

## 4 State and Anarchy

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In 2004, one of the few survivors of the Argentine urban guerrilla group Montoneros, Roberto Galimberti, better known as Galimba or El Loco (the Madman), died of natural causes. The conservative newspaper *La Nación* wrote: “He embodied many of the evils that have plagued Argentina over the past three decades: the end of utopias, the celebration of violence, the justification of torture, incoherence, careerism, sham pacts, culture light, hunger for power, egocentricity, and a complete lack of self-criticism.” (13 February 2002)

The Montoneros, founded in 1970 as the armed left-wing Catholic arm of Peronism, had around 30,000 supporters and 5,000 armed members in the mid-1970s. Their demonstrations, accompanied by singing and heavy drumming, shook the city. When Perón returned from exile in 1973 and a brief period of democracy prevailed until 1976, he made it clear that his Peronism, which had since shifted to the right and was hardly centrist anymore, had nothing to do with the left and certainly not with the Montoneros. At first, he wanted to use them as pawns on his chessboard of power. For example, as Minister of Social Welfare. But they did not play along. Perón gave the ministry to his loyal secretary in exile in Spain, the mystic Lopez Rega, known as the Wizard. He became the organiser of right-wing terror.

When Perón landed at Ezeiza airport in 1973 and was greeted by hundreds of thousands of people celebrating his return, Lopez Rega, as a member of the organising committee, had grouped the right-wing Peronist groups in such a way that they blocked the exit and the route to Perón for the Montoneros. When they opened fire, the Montoneros and bystanders fled, 38 were left dead. This was a clear signal, followed by further attacks. These were carried out by the newly founded terrorist group “Triple A” (*Alianza Anticomunista Argentina*). It targeted key figures in public life, universities and trade unions. It is well known that Lopez Rega led the group and that two leading police officers, Vilar and Margaride, supervised its operations. The Montoneros chant at their demonstrations: “Montonero, el pueblo te lo pide, queremos la cabeza de Villar y Margaride” (Montonero, the people ask you, we want the heads of Villar and Margaride). It was only much later proven that Perón founded the terrorist group. In gratitude, in 1974 he promoted Lopez Rega, a simple retired police

officer, to general commissioner with a decree issued especially for him, skipping 12 ranks.

“Triple A” also has an ideological media presence in the form of the weekly right-wing extremist magazine “*El Caudillo*” (The Leader). In 1973, shortly after Perón’s election as president, it declared leftists and liberals to be its main enemies in the press. Its worldview is strictly conservative, more oriented towards clerical fascism than the disruptive movement of National Socialism. Its humour is often anti-Semitic. It would be wrong to think that this magazine would be a good fit for the coup-plotting military. The military are not automatically fascists. Some are technocratic modernisers, others are primarily interested in pacifying the country.

They fail in economic matters just as much as their civilian colleagues. Even Economy Minister Celestino Rodrigo, a protégé of Lopez Rega, fails. In 1975, less than a year before the military coup, he announces a particularly original measure to curb uncontrolled inflation: a sudden and significant price increase, especially for consumer goods. Of course, no one finds this acceptable. The protests are so violent that Rodrigo not only has to reverse the measures immediately, but he and Lopez Rega also have to resign. The “wizard” leaves the country and is given the post of ambassador to Spain. But “*El Caudillo*” also falls from grace, and the editor Felipe Romero closes the magazine and flees abroad.

Ten years later, Lopez Rega was arrested in the United States and extradited to Argentina. There he was convicted of forming a criminal organisation, kidnapping and murder in connection with the trials of those responsible for state crimes. He died while awaiting sentencing. We will see how the caudillos shaped the political culture after the independence of what are now the Argentine provinces and led the country into a long civil war. The title “caudillo” therefore goes back much further than just the last caudillo in Spain, Francisco Franco. The caudillos ruled their provinces like warlords, were anti-Enlightenment and rejected modernisation through the global market. This spirit is reflected in pompous programmatic statements such as this one:

The country is tired of the trials and tribulations of eternal politicians without votes, of old traditions, of those who wield synarchic power, of the tabloid press and of those who serve anti-patriotism. Tired of those who persecuted San Martin (the liberator of South America, WH) when he was ill and returned to his homeland to find the peace he deserved as the hero of a hundred battles [...] self-appointed defenders of freedom and democracy overthrew the ‘tyrant’ Perón for the crime of saving the great men of our history from the shadow of oblivion and building on their shoulders the great Argentina, which is just, free and sovereign. [...] Eighteen years of struggle, full of martyrs who gave everything without asking for anything in return, years of misery, persecution and imprisonment, crucibles in which the people proved themselves as soldiers and citizens, years in which they

learned to love their fatherland with a vocation to serve, sacrificing the lives of their children, brothers and fathers in the Holocaust of sacred goals: to give us, not so long ago, the final return of the leader of this new Argentina.” (“El Caudillo,” 1975)

**Military Dictatorship** After Perón’s death, his wife Isabel took over the reins of government. But it was Lopez Rega who pulled the strings, escalating the violence and the confrontations between the Montoneros and the Trotskyist Revolutionary Workers’ Party (PRT) with its Revolutionary People’s Army (ERP) on the one hand and the police and army on the other. Since 1930, there have been six coups, each followed by the restoration of democracy. The most recent coup in 1976 was the most brutal and aimed at a “national reorganisation.”

Whereas in the past such words meant the elimination of Peronism in favour of large rural landowners, now the aim was primarily to eliminate rebellious young people, students, intellectuals and trade unionists. An estimated 30,000 people were kidnapped and tortured to reveal the names of friends or comrades, and then murdered. Or they were killed outright without interrogation. Their bodies disappeared without a trace.

There were 700 secret detention, torture and extermination centres, including ESMA, Campo de Mayo, El Olimpo and Automotores Orletti in Buenos Aires and the notorious La Perla torture centre in the province of Córdoba. 400 children were born in these centres under prison conditions and put up for adoption. They grew up with false names in foreign families, often military families. Their mothers were murdered after giving birth. 10,000 people were imprisoned for political reasons, 340,000 went into exile, and 20,000 factories closed. (Clarín, 10 December 2021) Crimes of the state, rightly described as state terrorism.

Four thousand people were murdered in the rooms of the ESMA (Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada, Higher School of Mechanics of the Navy) in Buenos Aires. An idyllic park between the sea and the urban avenue, Avenida del Libertador 8151, with several low houses in a pleasant style, an officers’ area, a canteen, an infirmary and accommodation, with the forgery workshop in the basement. Under the roof, the detainees waited for their end in the summer heat or freezing cold when names were called out in the morning.

Today, the ESMA is a memorial and museum with 17 exhibition rooms. Videos with testimonies from survivors are shown where they were held captive, decades later, grey-haired, aged, thoughtful. Unlike at the time of their imprisonment. There are well over 700 testimonies of crimes against humanity in trials for the disappearance of arrested and kidnapped persons in 1984, the trial against the juntas in 1985 and the trials for the reopening of proceedings. In 2024, President Milei ordered the at least partial closure of this crime and memorial site.

**Testimonies** The disappeared are occasionally able to leave messages. Elisabeth Patricia Marcuzzo was abducted in Mar del Plata in October 1977 and taken to the ESMA while three months pregnant. She gave birth to her son Sebastian there in April 1978. Before her disappearance, she managed to write a “Letter to Sebastian” and send it to her mother.

“Dear Mum,

Today, after such a long time without hearing from me, you receive a message. I am very sorry that I did not write to you sooner, but it was not possible because I was out of the country on business. This is my little boy. His name is SEBASTIAN, and I had him at a clinic in Buenos Aires. He weighed 3,800 kilos and was born with forceps. I am very well and in perfect health. The person who brought me the child is a friend of mine. He is doing me a favour because I can't do it at the moment, but I want you to stay calm because I am very well and I will be in touch again.

The child was born on 15 April. I want you to write that down. I'm sending you his clothes and his milk. I've been breastfeeding him until now, giving him Bifilac milk in addition during the first few days. Now he'll probably take 150 grams or more, because he's a big eater. He's quite calm and only wakes up once in the morning. The bottles are not boiled. And there is only one teat with a hole in it. I am sending some gifts for the babies. Big kisses to everyone. And especially to Sebastian. I don't want you to worry about me. I repeat that I am very well and that I will see you again. At the moment, it is not possible for me to come home. Mum, I hope the baby will comfort you in the face of uncertainty. Love him very much, he's a treasure. Give my love to Dad, who shouldn't worry about me either. A kiss to all my loved ones, please take care of yourselves. I hope to be there very soon and will do my best to make it happen. All that remains is for me to send you all four a big kiss. And one to Sebastian. I know it sounds incomprehensible, but you know how I think, and I also know that you don't agree with what I'm doing.

Everything will turn out for the best.

Paty

(Clarín, 27 June 2016)

A newspaper report looks back on the incident:

“They arrive at your front door in the morning, walk behind you in the park, follow you into the botanical garden, stand at the door of the café, stop you on the street. They take you to a green mid-range Ford Falcon. You know who they are and where you're going. When several of them come into your flat, they take everything they can carry. “They took televisions, bicycles, furniture, bookshelves, refrigerators, washing machines, fans, stoves, carpets [...] everything you can imagine. Everything was taken from the homes of those who were kidnapped,” says a

female survivor. Her statement is part of the trial against the military. (Clarín, 10 December 2021)

In September 1976, five Montoneros from the national secretariat, Alberto José Molina Benuzzi, Ignacio José Bertrán, Ismael Salame, José Carlos Coronel and Victoria Walsh, gathered for a secret meeting in the Floresta district of Buenos Aires. The military, police and gendarmerie knew about this and arrived with 200 armed men from Army Battalion 601, two armoured vehicles, three military trucks and a helicopter. Soldiers were stationed on the surrounding rooftops. Due to the resistance of the Montoneros, the battle lasts two hours, until four of those present are shot dead, while Victoria Walsh, the daughter of the well-known writer and journalist Rodolfo Walsh, takes her own life in the face of the hopeless situation. Her one-year-old daughter, who was present, is taken away by the military and later handed over to family members. In deep mourning, her father writes in a “Letter to Friends”:

My daughter was determined not to surrender alive. [...] Vicki could have chosen other paths that would not have been dishonourable. But the one she chose was the most just, the most generous, the most reasonable. Her bright death sums up her short, wonderful life. She did not live for herself, but for others, and those others are millions. Her death, however, belongs gloriously to her alone. I draw strength from this pride, and I will be reborn from her.

He too is a Montonero, lured into an ambush by the military in 1977 and shot dead. Four members of the family who owned the apartment were arrested and tortured. Forty-five years later, ten soldiers were charged with murder. (télam, 29 September 2023).

Stolen children are outlaws, some go through hell, like María Ramírez:

My life is like an odyssey, a life full of trials [...] In 1974, when I was two years old, my father and another friend were kidnapped one morning from our home in Quilmes. [...] In the early morning of 14 March 1977, we hugged my mother for the last time as we were surrounded by soldiers and bullets were flying everywhere. The operation was terrible, the bullets wouldn't stop. I was four years old, Carlos was five and Mariano was two. They shot my mother and two other comrades. Why did all this have to happen? Why did my brothers and I have to go out through the back window? And without my mother. Before he let us jump, he hugged us long and hard. It wasn't a normal hug. It was a goodbye hug. I remember his last words: “Maria, I love you” [...], just like my two brothers [...] The three of us were taken to the Casa de Belén home, which belongs to the municipality of Banfield. When we got there, we were baptised again and our surname, Ramírez, was changed to

Maciel. We were given the surname of the militiaman who owned the home. Our new parents demanded that we call them Mum and Dad, which was impossible. But when I could no longer bear the beatings, I gave in and called Dominga and Manuel Maciel by those names.

They gave us military godparents; my new godfather took me to work with him in secret centres where the walls were covered in blood rather than paint. Once I wasn't allowed in because people were 'working' inside; you could hear the music very loudly, the windows were closed. But as I waited there for my godfather, I could hear people screaming in the background. Screams of pain.

That home was hell. [...] It was a prison for children who had been kidnapped and kept as NN. We were there for almost seven years, yes, there were eight of us children. I felt like I was buried alive because the treatment was inhumane. There was no affection and no life. It was completely forbidden to talk to each other. We were always silent. We couldn't play, read, paint or have friends. I suffered greatly when they took Carlos, my brother, as their own son because he was very intelligent. Manuel's wish was to make him a soldier. Carlos also had to survive, and he did things that he suffers greatly from today. My own brother made us suffer because Manuel and the military gave him instructions on how to put pressure on us.

Night was another terrible time. [...] To this day, I still find it difficult to sleep. Why? Because the Casa de Belén served as an operations base at night. The military held their meetings in the dining room and then went to the girls' dormitory. I couldn't sleep because of the sexual abuse and the fear that they would separate the three of us. There was daily physical and psychological violence and sexual abuse of girls and boys. Yes, this was to force us to forget our parents and everything we had received from our families. Every time we complained about our parents, the punishments were intensified. In order to survive, I had a strategy: I told myself that they could break my body, but not my soul. Because that's where I had my mother. She was my secret and my angel. It wasn't just Manuel, there were other soldiers who abused me. I had no one. I asked the priest in Banfield for help, and he gave me Manuel and Dominga. And death was always close. All of this was meant to break us forever. They told us, "We don't want you to become like your criminal parents, drunks and prostitutes." That's why we were punished. My mother always appeared like an angel in the darkness. She gave me love and reminded me how much she loved me. And I still thank her today for the love she gave me during the four years we were together. Without her, it would be difficult to find the strength to survive.

My father suffered seven years in prison and searched for us from there. The search was very long, and with a lot of help, he was able to find us. When we were released in 1983, we had to go to Sweden to meet our father, who had gone into exile when he was released from prison. That is where we are now at home. And I felt another crisis because I couldn't understand my freedom. I couldn't remember my dad, I couldn't remember his face, no matter how hard I tried, but I was sure we had visited him in prison. I lacked confidence, I didn't trust anyone. And I didn't trust him either, I didn't know if he was really my father. Judge Pons and Manuel

and Dominga had told me many things against my father, that he was the devil himself. For a long time, I slept with a knife under my pillow because I was afraid of him.

For years I was lost, like a blind woman without a cane. And not only blind, but also with a conviction that prevented me from breathing. The identity crisis and the bitterness of having lost so many things: my childhood, my toys, my family, my country and my opportunities. My salvation was the support of my family, but at the same time I was afraid of dying. Then I started studying, painting and seeking professional help. Without this help, I would still be a person without an identity and a prisoner on the loose. Today, I have regained the affection of my father and my family, and I can see the puzzle in large pieces. But I am aware that pieces are missing; I was very broken. Painting helps me to live. I also became a nurse to hold on to life, despite everything. That is my task in order to live, not just to survive. My mother is a heroine, like many of my classmates from those years. I am proud and share with my parents the struggle for freedom and against all injustice. This struggle continues today in various forms. Today, we want those responsible for the Casa de Belén to be brought to justice and punished, and we want what was done to those of us who were there to be recognised as a crime against humanity.

In her novel "My Name is Luz," Elsa Osorio describes the fate of an adolescent adoptee. After extensive research, writer Juan Gelman was able to locate his granddaughter Macarena Gelman in Uruguay in 2000, where she had been adopted by a member of the military. In February 2011, a trial was held against former dictators Jorge Rafael Videla and Reynaldo Bignone for multiple child abductions and handing children over to government supporters. Videla, then 86, was sentenced to 50 years in prison, and Bignone, 84, to 15 years. (*Die Zeit*, 6 July 2012)

Almost 30 years after the dictatorship, former Argentine dictator Jorge Rafael Videla has admitted for the first time that he ordered the murder and disappearance of thousands of government opponents during what he called the "Dirty War." "Let's say there were about 7,000 or 8,000 people who had to die to win the war against subversion," he said. We couldn't execute them, but we couldn't bring them to trial either. A feigned dilemma to somehow save his own skin. He admitted that his government had political opponents abducted and, in some cases, had babies stolen, which he again tried to excuse with unfavourable circumstances, namely the demands of war. "There was no other solution," he explained. "We agreed that there was a price to pay to win the war, and we had to keep it secret so that the country wouldn't see what was happening." Then he finally confessed to the constant abduction of babies.

While Videla acknowledged the targeted killing of thousands of opposition members, he rejected the use of the term "disappeared" because it falsely implied something mysterious. The correct term, he said, was that "in every war [...] there

is a list of victims, murdered and disappeared people, whose whereabouts are unknown." Here, too, the excuse applies: "It is a regrettable consequence of war."

An even more brazen lie is the claim that placing the children of killed opposition members in the care of supporters of the military government was an act of charity.

Videla's sudden decision to speak out had nothing to do with remorse. He and other military personnel convicted of human rights crimes believed that Eduardo Duhalde would grant them amnesty if he were elected. They were mistaken. (Reuter, 14 April 2012) Stupidity and a lack of foresight are the qualities that sooner or later cause a military man to fail in his thinking and actions.

"I regret nothing and sleep very well every night," said Videla. "I carry a burden on my soul and want to make a contribution, take responsibility to help society understand what happened and make it easier for officers who are lower in rank than me." He wanted to justify the crimes and remove moral doubts from his subordinates. A military dictatorship does not only mean the suspension of democracy as a form of government, but above all the violation of human rights and complete arbitrariness towards the constitution and laws. (Reuter, 14 April 2012)

**The Death Flights** Organised disappearances. First there are rumours and speculation, then assumptions based on bodies washed up on the coast of Uruguay; later someone has the idea of looking for logbooks. And finds them. And finds entries from flights that take off for a short time and soon return. Entries made in the naive belief that bureaucratic order must prevail and that no charges would ever be brought against anyone in the military. "Get ready, you're going to La Plata," is the announcement of death, either by pistol or by SC-7 Skyvan turboprop transporter. Before the flight, the victims were injected with the sedative sodium thiopental, supposedly a vaccination. They are told they are being flown to freedom, music is played, and the prisoners are asked to dance. Then they have to undress, and the large hatch is opened. This pretence of a different reality is reminiscent of the fate of the victims before entering the Nazi gas chambers.

Three founding members of the human rights organisation "Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo" and two French nuns were also flown to their deaths. Between 180 and 200 flights, each carrying 13 to 17 victims, were made in 1977 and 1978, always on Wednesdays, according to the defendant Adolfo Scilingo, who claims to have flown only twice. In Spain, he is sentenced to more than 1,000 years in prison for 30 murders during death flights. Another pilot, who is arrested in Spain in 2009 and extradited to Argentina a year later, works as a pilot for a Dutch airline. The aircraft still exists; it is found in Florida and returns to the ESMA as an exhibit.

The practice of "disappearing" people by plane did not originate in Argentina, but dates back to French experiences in the Algerian War (1954–1962) and the suppression of the uprising in Madagascar in 1947. After the Cuban Revolution in 1959, South America was rocked by widespread social unrest and guerrilla movements. In

response, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia and Brazil cooperated with the United States in Operation Condor – a cross-border counterinsurgency strategy that reportedly claimed the lives of around 400,000 civilians in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s

French veterans of the Algerian War acted as key advisors and imparted the so-called “French doctrine,” which relied on secret arrests, torture, illegal killings and the disappearance of suspects. This strategy was applied already under President Isabel Perón, who in 1975 authorised the armed forces to wipe out “subversion” in the province of Tucumán. There, General Antonio Bussi, a student of French General Aussaresses, led the crackdown on the ERP guerrilla group. Aussaresses had previously been active in several wars and was an expert in torture. Colonel Robert Servant, who arrived in Argentina in 1974 as head of the French military mission, also taught in this matter. At the same time, former members of the French secret group OAS influenced the right-wing extremist Argentine organisation Triple A. In the same year, eleven marine special forces units were formed to combat “subversion”, which were directly subordinate to the secret service.

The secret “Plan de Capacidades de la Armada,” of which only 20 copies existed, gave the navy sovereignty over rivers and ports and obliged it to track down and destroy subversive groups with the help of other armed forces – with the aim of securing order, property and state authority. However, these methods had already been used before.

In 1958, three years after Perón’s overthrow, the Conintes Plan was introduced. Decree 9.880 allowed the Frondizi government to ban strikes and order military intervention in the event of internal unrest. Demonstrators were convicted as terrorists by military courts. The country was divided into military zones based on industrial areas in order to suppress worker protests, student movements and the first guerrilla actions of the United Revolutionary Front. The aim was to combat “terrorism” in order to prevent anarchy and coup attempts. During the plan’s two-year run, thousands were arrested, at least 111 were convicted in summary trials, and tens of thousands of public sector employees were conscripted into military service. In 1960, even tougher laws replaced the plan.

At one point, ESMA prisoners were transported to the island of “El Silencio,” which was used by Task Force 3.3 in 1979. They were to be hidden from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), which was conducting an inspection visit in response to more than a thousand complaints from the island. The island belongs to the Archdiocese of Buenos Aires. The name of the island is fitting not only for the disappearance of the victims, but also for the silence surrounding them, their invisibility and their voicelessness. The Catholic Church collaborated extensively with the military dictatorship. But when the IACHR arrived, the families went to the office of the Organisation of American States (OAS). “I had mixed feelings,” recalls Gustavo Bellingerini, whose father had disappeared two years earlier.

But there they saw an endless queue of people. “It was very encouraging to know that we were not alone and to see all the dignity of those who lined up to denounce them, but on the other hand, it was heartbreaking to see the extent of the human rights violations for the first time.” The rooms at the ESMA were refurbished, but it did not help. The IACHR stayed for two weeks and received 5,580 complaints of kidnapping and enforced disappearance. It writes a damning report, which finds its way back into the country via a roundabout route. The deception had been of no use. You could sense that this was the beginning of the end. (*El País*, 6 September 2019).

But the restored democracy is flawed. “Contradiction has been our hallmark since we were conquered by the Spanish,” writes author Marcelo Figueras.

That is why our darkest times are often the most culturally fruitful. The still tentative boom in young Argentine literature has not come out of nowhere, but from the context of a country that is rapidly falling into debt; from a country where the press and television are in the hands of a few corporations and freedom of expression is a chimera; where the police kill young people and children with impunity and demonstrations are suppressed with tear gas and rubber bullets; where the judiciary obediently fulfils the demands of the economic powers (for the first time since the dictatorship, there are over twenty political prisoners) and where entrepreneurs and speculators are allowed to transfer their billions abroad unhindered. (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 11 April 2018)