

The “Dirty War” Pope

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For over a week, the media has subjected the public to a tidal wave of euphoric banality on the Roman Catholic Church’s selection of a new pope.

This non-stop celebration of the dogma and ritual of an institution that for centuries has been identified with oppression and backwardness is stamped with a deeply undemocratic character. It is reflective of the rightward turn of the entire political establishment and its repudiation of the principles enshrined in the US Constitution, including the wall of separation between church and state.

What a far cry from the political ideals that animated those who drafted that document. It was Thomas Jefferson’s well-founded opinion that “In every country and in every age, the priest has been hostile to liberty. He is always in alliance with the despot, abetting his abuses in return for protection to his own.”

Jefferson’s view—and the reactionary character of the media’s sycophantic coverage—finds no more powerful conformation than in the identity of the new pope, officially celebrated as a paragon of “humility” and “renewal.”

Placed on the papal throne is not only another hard-line opponent of Marxism, the Enlightenment and all manner of human progress, but a man who is deeply and directly implicated in one of the greatest crimes of the post-World War II era—Argentina’s “Dirty War.”

Amid the pomp and ceremony Friday, the Vatican spokesman was compelled to address the past of the new Pope Francis—the former Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge Bergoglio. He dismissed the accusations against him as the work of “anti-clerical left-wing elements.”

That “left-wing elements” would denounce the complicity of the Church’s leaders in the “Dirty War” waged by the military junta that ruled Argentina between 1976 and 1983 is scarcely surprising. They accounted for many of the estimated 30,000 workers,

students, intellectuals and others who were “disappeared” and murdered, and the tens of thousands more who were imprisoned and tortured.

But some of Bergoglio’s harshest critics come from within the Catholic Church itself, including priests and lay workers who say he handed them over to the torturers as part of a collaborative effort to “cleanse” the Church of “leftists.” One of them, a Jesuit priest, Orlando Yorio, was abducted along with another priest after ignoring a warning from Bergoglio, then head of the Jesuit order in Argentina, to stop their work in a Buenos Aires slum district.

During the first trial of leaders of the military junta in 1985, Yorio declared, “I am sure that he himself gave over the list with our names to the Navy.” The two were taken to the notorious Navy School of Mechanics (ESMA) torture center and held for over five months before being drugged and dumped in a town outside the city.

Bergoglio was ideologically predisposed to backing the mass political killings unleashed by the junta. In the early 1970s, he was associated with the right-wing Peronist Guardia de Hierro (Iron Guard), whose cadre—together with elements of the Peronist trade union bureaucracy—were employed in the death squads known as the Triple A (Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance), which carried out a campaign of extermination against left-wing opponents of the military before the junta even took power. Adm. Emilio Massera, the chief of the Navy and the leading ideologue of the junta, also employed these elements, particularly in the disposal of the personal property of the “disappeared.”

Yorio, who died in 2000, charged that Bergoglio “had communications with Admiral Massera, and had informed him that I was the chief of the guerrillas.”

The junta viewed the most minimal expression of opposition to the existing social order or sympathy for

the oppressed as “terrorism.” The other priest who was abducted, Francisco Jalics, recounted in a book that Bergoglio had promised them he would tell the military that they were not terrorists. He wrote, “From subsequent statements by an official and 30 documents that I was able to access later, we were able to prove, without any room for doubt, that this man did not keep his promise, but that, on the contrary, he presented a false denunciation to the military.”

Bergoglio declined to appear at the first trial of the junta as well as at subsequent proceedings to which he was summoned. In 2010, when he finally did submit to questioning, lawyers for the victims found him to be “evasive” and “lying.”

Bergoglio claimed that he learned only after the end of the dictatorship of the junta’s practice of stealing the babies of disappeared mothers, who were abducted, held until giving birth and then executed, with their children given to military or police families. This lie was exposed by people who had gone to him for help in finding missing relatives.

The collaboration with the junta was not a mere personal failing of Bergoglio, but rather the policy of the Church hierarchy, which backed the military’s aims and methods. The Argentine journalist Horacio Verbitsky exposed Bergoglio’s attempted cover-up for this systemic complicity in a book that Bergoglio authored, which edited out compromising sentences from a memorandum recording a meeting between the Church leadership and the junta in November 1976, eight months after the military coup.

The excised statement included the pledge that the Church “in no way intends to take a critical position toward the action of the government,” as its “failure would lead, with great probability, to Marxism.” It declared the Catholic Church’s “understanding, adherence and acceptance” in relation to the so-called “Proceso” that unleashed a reign of terror against Argentine working people.

This support was by no means platonic. The junta’s detention and torture centers were assigned priests, whose job it was, not to minister to those suffering torture and death, but to help the torturers and killers overcome any pangs of conscience. Using such biblical parables as “separating the wheat from the chafe,” they assured those operating the so-called “death flights,” in which political prisoners were drugged, stripped naked,

bundled onto airplanes and thrown into the sea, that they were doing “God’s work.” Others participated in the torture sessions and tried to use the rite of confession to extract information of use to the torturers.

This collaboration was supported from the Vatican on down. In 1981, on the eve of Argentina’s war with Britain over the Malvinas (Falkland) Islands, Pope John Paul II flew to Buenos Aires, appearing with the junta and kissing its then-chief, Gen. Leopoldo Galtieri, while saying not a word about the tens of thousands who had been kidnapped, tortured and murdered.

As Jefferson noted, the Church is “always in alliance with the despot,” as it was in backing Franco’s fascists in Spain, its collaboration with the Nazis as they carried out the Holocaust in Europe, and its support of the US war in Vietnam.

Nonetheless, the naming of a figure like Bergoglio as pope—and its celebration within the media and ruling circles—must serve as a stark warning. Not only are the horrific crimes carried out in Argentina 30 years ago embraced, those in power are contemplating the use of similar methods once again to defend capitalism from intensifying class struggle and the threat of social revolution.



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