

The Rise and Fall of Juan Domingo Peron:
Fascism, Violence, and the Catholic Church in Twentieth Century Argentina

Anne Frances Moore

Departments: Comparative Literature and History

Abstract

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Catholic Church sought to increase its involvement in public life, politics, and social issue throughout Latin America. In Argentina, this desire led to the Churches involvement—both directly and indirectly—in a series of coups, revolutions, and counter revolutions. At the same time, a fascist, nationalist movement began to form in Argentina, inspired in part by European fascists, though distinct in its deep-seated connection with Catholicism. This ideological movement, called *nacionalismo*, often conflated fascism with Catholicism, and posited violence as the ultimate expression of these beliefs. *Nacionalista* religious violence would not fully actualize until decades later during and in the years preceding Argentina's Dirty War, but traces of it can be seen throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. In the 1940s, Juan Peron rose to power on a wave of fascism, however his increasingly populist and secularist leanings ultimately put him at odds with both the *nacionalistas* and the Catholic Church. His removal from office in 1955—orchestrated by Catholics in the military and supported by the Church—demonstrates the significant amount of influence Catholicism held in Argentina. The combination of the Catholic Churches growing political power and the innately violent nature of *nacionalismo* can help explain many of the social and political upheavals that occurred in Argentina throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. The emergence of this Catholic-fascist kinship contributed significantly to the overthrow of Peron in 1955 and the state terrorism that occurred during Argentina's Dirty War in the 1970s, giving insight into the role that religion plays in government, politics, and revolution.

The growing strength of both the Catholic Church and *nacionalismo* in twentieth century Argentina—fortified by their sympathetic, even cooperative relationship with each other—are essential components of both the rise and fall of Juan Domingo Peron, perhaps the country’s most influential politician of all time. In the 1920’s and 1930’s, the Catholic Church worked to increase its influence and involvement in public life, politics, and social issues in Argentina, following a global trend of Catholic revival. Meanwhile, the fascist *nacionalismo* movement, fundamentally linked to the Catholic faith, also began to form in Argentina—again following wider trends of fascism, particularly in Europe. Although not all clergymen were *nacionalistas*—indeed Catholicism often enabled leftist action like the labor movement—most *nacionalistas* used Catholicism to justify and support their actions, at times with clear endorsement and encouragement from the Church. The movement reached its height in the early 1940s, when Peron rose to power with the support of the Church and a legacy of fascist sympathies. However, his focus on social welfare and his popularity among the working classes quickly distanced him from the *nacionalistas*, and his burgeoning authoritarianism and secularism ultimately alienated the Catholic Church as well. The events leading up to Peron’s removal from office in 1955, which was orchestrated by *nacionalistas* in the military and supported by the Church and Catholic laymen, demonstrate the significant influence of Catholicism and fascism in Argentina. These two elements—Catholicism and fascism—were an underlying current, always moving and shaping the country in some way, and even coming to define Argentina’s fraught twentieth century.

The Catholic Church and *Nacionalismo* in the Early Twentieth Century

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church had lost most of its political power in Argentina. Following a global trend of anti-clericalism, the Argentine state had moved to separate itself from the Catholic Church, removing religious teachings from schools and enacting civil marriage laws (the government no longer recognized religious marriage ceremonies) in the 1880s.¹ In response, the Catholic Church launched “re-Christianization” campaign in the early twentieth century.² It sought to restore a ubiquitous cultural influence, and in the crisis of modernity following World War One—that is, societal trauma and widespread doubt, nihilism and disillusionment with enlightenment ideals—saw an opportunity to reassert itself into public life. In an attempt to fill this vacuum, the Church presented Catholic teachings as the solution to societal problems caused by modernity, such as the widespread poverty and inequality associated with industrialization.³

In Argentina, the Catholic revival movement was marked by the founding of the Argentine Catholic Action group in 1931 and the International Eucharistic Congress of 1934. These coincided with, or perhaps prompted, a resurgence of Church attendance and “outward religious expression.”⁴ The Eucharistic Congress, held in Buenos Aires, drew massive crowds—over one million people, including seven thousand soldiers, received communion.⁵ The participation of military men in the Eucharistic Congress was not insignificant, and reflects a growing participation of the military in Church life and a warming relationship between the two institutions.⁶ In fact, General Justo, then head of the military regime, performed a consecration of

¹ Carlos Alberto Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony: A Critical Sociology of Religion in Latin America* trans. Richard A. Young (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1992), 127.

² Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony*, 131.

³ Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony*, 133.

⁴ Austen Ivereigh, *Catholicism and Politics in Argentina, 1810-1960* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 77.

⁵ Ivereigh, *Catholicism and Politics in Argentina*, 76-77.

⁶ Ivereigh, *Catholicism and Politics in Argentina*, 80.

Argentina during the Congress.⁷ According to Latin American scholar and sociologist Carlos Alberto Torres, this event revealed the Church's new and not insignificant political power, as well as a "growing association of two institutions intimately linked to political domination in the country: the Church and the armed forces."⁸ This connection strengthened as both institutions experienced an increased presence in public life.⁹

The Church additionally employed social Catholicism to attract poor working classes and extend its reach into the labor movement, unionism, and politics. Some clergymen, such as German born Federico Grote, feared the spread of socialism and anarcho-syndicalism among the working class, feeling that these atheistic movements "sought to alienate the worker from God."¹⁰ He thought a Catholic social movement could effectively combat this threat, providing workers with a suitable alternative to socialism and communism.¹¹

The fascism that emerged in Argentina, though undoubtedly influenced by similar movements in Europe, such as German Nazism and Italian fascism, was for the most part "homegrown."¹² Historian Federico Finchelstein considers the country's movement to the right a "national religious experience."¹³ *Nacionalistas*, as they called themselves, closely associated their fascist ideology with their Catholic convictions, so that Catholicism , from the onset, was an innate and inextricable component of Argentine fascism.¹⁴ In fact, many important members of

⁷ Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony*, 135.

⁸ Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony*, 135.

⁹ Iverigh, *Catholicism and Politics in Argentina*, 80.

¹⁰ Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony*, 138.

¹¹ Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony*, 138.

¹² Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 33.

¹³ Federico Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War: Fascism, Populism, and Dictatorship in Twentieth Century Argentina* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 33.

¹⁴ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 33.

the Argentine clergy were also *nacionalistas*. Prominent *nacionalista* priests included Julio Meinvielle, Virgilio Filippo, and Gustavo Franceschi.¹⁵

Nacionalismo grew as a rejection of liberalism, democracy, and modernity and in part as a reaction to increased European—specifically Jewish—immigration.¹⁶ *Nacionalistas* held a fear and hatred of foreigners, especially foreign liberal capitalists, who they thought were working against Argentine interests.¹⁷ Because early *nacionalistas* considered Catholicism essential to Argentine history and national identity,¹⁸ they thusly believed any and all sentiments or entities deemed anti-Catholic were a threat to Argentina and the Argentine way of life.¹⁹ This connects to the *nacionalista* preoccupation with Holy War. They saw themselves as “Gods Warriors” and viewed violence not just as a preemptive defense against evil, but as the ultimate expression of their faith.²⁰ Father Meinvielle argued that “if fascist violence is not implemented, the people begin to fall rapidly into communist chaos. The example of fascist violence is inevitable.”²¹ Violence, they believed, should be enacted against all they considered to be “enemies of Jesus,”²² and thus enemies Argentina—this especially meant communists and Jews.

Nacionalistas believed too in the alliance of the Cross and the Sword, that is, the need to unite the military with Catholic-fascism.²³ They also felt that the armed forces should play a primary role in politics and government, as they were ostensibly Argentina's most loyal defenders.²⁴ This

¹⁵ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 39.

¹⁶ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 16.

¹⁷ Sandra McGee Deutsch, “The Right under Radicalism, 1916-1930,” in *The Argentine Right: Its History and Intellectual Origins, 1910 to the Present*, ed. Sandra McGee Deutsch and Ronald H. Dolkart (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc, 1993), 52.

¹⁸ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 23.

¹⁹ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 51.

²⁰ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 44.

²¹ Quoted in Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 50.

²² Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 39.

²³ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 31.

²⁴ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 31.

early anticipation and justification of violence foreshadows decades of militarism, political unrest, and state sanctioned terrorism.

The Rise of Peronism

Nacionalismo was not prominent in the military until the start of World War II, by which time a definite “nationalist consciousness” had developed among the armed forces.²⁵

Nacionalistas seized upon the admiration many officers felt for European fascism, and used it to gain support and sympathy within the army for their own movement.²⁶ So, By 1943, which Torres characterizes as the “golden age of militant Catholicism ,”²⁷ these various elements—the strengthening bond between the Catholic Church and the military, and the appearance of *nacionalismo* in the political scene—made Argentina ripe for a nacionalista military coup. The June Revolution as they called it, was justified in fascist terms: *nacionalistas* saw it as their duty to take power by any means necessary, including violent force, in order to fulfill the will of God.²⁸

Juan Peron was a prominent member of the military regime that took over after the 1943 June Revolution; he became Minister of War, Secretary of Labor, and then Vice President under the new government. Though he came into the political spotlight through the *nacionalista* coup, Peron was never truly a part of *nacionalismo* or perhaps even any other brand of fascism.²⁹ His ideology for the most part lacked the same level of religious zeal, clericalism and anti-Semitism that was so characteristic of the movement.³⁰ However, Peron was undeniably influenced by

²⁵ Luis Alberto Romero, *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century*. trans. James P. Brennan (University Park, Penn: Pennsylvania University Press, 2002), 87.

²⁶ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 31.

²⁷ Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony*, 139.

²⁸ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 31.

²⁹ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 65.

³⁰ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 65.

fascist doctrine. He had been stationed in Italy from 1936 to 1941, where he closely studied Italian fascism as well as German Nazism. He was very impressed, especially by Benito Mussolini, whom he openly praised.³¹ He saw in these examples of European fascism a “socialism with a national character,” an idea that influenced his vision of a nationalist, non-Marxist socialist state—an alternative to both liberal capitalism and communism.³² This is similar to the idea of the elusive “third way”³³ of governance that the Catholic Church sought, which is neither capitalist nor communist, liberal nor socialist.

Between 1943 and 1945, Peron became increasingly involved in social welfare, trade unions and the labor movement, passing through reforms that gave workers better benefits and paid vacation.³⁴ The military feared his growing power and popularity among the working class and descamisados (“the shirtless ones”), and so forced his resignation on October 9, 1945, and later imprisoned him.³⁵ This sparked a major backlash among his working-class base, who held a demonstration in the Plaza de Mayo on October 17, demanding Peron’s release from Prison. Bending to public pressure, the government released Peron, who then announced his candidacy for President.³⁶

Peron’s 1946 presidential campaign created an alliance between the newly formed Labor Party and a faction of the Radical Party, and also attracted members of the Catholic Church.³⁷ Father Virgilio Filippo, a parish Priest in Buenos Aires, was an early supporter of Peronism and promoted the movements connection to Catholicism, claiming it was based on the social

³¹ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 7.

³² Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 75.

³³ Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony*, 134.

³⁴ Romero, *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century*, 93.

³⁵ Romero, *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century*, 93.

³⁶ Richard J Walter, “The Right under Radicalism, 1916-1930,” in *The Argentine Right: Its History and Intellectual Origins, 1910 to the Present*, ed. Sandra McGee Deutsch and Ronald H. Dolkart (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc, 1993), 108.

³⁷ Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony*, 139.

teachings of the Catholic Church.³⁸ This holds some truth, as both Peron and the Church had concerned themselves with social welfare issues, however this common interest was perhaps superficial, and would ultimately turn to competition in the later years of Peron’s presidency. Filippo was also a fervent anti-communist and saw Peron as “the best antidote for stopping the march of socialism in Argentina.”³⁹ This follows the idea of using social Catholicism to combat Marxist ideology among the working classes and thus and gain their popular support, a strategy which Peron adopted and successfully deployed. But the entente between the Catholic Church and Peron was born less out of a genuine like-mindedness, and more from mutual political need. The Church saw in Peron an opportunity to protect themselves from the anti-clericalism of his opponents while also gaining political power.⁴⁰ They would abandon him once the alliance lost its political expediency. For Peron, the Church’s indorsement played a key role in his election, Torres even goes so far as to claim the Churches support as “fundamental” to his victory.⁴¹

While the Church enjoyed preferential treatment in the early Peron years—influence over the new constitution, protection and expansion of religious instruction in schools⁴² —the *nacionalistas* saw no such favor. After 1946, they received little attention from the President, lost most of their influence, and soon shrank into the political margins. Though they were purportedly “politically dormant” at this time, most *nacionalistas* privately resented Peron; they felt he had coopted their movement to gain political power, corrupted the Catholic-fascist ideology, and then tossed it aside.⁴³ They also criticized him for being too pragmatic and too quick to compromise his principles for political gain. Father Meinvielle would claim after

³⁸ Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony*, 140.

³⁹ Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony*, 139.

⁴⁰ John Frederick Schwaller, *The History of the Catholic Church in Latin America: From Conquest to Revolution and Beyond* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 218.

⁴¹ Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony*, 140.

⁴² Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony*, 148.

⁴³ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 95.

Peron's fall that "the Revolution of 1943 was appropriated by a demagogue who seized and corrupted the flags raised by a generation of 1930 to 1943."⁴⁴ *Nacionalistas* had hoped for a brief moment that Peron's history of fascist leanings, his strong stance against liberalism and communism, and his connection to the Catholic Church could mean a renewal of *nacionalista* dominance, but they were quickly disappointed. Ultimately, however, the *nacionalistas* begrudgingly accepted Peron as "an undeniable reality."⁴⁵ Considering him the lesser of two evils, they did not openly oppose the president until his alliance with the Church and military had ended.

Peron's Downfall

Some of the first conflicts between the Catholic Church and Peron were sparked by Peron's second wife Eva Maria—or Evita as she was affectionately known to supporters—and her considerable amount of political activity. As First Lady, Evita was extremely involved in social welfare issues, setting up a foundation in her name that funded a number of schools, orphanages, hospitals, and other charities.⁴⁶ This activism intruded on territory of the Catholic Church; Evita's programs, which were often more effective than those of the Church, directly threatened one of their main vehicles for social power and influence.⁴⁷ Evita's public criticism of the bourgeoisies, rejection of oligarchy, and her commitment to the working class made her a symbol of the Peronist movement and a rallying point for the *descamisados*—a stature that alarmed both the Church and the military for its potential to "radicalize Peronism." The passage of women's suffrage and the changing role of women in Argentina, both of which Evita had a significant impact on, upset the traditionalism and patriarchal values of the Church and

⁴⁴ Quoted in Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 95.

⁴⁵ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 95.

⁴⁶ Romero, *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century*, 107.

⁴⁷ Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony*, 143.

military.⁴⁸ Peron accused factions of the Church and military of attacking Evita—an accusation he would often repeat after her death during the deterioration of his relationship with the clergy.

In his second term as President, Peron began to distance himself from the Church and expressed interest in separation between Church and State. This is perhaps due to Peron's own personality and egotism, rather than any one specific issue.⁴⁹ Certainly, Peron felt threatened by the Church, and his authoritarian nature would not allow any institution as powerful as the Catholic Church to hold such an active role in political and public life.⁵⁰ He was especially wary of the Churches involvement in the labor movement and feared a "massive intervention by the Church in the working world in an attempt to compete with the Peronist unions."⁵¹

The Churches animosity stemmed from a similar place as Peron's. In addition to the threat of Evita's charity work, the cult of personality surrounding Peron and the frequent deification of him and Evita undermined the Church's authority by placing the President at times above God.⁵² Indeed, Father Franceschi accused schools, which were now required to teach Peronist propaganda, of comparing Evita to the Virgin Mary in textbooks.⁵³ This worship of the Evita and Juan Peron vexed the *nacionalistas* as well, who, unlike other fascist ideologs, did not elevate their leaders to a god-like status; *nacionalistas* insisted on the supremacy of God above all.⁵⁴ The phenomenon of sacralization only intensified with Evita's death, and the public cry for her canonization.⁵⁵ Furthermore, Peron represented a rift between the letter and the spirit of

⁴⁸ Goldwert, *Democracy, militarism, and Nationalism in Argentina*, 110.

⁴⁹ Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony*, 146.

⁵⁰ Schwaller, *The History of the Catholic Church in Latin America*, 219.

⁵¹ Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony*, 146.

⁵² Russell E. Fitzgibbon, "Church Alone Challenges Peron," *Washington Post and Times Herald* Apr 03, 1955.

ProQuest

⁵³ David Rock, *Authoritarian Argentina the Nationalist Movement, Its History, and Its Impact* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 117.

⁵⁴ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 36.

⁵⁵ Fitzgibbon, "Church Alone Challenges Peron."

Christianity—or as Sociologist Floreal Forni puts it “the two Christianities;” one being for the people, the other for the ecclesiastical hierarchy.⁵⁶ Peronism aligned with popular Catholicism, and thus rejected the institutionalized, Constantinian Catholic Church.⁵⁷

Tensions reached their highest point between 1954 and 1955. In November 1954 the Christian Democratic Party was established, which Peron accused of being a collusion between his enemies, i.e. the communists, liberals, conservatives, nationalists and clergy.⁵⁸ Over the following year, Peron ended religious teachings in school, legalized divorce and prostitution, threatened to tax Church property, and jailed a number of Catholic priests.⁵⁹ Peron’s legalization of prostitution and divorce seems to be an entirely antagonistic move, whereas removal of religious teachings in school was more pragmatic in nature: limiting the influence of the Catholic Church while also sending a message of power and defiance to the clergy.⁶⁰ In 1954 he publicly broke with Church, declaring it an enemy of the state and people. This represented a break with *nacionalistas* as well, who considered an attack against the Church an attack against themselves.⁶¹

The conflict came to head on June 11, 1955, when thousands of people gathered in front of the Buenos Aires Cathedral for the annual Corpus Christi Procession, despite Peron’s ban of the event. Demonstrators marched on the Plaza de Mayo and raised the Vatican flag over the congressional building.⁶² This single action in itself carries a lot of significance, visually embodying a loyalty to the Pope that superseded allegiance to Peron. Some accounts of the

⁵⁶ Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony*, 144.

⁵⁷ Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony*, 144.

⁵⁸ Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony*, 147.

⁵⁹ Goldwert, *Democracy, militarism, and Nationalism in Argentina*, 122.

⁶⁰ Fitzgibbon, "Church Alone Challenges Peron."

⁶¹ Walter, "The Right under Radicalism," 115.

⁶² Edward A. Morrows, "Argentina Seizes 250 at Cathedral in Wake of Crash" *New York Times*, Jun 13 1955. *ProQuest*.

Corpus Christi demonstrations even involve the burning of the Argentine national flag and the breaking into Peronist newspaper offices, though these claims were never substantiated. The next day was marked by unrest, acts of vandalism, and clashes between protesters and counter protesters. On June 13, two hundred and fifty Catholics were arrested inside the Cathedral, and on the 14th two priests were expelled from Argentina⁶³--major acts of hostility towards the Church.

In an address broadcast on the evening of June 13, Peron openly attacked the Catholic Church. He warned against the insidiousness of oligarchy, pointing especially to its resilience among the clergy. He blamed these oligarchic forces for the declining relations between the government and the Catholic Church, claiming the Church chose the side of oligarchy instead of Peron and the people. He criticized the Churches growing involvement in politics and emphasizes the importance of separation between Church and state. He went so far as to call the Church unchristian and “a wolf in sheep’s clothing.”⁶⁴ Three days later, nationalist Catholic factions within the Navy bombed the Plaza de Mayo in an attempted assassination of President Peron.⁶⁵ In retaliation, Unionists and Peronist set fire to Churches and cathedrals across Buenos Aires, which in turn prompted the Pope to formally excommunicate Juan Peron.⁶⁶

Though unsuccessful, the June 16 assassination attempt paved the way for Peron’s eventual removal just a few months later.

On September 16, 1955 General Eduardo Lonardi, a Catholic nationalist, led a military revolt against the Peronists government, which received considerable civilian support, primarily

⁶³Morrows, “Argentina Seizes 250”

⁶⁴Quoted in "Excerpts from Peron's Speech on Church Feud." *New York Times*, Jun 14 1955. *ProQuest*.

⁶⁵ Romero, *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century*, 129.

⁶⁶ Romero, *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century*, 129.

from Catholic laymen.⁶⁷ By September 22 Peron had fled to Paraguay, from where he would eventually fly to Spain.⁶⁸ After the coup, the alliance between the Church and the military deepened and intensified.⁶⁹ In a pamphlet dated later that year, right wing ideolog Joran Bruno Genta explained that “Only Catholic and military politics can control the Masonic and communist decay of the homeland,”⁷⁰ a statement which reflects the *nacionalista* desire for a union between the Church and the army. Atilio Boron, an Argentine sociologist, calls this the “authoritarian alliance” and blames it for the political instability that plagued Argentina for three decades to follow.⁷¹

Political Instability and *Nacionalismo* Violence

After the *Revolución Libertadora*, Argentina entered a period of revolving door regimes; military juntas would yield to attempted civilian administrations, which in turn were inevitably toppled by the military.⁷² Like in in the Revolution of 1943, *nacionalistas* saw the overthrow of Peron as their opportunity to take power. However, their ticket to political dominance, General Lonardi, was ousted just two months into his presidency.⁷³ In the following years of political turbulence, *nacionalistas* would hold some positions within the government with varying degrees of power and authority. Really, the *nacionalistas* asserted control most actively and effectively through “paramilitary squads,” various bands of civilians, students, youths, and ex-military men.⁷⁴ These groups were all characterized by Catholic fascism, violence, terrorism, anti-

⁶⁷ Romero, *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century*, 130.

⁶⁸ Romero, *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century*, 130.

⁶⁹ Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony*, 150.

⁷⁰ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 95.

⁷¹ Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony*, 150.

⁷² Walter, “The Right under Radicalism,” 119.

⁷³ Leonardo Senkman, “The Right and Civilian Regimes, 1955-1976.” in *The Argentine Right: Its History and Intellectual Origins, 1910 to the Present*, ed. Sandra McGee Deutsch and Ronald H. Dolkart (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc, 1993), 119.

⁷⁴ Senkman, “The Right and Civilian Regimes,” 126.

Semitism, and authoritarian rhetoric.⁷⁵ With Peron gone and a series of unstable governments coming in and out of power, the force and influence of Catholic Church found its best conduit among these *nacionalista* organizations throughout the late 1950s and 1960s, and into the 1970s.

The earliest, and perhaps most prominent of such groups was the Movement Nacionalista Tacuara (formed in 1955), often referred to simply as Tacuara, which was made up of a new generation young *nacionalistas* who considered themselves heirs to the original movement of the 1920s and 1930s.⁷⁶ Like their predecessors, they considered Catholicism an integral part of their ideology, and also like their predecessors, enjoyed continual support from leading Catholic intellectuals and members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, including Father Meinvielle.⁷⁷ Highly influenced by Meinvielle and the doctrine of the Cross and the Sword, Tacuaras viewed violence as an essential player in politics and government,⁷⁸ and thought violent action would bring them political power and legitimacy.⁷⁹ They sought to actualize this old ideology, envisioning themselves as the “soldiers of Catholic Argentina”⁸⁰ in a holy war against communists, leftists, and Jews.

Tacuara mainly recruited students from Catholic secondary Schools and youths with traditionalist, Catholic, anti-communist backgrounds--usually from middle class or formerly elite, upper class families.⁸¹ What started out as a mobilization of students for the return of religious teaching in schools, by the 1960s was a militant right wing terror group.⁸² This transformation suggests an insidious avenue from Catholic institutions to organized

⁷⁵ Senkman, “The Right and Civilian Regimes,” 126.

⁷⁶ Senkman, “The Right and Civilian Regimes,” 126.

⁷⁷ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 97.

⁷⁸ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 96.

⁷⁹ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 101.

⁸⁰ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 109.

⁸¹ Senkman, “The Right and Civilian Regimes,” 126.

⁸² Rock, *Authoritarian Argentina*, 205.

nacionalismo violence. Members of Tacuara received military training, and were responsible for a number bank robberies, bombings and plane hijackings, in addition to the violent attacks, kidnappings, and murders of Jews and left-wing activists.⁸³ Their crimes went largely unpunished, the government being indifferent at best, and tacitly sympathetic at worst⁸⁴--it indirectly benefited from the group's targeting of communist and student movements.⁸⁵

The Tacuara reflects the tradition in Argentina of justifying violence with Catholicism and the perennial link between the Catholic Church, the army, and *nacionalismo*. Indeed, after leaving the group, Tacuara's leader, Alberto Ezcurra, went on to become a Catholic Priest, and later an active, open supporter of the final military government and the Dirty war (1976-1983).⁸⁶ Tacuara, its offshoots, and its connections with the Church, state, and security forces influenced the development of the Alianza Anticomunista Argentina (The Argentine Anticommunist Alliance, or the Triple A).⁸⁷ The Triple A was a clerico-fascist terror group, which, after Peron's return to Argentina for a third presidential term in 1973, became a full-fledged Paramilitary organization.⁸⁸ When Peron's second wife, Isabel, who was more conservative than her husband, replaced him as president at his death in 1974, she became the de facto head of the Triple-A.⁸⁹

During Isabel Peron's reign, the Triple-A became essentially a death squad, and was instrumental in her violent repression of leftist Guerilla groups.⁹⁰ This repression enabled the military regime that overthrew Peron, by effectively crippling the only leftist force that could

⁸³ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 99.

⁸⁴ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 101.

⁸⁵ Senkman, "The Right and Civilian Regimes," 126.

⁸⁶ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 109.

⁸⁷ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 114.

⁸⁸ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 113.

⁸⁹ Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 117.

⁹⁰ Senkman, "The Right and Civilian Regimes," 133.

have opposed it. This in turn paved the way for escalating *nacionalismo* violence and religiously justified State terrorism.

Conclusion: Holy War

From 1973 to 1983 the military regime headed by General Jorge Rafael Videla waged war against its own citizens, committing countless crimes against humanity. In the Dirty War, between 15,000 and 30,000 people were “disappeared” by task forces of the government—alleged subversives were kidnapped, killed, tortured, and kept in concentration camps.⁹¹

Retuning once again to the doctrine of the Cross and the Sword, the regime used Catholic-fascist ideology to justify the elimination of anyone deemed a threat or potential threat to the state—that is, anyone they saw as opposing “God and His Christian Argentina.”⁹² In the years since the Dirty War, the Catholic Church in Argentina has faced accusations of passivity and even complicity in state violence. These accusations of silence are particularly troubling, given that Jorge Mario Bergoglio, now Pope Frances, was head of the Jesuit order, and thus a prominent figure in the Church hierarchy of the time. Whether or not clergymen directly participated in murder and human rights violations, the Catholic Church and the ecclesiastical hierarchy hold a considerable amount of responsibility for their engagement, encouragement, and empowerment of the nationalist and fascist ideologies that fed the Dirty War. Through its significant involvement in Juan Peron’s rise to power, as well as the military coup against him, the Catholic Church has demonstrated itself as a force to be reckoned with. The Church’s immense power in the mid-twentieth century—combined with the rise of *nacionalismo* and the tradition of pairing religion, fascism, and violence in Argentina—made a profound impact on Argentine politics and

⁹¹ Juan E. Méndez, "Argentina," in *Encyclopedia of Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity*, ed. Dinah L. Shelton (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), *World History in Context*

⁹² Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 125.

society, contributing the overthrow of an extremely popular leader and the decades of political turmoil and state terrorism that followed.

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