

Golden Globe award winner *Argentina, 1985* examines trial of military junta leaders

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Argentina, 1985 (Santiago Mitre) was recently awarded the Golden Globe for best Non-English Language film. It has been nominated for an Academy Award as best International Feature Film.

It is an accomplished work, but one with serious political and historical distortions and omissions.

Argentina, 1985, based on the criminal trial of the leaders of the military junta that ruled Argentina between 1976 and 1983, has had an impact on audiences worldwide. In particular, it has opened the eyes of younger generations to the work of a brutal dictatorship responsible for the abduction, kidnapping, rape, torture and murder of hundreds of thousands of people.

The story is based on actual events. It follows a government prosecutor, Julio Strassera, of the Fiscal Appeals Court, as he gathers and presents evidence against nine leaders of the dictatorship.

The junta arose as a response of the Argentine ruling class to the inability of the previous Peronist regime to contain the struggles of the working class and youth. It took over in 1976, abolishing the presidency, Congress and the constitution, creating the so-called “National Reorganization Process” (El Proceso).

Despite the tumultuous eruption of the class struggle both before the 1976 coup and during and after the collapse of the junta, the Argentine working class is almost totally absent from Santiago Mitre’s film. When workers do appear, they do so as victims. The not-so-hidden message is that the middle class is the true defender of democracy.

Argentina, 1985 is two hours and twenty minutes long. Although some of the testimony in the trial scenes is gripping, the most interesting and telling scenes are in the first half, prior to the actual trial.

Strassera, the principal character, played by veteran Argentine actor Ricardo Darín (*The Secret in Their Eyes*), is a chain-smoking federal prosecutor who lives in a middle-class apartment in Buenos Aires with his wife Sylvia (Alejandra Flechner) and two children who attend private schools.

As the movie begins, Strassera is very concerned that the individual dating his daughter may be a police agent; so much so that he has convinced her younger brother to spy on them. Julio and Sylvia are seen elegantly dressed in the morning

leaving for their jobs with their children in their school uniforms.

Strassera’s assistant attorney, Luis Moreno Ocampo (Peter Lanzani), comes from the upper level of the middle class, a family with ties to the military. His uncle is a military colonel, and his mother supposedly attends mass and is friends with Rafael Videla, the former commander-in chief of the army who became Argentina’s dictator and is the main defendant in the case.

Distrustful of Interior Ministry officials organizing the trial, Strassera and Moreno decide to build a team of students and young court clerks to gather evidence and interview witnesses for the trial. During their job interviews they appear as political neophytes, without strong opinions, except for one—Maco (Felix Rodriguez Santamaría), who defends Peronism as a party of social justice.

Allotted only four months to prepare the case (October 21, 1984–February 15, 1985), the enthusiastic, young assistants travel across the country interviewing survivors of the brutal dictatorship and collecting evidence in preparation for a civilian trial (a military tribunal had fully exonerated the accused in September 1984).

Strassera, his team, and his witnesses face constant anonymous death threats. In one scene Moreno is chased by men in a Ford Falcon (infamously, the “car of choice” for the death squads during the dictatorship). Defying the death threats, the team is able to obtain massive amounts of evidence, including from 709 witnesses.

The real-life Strassera, upon whom the film’s protagonist is based, had been a loyal servant of the Proceso, a judge tasked with denying habeas corpus petitions from the families of individuals abducted and “disappeared” by the regime. Following the collapse of the dictatorship, he found himself appointed prosecuting attorney against the military leaders of that very same regime. This implicit contradiction is alluded to in the film, albeit with no details.

As the team travels across Argentina seeking and gathering testimony, the film suggests that Strassera has put his past behind him and evolved into a paladin of justice and democracy. He is encouraged by Moreno, Sylvia, his own son, his prosecution team and two of his friends, a theater director

and an aging lawyer, to lead an uncompromising battle against the nine commander defendants.

The second half of *Argentina, 1985*, the trial itself, presents little information about how the regime's victims were selected, or what their connection was with the "terrorists" who were supposedly being targeted. It concentrates on the way prisoners were treated and tortured, including the abduction of babies born to female prisoners.

Significantly the phrase "working class" is never uttered. Also left out is that many prisoners had been imprisoned in other countries in Latin America, or were rendered to other nations, such as Chile and Uruguay, to be "disappeared."

In one case, mentioned in Strassera's summation, a person was mistakenly abducted for belonging to the Argentine Federation of Psychiatry, abbreviated to FAP, because he was taken to be a member of the Peronist Armed Forces (also FAP), illustrating the arbitrary and sweeping character of the junta's repression, while also suggesting that it was acceptable to target the latter.

At one point assistant prosecuting attorney Moreno is interviewed by a right-wing television host. He proudly proclaims that he is from a military family and defends the military as an institution, emphasizing that his role is not to question what the military is—a body of armed men whose function is to defend the profit system and oppress the working class—but rather the excesses of a few bad apples who overreacted to guerrilla and other threats.

In reading his final powerful argument in *Argentina, 1985*, written in collaboration with his team, Strassera elicits a standing ovation from almost all those in attendance, and from many of those who have watched the film in Argentina and elsewhere.

The statement echoes some of the words in the original statement at the 1985 trial, which also elicited a standing ovation, while leaving out Strassera's vigorous defense of the armed forces. "This trial is not against them [the armed forces]," he said, "but against those who led them between 1976-82. The armed forces are not on trial..."

The best light that could be put on Strassera's prosecution strategy is that he believed the judges would not have gone along with any other version of the junta's culpability.

In truth, the armed forces as instruments of state violence against students and workers were a constant feature of 20th-century Latin America, including Argentina. Their brutality, across the region, increased and changed qualitatively in the 1970s.

Regardless, the message to the audience is that, except for some especially brutal figures, the armed forces, far from being instruments of class oppression, are honorable institutions that defend national security, democratic rights and the rule of law, even today.

As one would expect from its title, Mitre's movie at times takes an idealized nationalist bent (including in the summation

speech), and ignores the international links between the Proceso, the other Latin American dictatorships and US imperialism, which coordinated their policies of state terror through the work of the US State Department, the CIA and the US military training School of the Americas. In June 1976, US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, in meetings with Argentine military leaders, gave the go ahead to the savagery that took place.

Kissinger also had been a key figure in organizing the overthrow and assassination of Chilean President Salvador Allende in 1973 by Augusto Pinochet, who carried out the same savage policies of torture and death that the Argentine Proceso imposed three years later.

Operation Condor, the closely coordinated right-wing terror carried out by the armed forces of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Bolivia, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay, was implemented with the full support of and at the direction of Washington.

Abductions, secret detention centers, disappearances and the wanton use of torture, rape and killings became commonplace. There should be no illusions that in today's "democratic" Latin America, the state will hesitate to resort to these same measures as the class struggle intensifies.

Current Argentine president, Alberto Fernandez (Peronist), reacted "with joy" when informed that *Argentina, 1985* has been nominated for the upcoming 2023 Oscars, in the best international film category. Fernandez, committed to savage austerity policies that have impoverished the Argentine working class and created hunger on a mass scale, welcomes any film that disorients the working class and blunts its struggle.

The lessons of the history of class struggles in Latin America and across the world have repeatedly shown that in its struggles today in defense of its class interests and democratic rights from Peru to France, Sri Lanka and elsewhere, the working class cannot rely on middle class servants of the financial oligarchy and the capitalist order, such as Strassera. Instead, the working class must demand the abolition of the repressive apparatus of the state, the police and armed forces, and itself take state power in order to create a truly democratic, socialist society.



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