

Former Argentine generals sentenced to life

US links to the junta

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At the end of last month two former Argentine generals were convicted of kidnapping, torturing and murdering a senator three decades ago, during the military dictatorship of General Jorge Videla. Masked thugs broke into the victim's home, kidnapping him and taking him to a prison on the very day the Argentine military carried out its infamous coup in March 1976.

Senator Guillermo Vargas Aignasse, a Peronist, became one of tens of thousands of the “disappeared,” victims of political repression by the Argentine military that lasted from 1976 until the junta fell following the disastrous Malvinas War in 1983. The country's military rulers waged a vast program designed to terrorize the working class and eliminate political opposition. There were 30,000 dead and disappeared, that is people detained by authorities, missing for decades, and presumed dead. Some of the prisoners of the junta were dumped into the sea from airplanes, falling to their death over open water. There were in total more than one million victims of the repression, many of whom were subjected to cruel and depraved torture by their police or military captors.

Convicted in the case were Antonio Bussi, 82, who was governor of Tucuman province and an army general, and his co-defendant, army general Luciano Menendez, 81. Together they were responsible not just for the death of one senator, but for the disappearance, murder and torture of thousands of people in the impoverished northern province of Tucuman, which was one of the first areas in which the nightmarish repression unleashed under the junta was first tried out, even before the military had taken power.

The two were sentenced to life in prison, but the court indicated they would be allowed to serve their sentences under house arrest. This provision enraged relatives and human rights advocates who watched the proceedings. Police fired water cannon and tear gas at protesters demonstrating outside the court building. The court claimed it was following current government policy, which has allowed convicted junta operatives over 70 to serve their sentences under house arrest. Inflammatory statements by both Bussi and Menendez justifying their crimes only fueled the anger among human rights advocates.

Bussi, for example, denounced federal prosecutor Alfredo Terraf as a “liar” and dismissed the case against him as “false accusations, supported by common criminals.” Menendez claimed that what happened in Argentina was not repression, but rather a war against “international terrorism” and “Marxist subversion.” As a result of the trial, he added, Argentina would have “the dubious merit of being the first country in history to judge its victorious soldiers.”

Menendez had already been sentenced to prison as a result of a trial that concluded in late July in the Argentine city of Cordoba. The ex-general and three other former members of the Argentine Army were sentenced to life in prison for the kidnapping, torture, and murder of

four members of the opposition Revolutionary Workers Party. A former Argentine police officer was also tried, convicted, and sentenced to life while three other individuals were given sentences of 18 to 22 years. With that earlier conviction Menendez had become the highest-ranking military officer recently convicted for crimes related to the years of the junta. He is accused of about 600 crimes in all perpetrated during the dictatorship.

Menendez was in charge of the regional third Army Corps in Cordoba province from 1975 to 1979. The infamous La Perla torture camp where victims were detained in 1977 was located in Cordoba. Authorities attempted to cover up the murder of the four — Hilda Palacios, Humberto Brandalissi, Carlos Lajas and Raul Cardozo — whose bodies were found later on the street. Of the 2300 victims interned at La Perla camp only 17 survived.

It is now known two-thirds of the one million detained, tortured, and killed or threatened with death were working class opponents of the economic oppression suffered under the regime in the 1970's and 1980's. Ford Motor Company has been charged in yet another Argentine court with playing a direct part in the illegal detention, torture and “disappearances” of its own workers under the dictatorship. A part of one of its factories was used as a detention center for militant autoworkers. Other victims of the regime included lawyers, civil rights advocates and other opponents of the right-wing regime.

The top leaders of the junta including General Jorge Videla, Admiral Emilio Massera and General Leopoldo Galtieri, were tried and sentenced in 1985 to life in prison. They served only five years, when an amnesty from the country's then President Raul Alfonsin, set them free. In 1986-1987, laws called “Full Stop” and “Due Obedience” were enacted to protect the military and police involved in the “Dirty War.”

Recent Trials

Since the theft of babies was excluded from the impunity laws of the 1980's, grandparents proceeded with charges against kidnappers of the children of the detained and murdered pregnant women who were among the junta's political prisoners. In October 2000, the Center for Legal and Social Studies (CELS), an Argentine human rights group, petitioned Judge Gabriel Cavallo to declare the laws unconstitutional. Cavallo was investigating the theft of eight-month-old Claudia Poblete from her mother.

In March 2001, Cavallo invalidated the laws and charged the

officers for the crimes committed against the child's parents, Jose Poblete Roa and Gertrudis Hlaczik de Poblete. The Federal Appeals Court upheld the ruling unanimously the following November, and the Supreme Court finally ratified the overturn of the amnesty laws three-and-a-half years later.

Finally, in 2006 Julio Simon was convicted and sentenced to 25 years in prison for the illegal arrest and torture of the couple. They had "disappeared" after being detained in November 1978 and held at a secret detention center run by the federal police.

Claudia was given to a police lieutenant and his wife, who adopted her and concealed her true identity for 22 years.

Miguel Osvaldo Etchecolatz was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment in 2006 on charges of homicide, kidnapping and torture. He was a senior officer in the Buenos Aires Provincial Police.

In October 2007, Christian von Wernich, a Catholic priest who had served as a police chaplain, was convicted of being a "co-participant" in the torture and disappearance of several political prisoners. He was sentenced to life in prison.

Former navy officer Hector Febres was found dead in his cell on December 10th, 2007. He was being tried for acts of torture at the infamous Navy School of Mechanics, known by its Spanish acronym ESMA. He apparently died from cyanide poisoning.

Justice delayed and justice denied

Current Argentine president Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner and her husband, former Argentine president Nestor Kirchner have made accounting for the atrocities of the junta a plank of current government policy. Kirchner is himself a lawyer and was jailed twice in the 1970's. In 2006, when Nestor Kirchner held the presidency, he rallied thousands of supporters on the grounds of the Navy School of Mechanics, the most infamous detention center of the military dictatorship. He said it would be turned into a memorial to victims of the past dictatorship.

However, one aspect of the Bussi-Menendez trial that could not have been to the liking of the Kirchner government was the defense put forward by Bussi that the repression began before the military coup and that the jail from which Aignasse disappeared was run by officials appointed by his own Peronist party.

Indeed, Bussi assumed command of the counterrevolutionary repression carried out under "Operation Independence" in Tucuman in December 1975, under the government of then-President Isabel Peron. This campaign initiated a wave of kidnappings, murder and torture. The ruling Peronist party supported this repression and, in many areas, the thugs of the Peronist union bureaucracy played a key role in these operations, carrying out ferocious repression against left-wing opposition, including among their own union members.

The political machine created under the governor of Tucuman during that period, the Peronist *caudillo* Amado Juri, continues to operate in the province and forms a base of support for the Kirchner government. While Juri publicly supported the savage repression unleashed by the military in Tucuman before the coup, he was jailed nonetheless after the junta took power.

Despite the Kirchner's promises, there is great consternation in Argentina about the slow progress of the trials of the junta's criminals. One human rights activist predicted a limited result from

the trials, noting that hundreds of judges from the era of the dictatorship still sit in courts throughout the country.

Several of those involved in the political repression that swept several Latin American countries during that era have gone on trial in recent years in Chile as well. And in April of 2005 the Spanish High Court found Adolfo Scilingo, 58, a former Argentine navy officer, guilty of crimes against humanity committed in Argentina 30 years ago. Scilingo was sentenced to 640 years in prison. The conviction of Scilingo was the first of its kind under Spanish legislation allowing that nation's courts to rule on non-domestic cases of crimes against humanity.

In February 2008 Spain ordered the extradition of Ricardo Miguel Cavallo to Argentina. He had been held in a Spanish prison since 2003, after he was extradited from Mexico. He is accused of executions, murder, illegal arrests, kidnapping and robbery of assets of opponents of the regime.

Spain is still refusing to extradite Isabel Peron, president of Argentina at the time of the coup, though Argentina asked for her extradition in 2007. Peron has been accused of authorizing the torture and political murders that unfolded in the years before the junta deposed her.

US links to the junta

Former secretary of state Henry Kissinger, a close confidante of the current Bush administration, provided Washington's explicit support for the bloodbath in Argentina, as documents from the period released in 2005 under the Freedom of Information Act confirmed.

George H.W. Bush, the father of the current US president was at the time the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, which was deeply involved in the repression taking place in Latin America.

Also implicated are current and former members of the Bush administration in the US. Among them are Vice president Dick Cheney, who was White House chief of staff at the time, and Donald Rumsfeld, who served then (as he did 30 years later) as the US defense secretary, overseeing relations between the Pentagon and the Argentine military.

There is no doubt that the "dirty war" prosecutions are deeply disquieting for much of the present US political establishment. Not only those officials directly implicated in the crimes of that period who are still alive and active in US politics deserve to stand trial as well, but also those who have resurrected the methods of the Latin American juntas, presiding over torture, imprisonment without trial, "disappearance" of individuals into secret prisons and murder, all in the name of a "global war on terror."



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