

Admiral Emilio Massera: Naval officer who took part in the 1976 coup in Argentina and was later jailed for his part in the junta's crimes

By Hugh O'Shaughnessy

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Emilio Massera, former commander-in-chief of the Argentine navy, promoter of the 1982 invasion of the Falklands and expert trafficker in babies and young children, has died in Buenos Aires after a cerebral haemorrhage. He is widely regarded as one of the most baleful of the many evil military figures who under Western patronage strutted across Latin America in the last century.

Born in Paraná on 19 October 1925, one of five children of Emilio, a modest engineer whose parents had immigrated from Switzerland, and his wife Emilia, the future admiral joined the Naval College when he was 16, graduating nearly five years later. He developed a forceful, often violent personality, and immense ambition. Despite his small stature and a dark complexion which earned him the nickname of "El Negro", he was seen as a promising officer who began carving a niche for himself in naval intelligence.

Regarded as an enemy of communism, he was head-hunted by the US – much as Idi Amin had been fostered by the British authorities in Uganda – and invited to a course at the School of the Americas, then sited in Panama. At the height of the Cold War this institution was successful in producing a crop of dictators for the region, indoctrinating Latin American officers in techniques of the "national security state". Putting into practice ideas first formulated by President Truman, it persuaded many officers to abandon ideas of Latin American nationalism – which might go against Washington's interests – and adopt the ideas of US nationalism.

As a middle-ranking officer Massera became involved with P2, the international masonic lodge led by the Italian Licio Gelli. Massera began to rise in the world of service politics which, in a country used to military dictators, offered the most effective way to supreme power. It was a slippery, complicated world where factions within the army, navy and air force were at daggers drawn with each other and each arm was at odds with the other two – a tragicomic situation which during the Falklands war helped cripple Argentina's military effort.

In the 1970s Massera had the foresight to get close to the ageing former President, General Juan Domingo Perón* who, since his overthrow in 1955, had been living in exile in Madrid. He also cultivated Perón's third wife María Estela, a former nightclub dancer known as Isabelita and his private secretary José López Rega, (El Brujo, "The Warlock"). These relationships were widely remarked since Perón's first period of rule had been cut short by the navy in a putsch during which it had trained the guns of its warships on Buenos Aires itself. On his re-election to a second period in power in 1973, Perón* named Massera commander-in-chief of

the navy on the The Warlock's advice.

He set about installing an interrogation and torture centre in the Naval School of Mechanics, ESMA, a base sited on a main road close to the centre of the Argentinian capital. It was a sophisticated, multi-purpose establishment, vital in the military plan to assassinate an estimated 30,000 "enemies of the state". It became a clearing house for valuables looted from political opponents which ensured wealth for Massera and his shipmates. Many thousands of ESMA's inmates, including, for instance, two French nuns, were routinely tortured mercilessly before being killed or dropped from aircraft into the River Plate. Hundreds of women captives saw their newborn babies and children taken off for sale, another source of profit for the admirals and captains. Yet other detainees, mainly former members of the Montonero guerrilla group, a violent, heretical sect of left-wing Peronism, were organised in Task Force 3.3.2. and put to producing propaganda to counter international protest at the activities of the Argentinian armed forces. One of Massera's principal protégés in the ESMA was Captain Alfredo Aztiz, "the Blond Angel of Death" who personally tortured captives but whose career ended when he surrendered without firing a shot to British forces on South Georgia in 1982.

At the same time the former Montoneros were told on pain of torture and death to build the ideological base for an eventual lunge by Massera for the presidency, an urgent task since Massera, full of ambition, was very short on ideas. One fruit of this was the appearance of a set of ideas supporting nationalism and a strong state. There was particular scorn for the neo-liberal creed of privatisations and the shrinking of the state which was espoused by José Alfredo Martínez de Hoz, a local politician and guru for army commanders, rich Argentinians and foreign financiers.

By July 1974 Peró* died and the presidency passed to Isabelita who, in harness with The Warlock, now minister for social welfare, ruled the country with hysterical incompetence. As Argentina plunged into generalised terrorism and a hyperinflation rate of nearly 60 per cent per month, the three armed forces seized their opportunity in March 1976 and carried out the sort of coup which Massera had long urged on the hesitant General Jorge Videla, the army commander, and Brigadier Ramó* Agosti, the commander of the much less politically important air force.

It was to be a discreet coup where victims were eliminated secretly, not the sort of anti-left spectacular which General Pinochet had pulled off in Chile in 1973 and which earned him international opprobrium. Burson-Mars-teller, a New York PR agency, was engaged to do for the Argentinian dictatorship what it was trying to do for the East German dictatorship, viz. to hide atrocities from world attention.

Massera, the most forceful member of the triumvirate, did his best to maintain his links with Washington. He assisted in the development of Plan Cóndor, a collaborative scheme to co-ordinate the terrorism being practised by South American military régimes, and he favoured Washington's bizarre plan for a strategic pact in the South Atlantic to include the apartheid government, a plan which foundered on opposition from Brazil, home to millions of blacks.

In 1977, remembering the lessons he learnt in the School of the Americas, Massera travelled to Nicaragua, where Argentina was active in support of the Central America military tyrants regarded as allies of the West. In Managua he was decorated by President Anastasio Somoza, the second of the three members of the notorious Nicaraguan dynasty.

At home, Massera's friends included the papal nuncio Archbishop, now Cardinal, Pio Laghi, with whom he used to play tennis. Laghi maintained support for the military dictatorship among Argentine clergy and the tacit acceptance by the Vatican of its atrocities – including the murder of at least one bishop – in the name of anti-communism. In August 1978, ultimately unable to secure the political victory of the Argentine navy over the more numerous and powerful army and win the presidency for himself alone, he was forced into retirement. He unsuccessfully tried to found a political party and continued to lobby in favour of the invasion of the Falklands. "The Malvinas are not", he used to say, "a bit of land. They are a bit of [Argentina's] soul". Ironically, in the Falklands War Argentinian warships were either sunk or fled from contact with the British.

When civilian government was re-established in 1983 Massera was tried and found guilty of crimes against humanity and jailed for life. When the neo-Peronist President Menem came to power Massera was amnestied. Re-arrested in September 1999, he was again sentenced to life imprisonment again, this time for his trafficking in babies and children, a sentence he was allowed to serve in one of his houses because of his age.

His crimes brought him disgrace. When he was recognised in a restaurant in Uruguay, the clientele insulted him and departed en masse. In 1997, the River Plate football supporters club dismissed him as a member and in March 1998 the idea of a member of a petty officers club to offer him a gala dinner was vetoed by the club committee.

On 2 November 1999 an international arrest warrant for him was issued by the Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón* but Argentina refused to extradite him to Spain.

Emilio Eduardo Massera. naval officer and politician: born Paraná. Argentina 19 October 1925: commissioned Argentinian navy 1942. named commander-in-chief 1973: married Delia "Lily" Esther Vieyra (two daughters, three sons); died 8 November 2010.