

Argentine military commander eulogizes ex-dictator

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A eulogy by Argentina's top army general describing the country's former dictator Leopoldo Fortunato Galtieri as a "disciplined soldier" who "acted according to his convictions" has sparked widespread protests and demands for the officer's dismissal.

General Ricardo Brinzoni, chief of the Argentine army, delivered the remarks at the January 13 funeral of Galtieri, the third of four generals who headed the dictatorship that ruled the country from 1976 to 1983.

Galtieri led Argentina into the disastrous 1982 attempt to seize the Malvinas Islands, a British colony off of Argentina's coast. Within his own country he was reviled for the role he played in the dictatorship's so-called "dirty war," which claimed the lives of some 30,000 people who were summarily executed or "disappeared." Before he died from pancreatic cancer earlier this week, Galtieri was under house arrest in connection with an ongoing judicial investigation into his role in the torture and murder of opponents of the military junta.

Flanked by an honor guard from the Patricios Regiment, General Brinzoni began his brief eulogy by announcing that "the Army bids farewell today to one of its commanders-in-chief." He continued: "During a period of convulsions and disagreements within Argentine society, he acted and decided according to his convictions."

Brinzoni concluded, "In these last years, he confronted the difficulties with integrity and obeyed like a disciplined soldier all the orders and the institutional policies dictated by the Army."

The "difficulties" Brinzoni referred to included the renewal of prosecutions against Galtieri and other top officers from the former dictatorship. They were specifically charged in the killing of members of the Montoneros, the left-wing Peronist guerrilla group.

Some of these victims of the dictatorship were kidnapped in Brazil and forcibly returned to Argentina.

Galtieri refused to testify in the proceedings, and human rights activists lamented the fact that he had gone to his grave without ever revealing the fate of those who disappeared after falling into his hands. The military has strongly opposed the new legal proceedings, initiated by a judge who ruled that laws passed in 1987 and 1990 granting a blanket amnesty to the former dictators and other military personnel were unconstitutional.

Even before being placed under house arrest, Galtieri was unable to leave the country for fear of being extradited to Spain or Italy, both of which had charged him in connection with the murder or disappearance in Argentina of their citizens during the years of military rule.

Human rights organizations and some legislators responded to the funeral oration with a demand for General Brinzoni's ouster. "Brinzoni's statements clearly show the current army chief's institutional vindication of the violations of human rights committed by the last military dictatorship," declared a document issued by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and a number of other human rights groups.

Accusing Brinzoni of leading an effort in the military to block any investigation into the junta's crimes, the document added that his statements and actions "constitute a retreat in the subordination of the Army to the rules of democracy and the observance of human rights."

Galtieri began his rise within the Argentine military after attending the US Army's School of the Americas, then headquartered in Panama. Dubbed the "school for assassins," the institution trained an entire generation of Latin American officers who were responsible for a

wave of US-backed military coups and the dictatorships that ruled most of the continent in the 1970s.

After the 1976 coup that brought the military to power in Argentina, Galtieri headed the Army's Second Corps, based in Rosario, Argentina's second largest city. There he supervised the creation of more than a dozen detention centers and the extra-legal imprisonment and murder of thousands of militant workers, students and other opponents of the dictatorship. In the nightmarish repression, many prisoners were tortured until nearly dead and then thrown alive from helicopters into rivers or into the ocean.

During recent court proceedings against the ex-dictator in Spain, where Galtieri was charged with torture and genocide, Madrid's former consul in Rosario testified about his meeting with the general to inquire into the fate of missing Spanish citizens. "In every war innocents die," Galtieri told him. "It's like what happened with the bombardment of Germany."

In 1981, Galtieri succeeded General Jorge Videla as head of the military junta. Faced with a severe economic crisis and mounting popular opposition, culminating in strikes and mass demonstrations the following year, Galtieri attempted to rescue the junta by launching a military adventure. Asserting Argentina's historic claim to the Malvinas (called the Falklands by Britain), Galtieri dispatched an ill-equipped and poorly trained force of conscripts on April 2, 1982 to occupy the islands some 350 miles east of Argentina.

In a speech marked by whisky-fueled bluster, Galtieri challenged the Thatcher government in Britain: "If they want to come, let them come. We will give them battle." At the time, it was joked that Galtieri was acting on the advice of an influential US adviser—Johnny Walker.

The dictator later revealed he had believed the British would acquiesce to Argentina's fait accompli. He also placed ill-founded hopes in the Reagan administration siding with the Argentine junta in recognition of the assistance it had rendered in training the CIA-backed "contra" army waging war on Nicaragua.

Both estimations proved disastrously mistaken. While Washington backed the Argentine junta in its "dirty war" on its own people and valued its collaboration in Central America, it, like Britain, viewed the Malvinas incursion as an unacceptable challenge to imperialist

interests that had to be crushed.

The maneuver did succeed in the short term in diverting the junta's opposition, with the Peronist politicians and labor leaders as well as substantial elements of the radical left lining up behind the dictatorship. The humiliating defeat of Argentina—316 soldiers were massacred by the British on the Malvinas, while 323 sailors perished in the torpedo attack on the cruiser *General Belgrano*—led to Galtieri's downfall and the collapse of the junta shortly thereafter.

A military court found Galtieri guilty of gross incompetence and recommended that he be stripped of his rank and put before a firing squad. The penalty was reduced to 12 years imprisonment, however. In 1990 he was released along with other former junta members as part of a pardon issued by then-president Carlos Menem, a Peronist. Unlike the other former leaders of the dictatorship, Galtieri was allowed to keep his rank, and he regularly participated in the Army Day parades and other activities of the military.

The military's embrace of Galtieri and its opposition to recent attempts to prosecute him demonstrate that for the high command, the debacle in the Malvinas was a secondary matter. The ex-dictator's main contribution was seen as his leadership in a war of murder and torture against the Argentine working class.

General Brinzoni's funeral oration serves as a stark warning. Under conditions of a crippling crisis of the Argentine economy, the destitution of masses of working people and growing social upheavals, the military is prepared once again to unleash savage repression to defend the interests of the country's financial elite and the multinational banks and corporations.



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