

State Terrorism in Argentina: Images and Memories

By Mark Alan Healey

This fall, the walls of CLAS have been covered with haunting images of political violence: death squads, dumped bodies and the sometimes terrified, sometimes indifferent faces of passers-by. On the 30th anniversary of the military coup in Argentina that made terror, murder and disappearance official state policy, this photographic exhibit has been a timely reminder of the horrors that a blind embrace of national security doctrine brought to many countries. The exhibit's powerful sequence of images, some well-known and many more previously unseen, are the product of extensive research and careful selection by photojournalists Alejandro Reynoso and Pablo Cerolini. Curated by Ernesto Semán and brought to Berkeley with the help of the Argentine government, the exhibit was inaugurated on August 30, 2006, with a speech by Ambassador Héctor Timerman, a long-standing human rights activist who is now the consul general of Argentina in New York.

As the son of Jacobo Timerman, one of the best-known victims of the military regime, the ambassador could offer an intimate perspective on where state terror came from and how it affected Argentine society. Drawing on his own memories of the period, Ambassador Timerman told of the shattering experience of having his father taken away and of the numbing series of meetings with maliciously indifferent bureaucrats as he tried to find out where his father was being held. He told of countless encounters with the lawless servants of the law, with their doublespeak, their casual brutality and their manipulative promises. He recounted the sobering moment when he saw his father again, wasting away from torture and mistreatment and the difficulty of holding together a family when the possibility of even



Photo by Pablo Lasansky

seeing his father again could be arbitrarily taken away at any time.

Ultimately, of course, Jacobo Timerman was released, thanks to the persistence of his family and the lobbying efforts of many international groups. He left the country to write *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*, a searing exposé of the dictatorship that proved key in further isolating the military regime and strengthening international support for human rights.

Ambassador Timerman dwelt at length on the important role the United States played in this process, from high-ranking officials of the Carter administration like Pat Derian, to the heroic efforts of diplomats like “Tex” Harris, who worked to document and stop the disappearances, tortures and murders that were taking place. This U.S. support was crucial to weakening the dictatorship and keeping the human rights movement alive as well as laying

The army violently quashes a demonstration, 1982.

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Photo courtesy of Medaglia and Ameri, p. Archivo Crónica.



Jacobo Timerman is placed under house arrest, 1978.

the groundwork for Argentines to return to democracy and bring military leaders to justice. But as Ambassador Timerman also noted, the United States had encouraged the coup in the first place and, after Reagan took office, reversed course and embraced the worst violators of human rights.

The struggle for human rights was key to restoring democracy in Argentina, but political instability and military reaction led the first two democratic presidents, Alfonsín and Menem, to limit the prosecution of human rights violators in the name of securing democracy. Since the Argentine Supreme Court voided amnesties given to human rights violators, the Kirchner administration has made a priority of bringing the perpetrators of state terror to trial. While some have worried about the instability these trials might bring, Ambassador Timerman emphasized that the only path to lasting stability requires justice for the victims and memory of the crimes. Underscoring the importance of a robust defense of human rights and a full reckoning with the past, his speech and the exhibit it inaugurated clearly showed

how “Never Again” has become a foundational principle of Argentine democracy.

“En Negro y Blanco: Images of State Terrorism in Argentina (1976–1983)” is on display at CLAS until January 3, 2007. The photos on pages 25–31 are part of the exhibit.

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Photo by David R. León Lara.