

Life Sentence for Gen. Videla

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Just before Christmas, former Argentine dictator Gen. Jorge Videla was sentenced to life in prison for the torture and murder of 31 prisoners, most of whom who were “shot while trying to escape” in the months after his 1976 military coup. Two dozen of his subordinates were given life sentences at the same time.

This is just the tip of the iceberg of crimes for which Videla was actually responsible. Though there are no accurate counts, estimates of those who “disappeared” and were presumably murdered on his watch vary from 9,000 to 30,000, in a country whose population is about a tenth that of the United States.

Videla proudly assumed responsibility for the killings, claiming they were justified to save Argentina from terrorists. What kind of terrorists? According to Videla, exactly the kind of democratically elected terrorists who have run Argentina for the past 25 years, a period of dramatically enhanced personal freedom and economic growth. The terrorists who run Argentina even went so far as to legalize gay marriage last year.

Videla is now 85 years old, so a life sentence will probably not amount to much in terms of years. However, he will live out his days undergoing another kind of torture in the form of a series of additional trials about additional batches of victims.

Monica's Tale

Numbers numb; a single story chills. Monica Mignone was the pretty 24-year old daughter of Emilio Mignone, a prominent lawyer and educator who had previously held a position with the Organization of American States and was then serving as rector of the National University of Luján. Monica wasn't a communist, but fell in a suspect class because she devoted her spare time to volunteer work with the poor in the slums of Buenos Aires.

The military coup occurred on March 24, 1976, when Gen. Videla, a deeply religious man, overthrew the democratically elected Argentine government and promised to restore “Christian morals and values.”

Shortly before dawn on the morning of May 14, 1976, five heavily armed men wearing civilian clothes but carrying army identification papers banged on the door of the Mignone home, grabbed Monica, and left. What happened to her then? Her family has never found out, despite the tireless efforts of her well-connected father to discover the truth. Although Emilio pulled every string in the Church and government on her behalf, he went to his grave 22 years later without ever having discovered a shred of evidence as to what happened to Monica, let alone why or how. We do know that the other volunteer social workers in Monica's group were taken as well. We also know that the 31 victims in the case decided last month were taken to a secret center in Cordoba and tortured with methods including electric shock, rape, simulated asphyxiation with water and mock executions. They were left naked in cold wet cells through the winter, and were told their families would be killed if they didn't tell what they knew.

As the number of disappearances mounted, mothers and grandmothers of the disappeared began protesting every Thursday in the Plaza de Mayo. The military response was straightforward: the leader of the mothers' group and nine other women were themselves kidnapped from their homes, never to be heard from again. The mothers in fact were violating an official decree prohibiting “comment or reference to themes related to subversive activities, the appearance of bodies and

the deaths of subversive elements and/or members of the armed forces or security forces in these happenings, unless they are reported by an official, responsible source. This includes kidnappings or disappearances.”

“Terrorism”

Monica was indeed a terrorist, at least as the junta defined it. Gen. Videla explained that a terrorist was “not only someone with a gun or bomb, but also anyone who encourages their use by ideas incompatible with Western Christian civilization.” Gen. Roberto Viola defined terrorism as “any concealed or open, insidious or violent action that attempts to change or destroy a people’s moral criteria and way of life, for the purpose of seizing power or imposing from a position of power a new way of life based on a different ordering of human values.” Gen. Iberico Saint-Jean laid out the plan: “First we kill all the subversives; then we will kill their collaborators; then their sympathizers; then ... those who remain indifferent; and finally we will kill the timid.” Since it took nearly two months to get around to Monica Mignone, she probably fell in the “sympathizer” category.

The regime destroyed not only people but books, often whole libraries at a time; as a colonel later explained, “What is really subverting the system are ideas.” On April 29, 1976, Jorge Eduardo Gorleri, later made a general, ordered a huge book-burning in Cordoba, with these words: “The command of the III Army Corps informs the public that on this date it is proceeding to burn pernicious material that affects the mind and our Christian way of life. In order that nothing of these books, pamphlets, and magazines be left, this resolution is being taken so that this material will no longer deceive our young about the true goodness represented in our national symbols, our family, our Church, and our most venerable traditional legacy, which is summarized in God, Fatherland, Home.” Lt. Col. Justo Jacobo Rojas Alcorta said that religious freedom was only good for “hiding atheists,” while calling liberal democracy “false, because it supports popular sovereignty when, according to Christian doctrine, it is God who confers power.”

Complicity of the Church

The fact that a military dictatorship behaved badly is not earthshaking news. What’s interesting about Argentina, though, is the symbiotic relationship between the dictatorship and the Catholic Church, and the Church’s refusal to own up to its role in what happened. At last month’s trial, Videla described his current martyrdom as “one more act of service to the Lord our Father and to the country.”

A few months before the military coup was launched, in a homily delivered in the presence of the army chief of staff, Bishop Victorio Bonamin asked aloud, “May not Christ some day want the armed forces to go beyond their normal function?” A priest at the Army War College taught that “Democracy is government by the people. Therefore, if a people is not mature enough to govern, democracy makes it responsible for its own downfall. Let us not forget that here and in other countries subversion arose under democratic governments.”

On the eve of the coup, Videla and other plotters received the blessing of the Archbishop of Paraná, Adolfo Tortolo, who also served as vicar of the armed forces. The day of the takeover itself, the military leaders had a lengthy meeting with the leaders of the bishop’s conference. As he emerged from that meeting, Archbishop Tortolo stated that although “the church has its own specific mission . . . there are circumstances in which it cannot refrain from participating even when it is a matter of problems related to the specific order of the state.” He urged Argentinians to “cooperate in a positive way” with the new government.

Monica’s father knew Archbishop Tortolo, and repeatedly pleaded for his help. He got nothing but an icy stare. After thousands had disappeared, Tortolo told the press that “I have no knowledge, I have no reliable proof, of human rights being violated in our country” and praised the military regime, saying that the armed forces were simply “carrying out their duty.” The vicar for the army,

Bishop Bonamin, characterized the campaign as a defense of “morality, human dignity, and ultimately a struggle to defend God ... Therefore, I pray for divine protection over this ‘dirty war’ in which we are engaged.” He told a university audience in December 1977 that the world was divided into “atheistic materialism and Christian humanism.” Though he denied any knowledge of individual cases, he proclaimed that “If I could speak with the government, I would tell it that we must remain firm in the positions we’re taking: foreign accusations about disappearances should be ignored.”

Next week: The Church, torture, and “letting bygones be bygones.”

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