andrew Graham-Yooll, were often published abroad before they were printed in Argentina.

The *Herald*, too, had a precarious balance to maintain, avoiding a complete shutdown while sustaining raids, intimidation and legal proceedings. Attempts to undermine the credibility of the *Herald* were also taken. Robert Cox explains:

*The government tried to trap you by putting false information in your way in the hopes that you would pick it up and blow your credibility. Then there were individuals who were trying to get us to – stupidly – defend some murderer or terrorist, which could have been just as bad for us. That would've destroyed our credibility too.*³¹

With respect to stylistic quality and the layout of the newspapers, *La Opinión*, along with several other Spanish-language publications like *Clarín* and *La Nación*, were clearly superior to the *Herald*. But no voice in the Argentine print media scene denounced gross violations of human rights and reported disappearances like the small daily newspaper in English.

Traditionally, the *Herald* represented a “center-right” posture, opposed to Peronism. The *Herald* was known as an advocate for British business interests, precisely an example of the “imperialism” and “oligarchic” connections that the Peronists decried. As a foreign-

owned, and often, a foreign-operated newspaper, the *Herald* became an easy target for nationalist rhetoric.

La Opinión, of a more Leftist orientation, followed a considerably different ideological trajectory than did the *Herald*. Thus, as *La Opinión* and the *Herald* adhered to different ideologies, their convergence during the Proceso is interesting – if not paradoxical at first glance. However, Robert Cox, editor of the *Herald* during the first years of the Proceso, was one of the very few to publicly denounce Timerman’s arrest. In an interview published in the magazine *Somos* after Timerman’s arrest, Cox explained the apparently contradictory posture as the ethic responsibility of the newspaper:

*I never agreed with the polemics or the outlook of that newspaper [La Opinión]. My stance in defense of Timerman brought about a great deal of criticism for me, but I believe that I acted with loyalty. It is that way of being true to our beliefs, an outlook that has never changed, for which during the government of Cámpora they accused us of being right-wing imperialists and today...of another sign.*³²

In this statement, Cox makes reference to a new “sign” with which the *Herald* had been pegged as *antiargentino*. During the Proceso, the *Herald* and its staff were routinely accused of being friendly with *comunistas* for their criticism of the government and support of human rights – an accusation ironically distinct from earlier governments – when they were dubbed “right-wing imperialists.”

While the *Herald* and *La Opinión* were unique exceptions to *autocensura*, there were publishers like *Editorial Atlántida*, which collaborated actively with the military authorities in condemning the work of human rights groups.³³ Certain publications continued latching on to whoever was in power with unwavering support and self-censored discretion, earning themselves reputations for practicing unabashed bandwagon journalism.

For example, Robert Cox refers to the case of *Gente*, the most popular weekly newsmagazine in Argentina at the time, which formed part of the previously mentioned

publisher, *Editorial Atlántida*. Produced shortly after the Golpe of March, 1976 and titled *Photos-Events-Testimonies of 1035 Dramatic Days*, the book provided a history of the “Isabelita” government that had just been overthrown, “[a] story it had assiduously avoided telling while the events in question were taking place. Into the book went material that the editors of *Gente* had rigorously self-censored before.”³⁴

Meanwhile, the major Argentine newspapers routinely published official propaganda and echoed the military’s rhetoric, praising successes in the struggle against “subversion” without expressing a doubt about the obvious and sinister nature of its consequences. Robert Cox reflects on the neglect of the mainstream press:

*What is more difficult to understand is the attitude of long-established independent newspapers such as La Nación, whose prestige was so great and whose reputation protected them from any insidious charges that their editors were closet Marxists or that their staffs were infiltrated by terrorists. Why did they simply turn a blind eye to the highly visible and undoubtedly newsworthy consequences of the war against terrorism which was producing a new strain of terrorism more venomous, in some aspects, than the evil the military had pledged to extirpate from Argentina?*³⁵

The escalating and horrific system of abduction, torture and disappearance was well underway, claiming thousands of lives, while the press opted to keep the secret of the “Dirty War.” Operating on the basis of self-interest and attempting to stay in good favor with the government – a tradition employed by most newspapers since Perón – the press neglected to inform the public on the atrocities. The press was the last standing institutional counterbalance to the government in Argentina, thus assuming a paramount importance during the counter-terrorism efforts. Instead of informing the public and counterbalancing the government’s power, the press acted as an accomplice to the “Dirty War,” shrouding the truth instead of exposing it. In this way, the press actually reinforced

the power of the dictatorship while covering-up “Dirty War” tactics and enabling their plausible deniability.

.: Ford Falcons, *sin patentes*

The offices of the *Herald* are located in close proximity to the presidential palace, la Casa Rosada, as well as the headquarters of the Armed Forces. It is normal then, for *Herald* staff to take the underground train, *el subterráneo* or “*subte*,” to the Plaza de Mayo Station or the Catedral Station before continuing on foot to the offices. Going this way one passes by the Casa Rosada and its parking area, which are both adjacent to the Plaza de Mayo.

Just days after the Golpe of March 24, an editorial in the *Herald* mentioned the absence of unmarked Ford Falcons without license plates, *sin patentes*, around the Casa Rosada, a noteworthy observation because this type of automobile had been associated with the kidnappings and death-squads of previous governments. The author expresses relief and optimism for having not seen them.

But soon thereafter, newspapers were printing stories about mysterious kidnappings perpetrated by heavily armed men dressed in civilian clothes in Ford Falcons, *sin patentes*. During the Proceso, the covert automobile’s status was renewed as a trademark of the disappearance. According to Andrew Graham-Yooll’s description:

*Buenos Aires became a city roamed by unmarked cars, usually Ford Falcons, supplied on fleet order to police, but preferred by all for reliability at high speed and relatively low running cost. The cars were parked outside the Government House, without a license number to mar the bumper. They sped through the city ignoring lights; they were feared by the public, and the only man to campaign against their presence was the editor of the Buenos Aires Herald.*³⁶

On April 22, *Clarín* announced that after the “rigid press censorship” that accompanied the Golpe, there had been “...a progressive return to normality in all order and the fluid communication between the government and the newspapers has been reduced to the carrying out of indicated norms.”³⁷ The same day that *Clarín* indicated the improving state of press freedoms, the Casa Rosada was busy informing journalists of a new development. Passed around as a covert announcement, “...without any letterhead or authorizing signature – thereby disguising the fact that it was a notification of official censorship,” the directive informed journalists of new requirements amidst the growing mystery of corpses that were appearing around Buenos Aires every day:

*As from today, 22/4/76, it is forbidden to inform, comment or make reference to subjects related to subversive elements and/or members of the armed and security forces in these incidents, unless they are reported by a responsible official source. This includes victims of kidnappings and missing persons.*³⁸

Most of the print media had submitted to some form of *autocensura* long before April 22, reiterating the Junta’s public announcements and resorting to inane coverage of petty crime, sports and gossip instead of covering the escalating violence that was occurring daily. Nonetheless, by some accounts, April 22 was a landmark day in the conspiracy of silence that was carried out by the Argentine press. It was only after this day that the *Herald* – originally a hopeful advocate of the military’s intentions – became critical of the regime.

The *Herald*’s editorial on April 23 made bitter observations about newspapers that observed censorship directives and, as a consequence, “are horribly boring to read.”³⁹ The next day, the *Herald* published the “unofficial,” official announcement from April 22 verbatim, strapped across the front page.⁴⁰ In addition to the front-page reprinting of the directive, the *Herald*’s editorial that day ripped press policies, warning that the Junta’s image of “decency and moderation” was gravely endangered by such decisions.⁴¹ In the

same edition, Andrew Graham-Yooll's weekly column, "Politics & Labour," also criticized censorship directives as well as the press' *autocensura* and the government's reluctance to account for the number of prisoners being held. *La Opinión* was the only other daily in Argentina that carried news of the new censorship directive. No other newspaper besides the *Herald*, however, raised serious doubts about the issue.

While the government forbade newspapers to report disappearances, mysterious kidnappings continued. An internationally renowned novelist with Leftist sympathies, Haroldo Conti, was kidnapped from his home on May 7. On May 15, the *Herald* became the first paper to challenge the *autocensura* commanded on April 22, publishing a story about the incident, in blatant defiance of the military's new restriction.⁴² No other newspaper reported the kidnapping. Conti was never seen or heard from again.

Also on May 15, in a stinging but brief piece in the corner of the editorial page, Robert Cox posed the question of press objectivity with a sarcastically joyful announcement that phone lines – long since due and paid for – were finally installed at the *Herald's* offices by the state-operated telephone company. Cox wondered how the newspaper would ever be able to repay the government for its services while musing, "... how could we outdo *La Razón* [another prominent paper] in obsequiousness and compliancy?" Cox concludes the article on an ominous and still more sarcastic note, "Perhaps one day my other dream will come true and those unmarked Ford Falcons without number plates will stop haunting me."⁴³

Besides campaigning against the Ford Falcons *sin patentes*, a thinly veiled protest of state-sponsored disappearances, the *Herald* also struggled to clarify the meaning of "subversion," as it was the principal justification for most of the military's policies. The term "subversion," was used in public discourse to dehumanize opposition and cast a wide

net over perceived enemies of the state, but was never clearly defined by military officials. In one instance, foreign minister César Augusto Guzzetti asserted that there simply was no right-wing subversion, an attitude echoed by *La Opinión*'s Horacio Chávez Paz, according to James Neilson.⁴⁴ In response, Neilson wrote "Murder most natural?", a highly critical article denouncing terrorism of the Left and the Right in an attempt to debunk the ideas that, "violence from above causes violence from below" (the guerilla justification) and that, "violence from the left causes violence from the right" (the military's reasoning). "So dragging people from their homes in the dead of night to torture them before tearing their bodies to pieces with machine gun bullets is just 'a natural reaction'?"⁴⁵

Shortly thereafter, as defense lawyers of left-wing detainees Hipólito Solari Yrigoyen and Mario Abel Amaya suddenly stood accused of "subversion," the *Herald*'s editorial dubbed the allegation a "witch-hunt".⁴⁶ These accusations were backed by "responsible sources," another ill-defined term that found its way into many justifications during the Proceso. Later, even the Beatles were deemed "subversive," listed as one of the various recordings banned from Buenos Aires radios stations by the central broadcasting system.⁴⁷

The *Herald* also took a unique stance on the issue of human rights, which due to a largely successful propaganda campaign, was widely discredited as *antiargentino* or *comunista*.⁴⁸ In an effort to dispel the notion that human rights groups were only interested in violations of right-wing regimes, the *Herald* published a disproportionate quantity of articles about Amnesty International's work in Cuba and the Soviet Union.⁴⁹ Of the Argentine newspapers, the *Herald* was the first and only to cover the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in an objective way, this is to say, without immediately referring to them as

communist sympathizers and “madwomen.” For this reason, the *Herald* was later praised by some of the *madres*.

Bennett and Simpson observe, “Nowadays it has become usual for Argentine journalists who did not themselves speak out to regard the *Herald*’s position and that of its editorial staff as impregnable, but it did not seem like that at the time.”⁵⁰ Some authors have observed that the *Herald*’s status as a foreign-owned newspaper or the fact that some of the editors were British subjects endowed them with a cushion, a certain degree of protection from the military’s wrath. Robert Cox, however, disagrees with that assessment, noting that, “In fact, it was more dangerous for us because at any moment we could have been closed down for being a foreign-owned newspaper that was anti-Argentine or communist.”⁵¹ As such, the *Herald* was an easy target compared to established newspapers – like *La Nación* – that had a great deal of resources and a prestigious reputation.

Indeed, foreigners were among the disappeared, such as the French nuns that were kidnapped by men claiming to be the police. News editor and political columnist, Andrew Graham-Yooll, was the first to leave the *Herald*, accepting an offer for political asylum from France in September of 1976. Robert Cox left Argentina for South Carolina in December of 1979. Both men had been arrested previously and fled with their families for fear of torture and disappearance.

James Neilson, who received his own share of threats, became editor of the *Herald* when Cox left. At this point, due to the different approaches to journalism by the individuals, the newspaper underwent a stylistic alteration. Explaining the difference in their styles, Andrew Graham-Yooll observes, “After Bob left there was a series of strong editorials, but there was less reporting. Jim’s writing was marvelous and his commentary excellent, but he wasn’t as strong as Cox in reporting information.”⁵² Despite the changes

in direction and style, the *Herald* continued to denounce violence from both sides, Left and Right.

.:Conclusions

Despite the submissive posture of the Argentine press throughout the Proceso, it should be mentioned that many journalists – both within and outside the *Herald* and *La Opinión* – rejected the complicity of silence and censorship in the times of massive human atrocities. Most of these journalists were fired from newspapers, exiled, imprisoned or disappeared, in their attempt to resist the silence that protected the secret of the “Dirty War.”

Another mode of resistance, more subtle and thus safer for journalists was *entrelíneas*, “between the lines” criticism, which could employ metaphorical references and other literary devices to voice what would be dangerous to state in plain language. Such methods were practiced at times in *Humor* magazine during the later years of the Proceso, in which political issues were raised through a comedic and sometimes absurd style.

But it was the vast majority of journalists and the major newspapers that succumbed to *autocensura*, some of whom were harshly self-critical after the fall of the Junta. Others are simply forgetful and some deny knowledge of the events, a claim that sits uneasily beside statistics and testimonies about the inescapable and pervasive terror of disappearances. However, faced with torture or death – with lives to live and families to support – the path taken by so many editors and journalists seems quite human, even logical. Graham-Yooll reflects on the choice, “The bally-hoo of press freedom lost some of its momentum in such situations. [...] The immorality of self-censorship became less-reprehensible with the growing number of journalists killed.”⁵³

While it is difficult – perhaps impossible – to neatly categorize the role that the press assumed during the Proceso, some observations are within reach. For one, the press served to perpetuate the deniability of the state-sponsored terror, endowing the dictatorship with the capacity to act without substantial public scrutiny. Without information from the media to reveal the realities of the “Dirty War,” it was possible for the Argentine public to remain indifferent or even ignorant to what was going on. In the absence of an extensively documented history, establishing the “truth” quickly became a political battle upon the return of democracy, which led to a movement for historical clarification, which led to la Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparación de Personas (CONADEP), and its subsequent report on disappeared persons, *Nunca Más*.

During the decay of the Proceso towards the early eighties, the mass murders came to be, though treated in carefully measured tones, part of public discourse in press coverage. By then however, thousands of disappearances – perhaps tens of thousands – had already been carried out during the first and most intense years of the state-terror apparatus. At this point, even military officials were obliged to publicly recognize the exceedingly drastic degree of repression. As General Albano Harguindeguy admitted in 1981, “There were excesses and errors in the repression of terrorism that we all regret...”⁵⁴

Thus, public debate arrived far too late to encourage moderation on the part of the military. Given the tendency of the Argentine press to abide by momentary economic interests and political loyalties, tragically, for the people of Argentina – the failure was in the timing. As Robert Cox put it, “Public indignation, therefore, is always being whipped into a frenzy long after the die has been cast.”⁵⁵

Notes

An earlier draft of this paper was written in Spanish, titled, “El *Buenos Aires Herald* y su cobertura excepcional: La prensa gráfica en la Argentina durante los primeros años del Proceso,” as part of a research project while the author was working as an intern at the *Herald* during the summer of 2003. This paper is the culmination of the work from that paper as well as the continued process of editing and research upon return to the United States. The author would like to express his deep gratitude to those who supported him with feedback and assistance along the way: Julio Nakamurakare, Betina Kaplan, Amy Ross, and Iêda Siqueira Wiarda. He would also like to thank the *Herald* for access to its archives, an indispensable resource for this project.

See “Argentine press condemns Galtieri” *BBC News*, 13 January 2003 [online]

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/not_in_website/syndication/monitoring/media_reports/2652937.stm; see also, “Galtieri death ‘no great loss’” *BBC News*, 12 January 2003 [online] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/2651725.stm>.

² The term “Dirty War” now has intensely pejorative connotations in the context of Latin American authoritarianism, as associated with massive human rights violations and state-sponsored terrorism conducted by certain regimes of the 70s and 80s in Central and South America. However, the term was originally coined by the military in reference to what they considered a necessary effort to eradicate subversives and terrorists through any means possible.

³ For the *Herald*’s exceptional stance and daring coverage during the Proceso, both Robert Cox and the *Herald* were awarded Maria Moors Cabot Prizes in 1987, from the University of Columbia’s School of Journalism. In 1977, the *Herald* received the Inter-American Press Association’s Mergenthaler Plaque.

⁴ Elizabeth Fox, “Nationalism, Censorship and Transnational Control.” in Media and Politics in Latin America, ed. Elizabeth Fox (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1988), 36.

⁵ Bruce Garrison and Michael Salwen, Latin American Journalism, (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991), 17.

⁶ Joseph Page, Perón: A Biography, (New York: Random House, 1983), 211.

⁷ Elizabeth Fox, Media and Politics in Latin America, 39.

⁸ See U.S. Embassy, Buenos Aires, to secretary of state, No. 202, August 3, 1945, OSS File 140129. Cited in Perón: A biography, 112.

⁹ Joseph Page, Perón: A Biography, 210.

¹⁰ Examples given by historian Luis Romero include, “sardonic tango singer Enrique Santos Discépolo and the mediocre Américo Barrios,” as well as sports announcer, Luis Elías Sojít. See Luis Alberto Romero, The History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century, Trans. James Brennan (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 116.

¹¹ Accounts on the buildup to confiscation vary in interpretation. A self-lauding but insightful historical document, written by the editors of *La Prensa* themselves, is titled Defense of Freedom (New York: The John Day Co., 1952). A more critical account can be found in Perón: A Biography, 212-214.

¹² Among these groups: the Argentine Anticomunist Alliance (AAA), “Triple A”, a right-wing organization that resembled a paramilitary in structure and practice; the left-wing Peronist Montoneros; and the Marxist-Leninist People’s Revolutionary Army (ERP).

¹³ See Robert Cox, interview by Uki Goñi, “Fuzzy Press Ethics,” Buenos Aires, Argentina, November 28, 1993; available from <http://www.ukinet.com/media/text/coxethic.htm> or in Spanish as “Ética Borrosa” from <http://www.ukinet.com/media/text/coxetica.htm>

¹⁴ See William Smith, Authoritarianism and the Crisis of the Argentine Political Economy, 267. Cited in Alison Brysk, The Politics of Human Rights in Argentina, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994), 27.

¹⁵ Jo Fisher. Mothers of the Disappeared. (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 11.

¹⁶ Andrew Graham-Yooll, State of Fear, (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1986), 65.

¹⁷ For a concise description of political and social factors leading to the Proceso, see Alison Brysk, The Politics of Human Rights in Argentina, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994), 23-41.

¹⁸ Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparación de Personas (CONADEP), Nunca Más: The Report of the Argentine National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986), 362.

¹⁹ For a discussion on the CONADEP figure, see Allison Brysk in Human Rights: Theory and Measurement, ed. David Cingranelli, (New York: St. Martin's Press in association with the Policy Studies Organization, 1988). CONADEP, Nunca Más, 363.

²⁰ Jerry Knudson proposes that approximately 400 journalists fled the country. See Jerry Knudson, “Argentine press: ‘dirty war’ hangover,” *Times of the Americas*, October 1990.

- 22 Blaustein and Zubieta, Decíamos Ayer: La prensa argentina bajo el Proceso, (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Colihue, 1998) 27.
- 23 “Videla hosts former FM’s,” *The Buenos Aires Herald*, 13 May 1976.
- 24 [Translated] Blaustein and Zubieta, Decíamos Ayer, 23.
- 25 Muraro, Heriberto. Medios, Transformación Cultural y Política, 22.
- 26 “Closure worries provincial press,” *The Buenos Aires Herald*, 2 April 1976.
- 27 Blaustein and Zubieta, Decíamos Ayer, 26.
- 28 Jana Bennett and John Simpson. The Disappeared and the Mothers of the Plaza, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 245.
- 29 For Timerman’s account, see Jacobo Timerman, Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number, (New York: Knopf Inc., 1981).
- 30 Bennett and Simpson compare this phenomenon to a kind of *samizdat*, the Russian term, literally “self publishing,” for an underground system of printing and distribution of banned literature. See Bennett and Simpson, The Disappeared and the Mothers of the Plaza, Ibid cit., 240. Also see, Goñi, Uki. I Remember Julia, 63. Ibid. cit.
- 31 Robert Cox, personal interview with the author, Charleston, South Carolina, April 3, 2004.
- 32 [Translated] “Robert Cox o la importancia de cuestionar,” *Somos*, Nº 36, 27 May 1977. Reprinted in Decíamos Ayer.
- 33 Muraro, Heriberto. Medios, Transformación Cultural y Política, 22.
- 34 Robert Cox, “Total Terrorism: Argentina, 1969 to 1979,” in Terrorism, Legitimacy, and Power, ed. Martha Crenshaw (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), 134.
- 35 Robert Cox, “The Sound of One Hand Clapping: A Preliminary Study of the Argentine Press in a Time of Terror,” (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1980), 11.
- 36 Andrew Graham-Yooll, State of Fear, 73.
- 37 [Translated] “El gobierno y los diarios,” *Clarín*, 22 April 1976. Reprinted in Decíamos Ayer.
- 38 Andrew Graham-Yooll, State of Fear, 107.
- 39 “La falta de información no es buena noticia,” *The Buenos Aires Herald*, 23 April 1976.
- 40 “‘Subversive’ news banned,” *The Buenos Aires Herald*, 24 April 1976.
- 41 “Saliendo de la pesadilla...pero,” *The Buenos Aires Herald*, 24 April 1976.
- 42 “Novelist missing” *The Buenos Aires Herald*, 15 May 1976.
- 43 Robert Cox, “Ring out ye telephone bells!,” *The Buenos Aires Herald*, 15 May 1976.
- 44 James Neilson, “Murder most natural?,” *The Buenos Aires Herald*, 12 October 1976.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 “La cacería de brujas no contribuirá a ganar la guerra,” *The Buenos Aires Herald*, 17 October 1976.
- 47 “Beatles subversive?,” *The Buenos Aires Herald*, 27 October 1976.
- 48 Examples of this form of propaganda are abundant, appearing in many publications, from *Clarín* to the popular magazine *Somos*. One such example appeared in *La Nación* as follows [translated]: “The surprise is fitting amidst this global campaign for human rights and the growing concern from so many governments and international organizations when their investigations concentrate, for example, on the events in Argentina, but apparently they are only superficially interested about what occurs in Russian or Cuban prisons.” From *La Nación*, “Los derechos humanos en el mundo de hoy,” 11 February 1977. Reprinted in Decíamos Ayer, Ibid cit.
- 49 See, Robert Cox, “Forget Human Rights” *The Buenos Aires Herald*, 27 November 1976.
- 50 Bennett and Simpson, The Disappeared and the Mothers of the Plaza, Ibid cit., 238.
- 51 Robert Cox, personal interview, Ibid cit.
- 52 Andrew Graham-Yooll, personal interview with the author, Buenos Aires, Argentina, July 22, 2003.
- 53 Andrew Graham-Yooll, State of Fear, 107-108, Ibid cit.
- 54 General Albano Harguindeguy, quoted in *La Prensa*, 24 March 1981. Reprinted in Decíamos Ayer, Ibid cit.
- 55 Robert Cox, “Terrorism, Legitimacy, and Power, 135, Ibid. cit.