

# REVOLUTIONARY WAR, HUMAN RIGHTS AND INCOMPLETE TRUTHS

By Vera Carnovale



*If this has not been a war, a revolutionary war, a non-conventional, atypical,  
but real, cruel, true war, God come and say.<sup>1</sup>*

The defiant appeal to God made by the counsel of former commander Emilio Massera during the *Juicio a las Juntas* poorly concealed his impotence. At that time the figure of war, as making sense of the drama lived in Argentina, was being categorically rejected by the majority of society who in a climate of democratic “awakening” was discovering the massive nature of the crimes perpetrated by the State, and was fervently siding with democracy and law. Perhaps what was most irritating to those who had carried out the “fight against subversion” was the fact that within that wide spectrum one could not only find their “enemies of yesterday” — ex-militants and combatants enrolled in the revolutionary war now “posing as victims” — but also a heterogeneous chorus of political actors who not so long ago had spared no effort in reaching political agreements and setting up legal dispositions in order to “annihilate the action of subversive elements”.<sup>2</sup> After the storm, these actors would have “washed their hands openly”<sup>3</sup> of all responsibility for the past, and the hierarchs of the Armed Forces, “unjustly condemned”, would from that moment on affirm that they were “the scapegoat” of a society that had found a way to be able to rinse itself of “collective guilt” and “silence its conscience”.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Prats Cardona, Emilio Massera’s counsel during the *Juicio a las Juntas Militares* (1985).

<sup>2</sup> Ramón Díaz Bessone, *Guerra revolucionaria en la Argentina (1959-1978)*, (Buenos Aires: Editorial Fraterna, 1986): 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> General Jorge Rafael Videla, “Manifestación ante los jueces. Introito” (23 December 2010).

In this paper I am not going to deal with the dimension of collective responsibilities in the setting up and running of state terrorism. Instead, I would like to explore the narratives of those who implemented it — or have defended it and still vindicate it — and in so doing compare some of its core points with the more general issue of social memory and, especially, with the issue of militant memories and the place this continues to occupy in official discourse and state policies. Readers of those former narratives will have no trouble spotting a tendency to swing towards some recurring topics: the figure of war, as an explanatory key; the insistence on the exceptional features of that war; the demand for recognition for those who won, and for homage to “the forgotten dead”; the requirement of a whole or “complete truth”; the indication of a “political defeat” as the other face of the military victory; the appeal to the reconciliation of Argentinians. Along with these topics, other exculpatory arguments can be identified (“we were convoked” by the constitutional government; “we proceeded within the framework of legality”; “the methods were imposed by the enemy”), arguments articulated with negationist components, simple lies and justifications.

#### THE “TERRORIST AGGRESSION”

From the mid 1960s the Argentine Republic began to suffer the aggression of terrorism which, through the use of violence, attempted to render effective a political project intending to subvert the moral and ethical values shared by the vast majority of Argentinians. This project sought to modify the conception of man and of the state of our community, conquering power through violence...

Explained the *Final Document of the Militar Junta on the War against Subversion and Terrorism*, in April 1983. The document went on to say that “terrorist aggression” had first taken the form of rural guerrilla warfare. Its first attempts had failed, but the change of the continental strategy of “international terrorism” — following its defeat in a bordering country (namely, after “Che” Guevara’s death in Bolivia) — implied a shift towards urban guerrilla warfare. Thus, the nation had

begun to undergo the assailment of its most legitimate foundations, “our traditional way of life” characterised by Western and Christian values carried out by international Marxism-Leninism, who appealing to *revolutionary war* strategy, “induced many to accept criminal violence as a mode of political action”. The *Final Document* then identified what it understood to be a decisive turning point:

Starting on 25 May 1973 with the ascension of the constitutional government, the infiltration of the State apparatus, made it possible for terrorists to abandon clandestinity, and join those who had gained their freedom to start their attack on power.

The mentioning of those who “gained their freedom” is of particular importance as it would become yet another recurring topic in the “rhetorical artillery” of the Armed Forces when seeking to justify themselves. As Videla would remember years later, if thanks to the legal provisions of General Lanusse’s government (1971 - 1973), on 25 May 1973 “there were about 1 500 people in preventive detention or serving a sentence respecting the due process of law”<sup>5</sup> the decree establishing their liberation signed that same day by the new president Hector Cámpora, and the amnesty law enacted by the National Congress shortly after, freed “all the terrorists under arrest... All of them... came out ready to kill”.<sup>6</sup>

Even more important for the argumentative strategy of the military was that the revocation of the former criminal legislation had deprived the defenders of the attacked nation of all legal instruments:

Strange paradox: The judicial remedy, effectively implemented by a military government to fight subversive terrorism with the means of law, was then demagogically annulled by the constitutional government which succeeded it.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Videla, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

The document held that in 1974 subversive action had entered a new phase: “the stage of selective assassinations was followed by the phase of indiscriminate terrorism, which produced victims in all sectors of society”.<sup>8</sup> This new phase was accompanied by an increasing operational capacity of subversion, as shown by the assault on barracks and military garrisons, as well as by the settlement of a guerilla unit in the province of Tucuman.

Thus “security and order no longer existed”, explained the *Final Document*, and “as a last resort” the constitutional government of Isabel Perón finally declared a state of siege in the entire country, ordering the Armed Forces to neutralize and/or destroy the terrorist hub acting in and extending from the province of Tucuman. The situation was of unprecedented gravity and did not allow for hesitation.

It was not a situation that could be controlled by the police or the judicial institutions of the time, and so it was also understood by the constitutional government of Isabel Perón. A relentless battle was to be fought...

The defence counsel for Massera would explain during the trial.

“WE WERE CONVOKED”

It was at this crucial moment, so the story continues, that the Armed Forces were summoned by the constitutional government to deal with subversion. This appeal materialised in two resolutions: decree n° 261 dated 5 February 1975, and decree n° 2772 of 6 October, of that same year, ordered the execution of the military and security operations “in order to neutralize and/or destroy the action of the subversive elements in the entire territory of the country”. It is worth quoting the extensive fragment in which, in 2010, Videla evoked that historic meeting:

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

In the early days of the month of October 1975, Dr. Luder, temporarily in charge of the Presidency of the Nation... convened a cabinet meeting to determine how to face the extent to which the subversive activity had spread. At that meeting we, the commanding generals, were invited to expose our points of view... I then said that, repression by the police and security forces having been carried out without achieving a restoration of order, and Justice having proved to be ineffective... the moment seemed to have come to appeal, as a last resort, to the action of the armed forces in order to fight subversive terrorism. I added that the decision to employ the Armed Forces to fulfil this task in fact implied recognizing the existence of a state of internal war, along with its aftermath; this means, the Armed Forces are organised, equipped and trained for combat, that is to make war, where you die or you kill... It should be noted that the aggressor was acting in hiding, employing a cell-like organisation which was difficult to penetrate, and that his localisation thus imposed a patient task of intelligence. I must pay tribute to the civic courage shown by Dr. Luder at that moment when, without hesitation, he chose a course of action which, while being the most risky in terms of the possible errors or excesses it could incur, would best ensure the defeat of terrorism.<sup>9</sup>

This tribute to the “civil courage” shown by Luder in 1975 is the flip side of the open reproach that both Videla and Prats Cardona would pose to Luder during their statements in the *Juicio a las Juntas*. In effect, called as a witness at the trial, Luder would endeavour to explain that the concept “to annihilate the action of subversion” meant putting an end to its fighting capacity, but at no point entailed the physical annihilation of the subversives. The declaration couldn’t look more like a betrayal. However, careful in public not to show their resentment before such an exculpation, former commanders answered sticking to technical, military arguments. Prats Cardona thus pointed out that:

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

The definition of annihilation established by the regulation of military terminology, which was effective during the whole duration of the decrees concerned, consists of producing the effect of the research of physical and/or moral destruction of the enemy, usually by combat actions... As I admit I am poorly instructed in military matters, I will follow with the respect of a disciple [of] Clausewitz's thought when he maintains that unarming the enemy, forcing him to comply with our intentions, involves materially and morally breaking his will to fight, to which we should add — according to Clausewitz's famous sentence — that blood is the price of victory.<sup>10</sup>

In the same vein, Videla noted that Luder had fallen into a:

Semantic interpretation of the term annihilate, failing to notice that the regulations in force at that moment accurately defined the scope of the term. What is even worse, he has forgotten... that the action of annihilation represented the most accurate interpretation of what general Perón had expressed in a letter sent to the military garrison of Azul, after the attack it had suffered. From that letter...

He added,

I want to recover the following sentence, referring to the terrorist attackers: that the small remaining number of psychopaths must be exterminated one by one for the sake of the Republic.<sup>11</sup>

## THE METHODS

Both the former exhortation of Perón, as well as the decrees of the constitutional government which succeeded him after his death, represented an “unprecedented challenge for the Armed Forces, since

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<sup>10</sup> Cardona, 1985.

<sup>11</sup> Videla, 2010.

its organic doctrine, its structure and its deployment were built on the provisions of classic struggle”,<sup>12</sup> and as the revolutionary war was defined, first and foremost, as an “unconventional” war which lacked legal status, not “having been previously conceptualised or recognised as a deed of war in the war codes, in spite of which, from the doctrinal point of view, the revolutionary war sets up a state of war”.<sup>13</sup> In this kind of war, the lawyer went on, the partisans make use of entirely irregular tactics and procedures in order to achieve surprise and obtain greater results, while at the same time protecting their cunning and clandestine action.

And here the question naturally arises: how should the attacked country respond in the absence of legal norms, in a conflict not conventionally recognised as such, but whose manifestations are unambiguous and whose consequences are disastrous? The sense of the response cannot be juridical.<sup>14</sup>

Carl Schmitt,<sup>15</sup> who identified the rise of a new theory of war — the revolutionary war — in the Spanish guerrillas who fought against the Napoleonic army, warned that given the bewilderment generated by this irregular combat, Napoleon had established the following: *For the partisans, partisan methods*. The defensive strategy of the Armed Forces was to assume a similar trend: when one of the adversaries ignores the limitations and regulations of the law of war, Prats Cardona would argue once more, “the other one has the right to proceed in the same way”. In a war neither triggered nor elected by the Armed Forces, so the story continues, the scenario and the methods were imposed by the enemy.

On these methods very little — or nothing — will be said; only silence, euphemisms and open lies, which will nonetheless fail to hide the

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<sup>12</sup> *Final Document of the Militar Junta on the War against Subversion and Terrorism*.

<sup>13</sup> Cardona, 1985.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>15</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Teoría del partisano. Acotación al concepto de los político*, (Buenos Aires: Struhart & Cía., 2005).

awareness of the crimes. First of all, clandestinity is recognised and attributed to the compartmentalised structure of revolutionary organisations, and to the nature of their actions (“surprise, systematic attack”), which, it will be said, “imposed the strictest secrecy on information related to military actions”.<sup>16</sup>

Following this line of thought one might have expected that upon the conflict’s cessation this strict secrecy would be lifted; but it was not. Aside from the statements of some solitary repentants, silence, denial and lies were, from the first moments, the hallmarks of the military discourse concerning the “methods” used in the “war”.

As an example, let us quote the *Final Document* :

Many of the disappearances are a result of how terrorists operate. They change their real names and surnames, they know each other by what they call ‘war names’ and possess lots of falsified personal documentation... Those who decide to join terrorist organisations do so surreptitiously, abandoning their family, labour and social environment. The most typical case is: a family reports a disappearance they cannot explain... Thus, some of the ‘disappeared’ whose absence had been reported turned up later on carrying out terrorist actions. In other cases, the terrorists have left the country clandestinely and live abroad under false identity. Others, after going into exile, have returned to the country with a false identity... When possible, the terrorists would always withdraw the bodies of their dead from the place of a confrontation. Their corpses, as well as those of the wounded who died as a result of the action, were destroyed or secretly buried by them.

#### RECOGNITION AND RECONCILIATION

Along with justifications, exculpatory and negationist topics, the story

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<sup>16</sup> *Final Document of the Militar Junta.*



told by the Armed Forces strongly emphasises a demand for social recognition, for “complete truth” and, finally, for reconciliation. Not surprisingly, these stories gain more public resonance in the contexts of the prosecution of repressors.

The *Final Document* noted:

All of these, individual and collective, physical and spiritual, are the aftermaths of a war that we Argentinians must overcome. This will only become possible with humility and without [the] spirit of revenge, but essentially, [by] putting aside unjust partialities which only serve to bring to the surface the pain of those who, contributing to the peace of the Republic, have endured with stoic conduct the consequences of an aggression they neither caused nor deserved... Those who rendered their lives fighting the terrorist disease deserve an eternal tribute of respect and gratitude. Those who lost their lives serving in terrorist organisations and attacked the society that had nurtured them, beyond ideological differences, and unified by the condition of children of God, let them be forgiven... Reconciliation is the difficult start of an era of maturity.

Twenty years later, one of the young leaders of the Argentine Association for a Complete Memory, claimed:

The country desperately needs reconciliation. Eternal resentment leads nowhere; it only serves to keep hatred alive, and to encourage such things to happen again. But to attain the long-awaited and unmaterialised reconciliation, it is first necessary to reach an overcoming and supra-ideological truth. For this, it is necessary to know the truth in its whole extension, this being the only possible truth. It is well known that he who says a half-truth, lies twice... But that's the way it is. If someone died as a result of the military response to war against terrorism, he will probably be declared a martyr, plaques in his honour will be discovered, and his relatives and spouses will be lavishly compensated. In *contrario sensu*, a victim killed by terrorist and/or subversive action will only be

remembered *in rectore* and inadvertently by immediate family, and that's it. In silent pain they endure not only the anguish at the loss of a beloved one, but also the indifference and oblivion (if not the contempt) from the defenders of 'human rights'.<sup>17</sup>

This last fragment refers to the fact that the militant stories about the recent past seem to have won the battle in the field of social memory, successfully pulling off the imposition of a speech which was strongly condemnatory of repressors and, to a large extent, vindicatory of victims of state terrorism. In these stories and memories there is no place for the "other dead"; more importantly, as we will see, we can observe semantic displacements and/or paradigmatic shifts, concerning the significance of speeches, representations and practices supported by revolutionary organisations decades ago.

#### SHARED IMAGINARIES OF YESTERDAY AND MILITANT MEMORIES OF TODAY

As the *Final Document* states, during the 70s — if not before — the main armed revolutionary organisations characterised the political process as a "revolutionary war"; in other words, having discarded insurrection as a strategy for seizing power, they appealed to the Asian model of the "prolonged popular war".

It could thus be said that the imaginary of the guerilla has been filled by notions of warfare, which have boosted practices and imperatives corresponding to a culture of warriors. So mighty was the conviction that they were fighting a war, that — long before 1976 or the decrees of 1975 — the guerrillas appealed to the Geneva Conventions when denouncing the Armed Forces for ignoring war regulations or war codes.

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<sup>17</sup> Nicolás Márquez, *La otra parte de la verdad: La respuesta a los que han ocultado y deformado la verdad histórica sobre la década del '70 y el terrorismo* (Buenos Aires: Argentinos por la Memoria Completa, 2004): 87.

After the defeat of the guerrillas, only the right-wing spokesmen seemed to adhere to the once-shared notion. In fact, the figure of the war was abandoned by left-militant stories as an explanatory key of what had happened, only to be replaced by the notion of State terrorism or genocide. This change could not but involve the displacement of the figure of the “combatant” by the “victim”, a displacement not left untouched by tensions and instrumental uses.

It is perfectly understandable that militants who were kidnapped, tortured, murdered and “disappeared”, or even those who were directly executed at the time of their arrest, be considered as victims of State terrorism, but: is he who died in the attempted assault on a barracks a victim of state terrorism?

Another theme of the once-shared warrior imaginary was the appeal to the idea of parity between the contending forces. Refocusing on the *Final Document*, we read that: “The operations of [guerrillas] were acquiring a similar level to that of the regular forces”. On the other side, from the perspective of the guerrilla organisations, the very notion of revolutionary war involved the construction of an army that “grows from small to big” up to the size of a regular army. Plenty of examples of representations and practices beg for the insistence on this parity.

Today, however, this notion of imaginary parity is totally dismissed by militant memories, precisely because, in ascribing to the notion of State terrorism the impossibility (conceptual, political, and legal) of the equalisation between the State forces and those of any civil society group is what primarily stands out. Moreover, the idea of parity which filled the imagery and the actions of the revolutionary organisations is explicitly fought against since, it is argued, it nurtures the so-called “theory of the two devils”.

Finally, the question of the “methods” used by the military — a question which was systematically silenced in the military stories — was the main target of the allegations of the left revolutionary organisations first and of the human rights movement later. However, the undisputable illegitimacy of those methods, and their imperative

condemnation — political, ethical and legal —, blurs another problem which has received little attention: that of the “other victims”.

#### DEBTS AND TENSIONS OF THE MILITANT MEMORIES

*I must say, with identical religious sentiment, that I have also said prayers for the dead, extending them equally to all those who suffered and died, victims of subversive terrorism, as now these dead seem to have been forgotten.*<sup>18</sup>

What will the State do with those “other forgotten victims”? What shall the place of those deaths be in a memory that attempts to be “politically correct”?

At this point, it is necessary to briefly address the reorientation of the revolutionary militancy during the military dictatorship, towards practices — mainly of denunciation — of the human rights movement. It is certain that this was not a novel occurrence: during their active life, the revolutionary organisations had fostered the constitution of organisational spaces dedicated to the defence of political prisoners. However, during the military dictatorship significant transmutations occurred — mainly in exile. First of all, the body of the political activist originally thought of as a body offered for revolutionary slaughter, came to be understood as an entity whose physical integrity should be ensured. Secondly, international positive law and its instruments came to be highly valued and used. It is therefore not surprising that the activities of denunciation before international human rights organisations would redirect old revolutionary ideology towards something closer to classic political liberalism. And, perhaps as a corollary of this reorientation, in recent years we have seen many of the former militants achieving key positions in the Argentinian State, as well as in the local and international movement of human rights.

However, we would like to stress the fact that, even with nuances, these militants keep offering a vindicatory or nostalgic reading of the armed

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<sup>18</sup> Cardona, 1985.

experience. To put it another way, it is worth pointing out that important marks of the former ideology and experience of the revolution are still embedded in Argentinian political culture, even in spaces circumscribed by notions corresponding to the domains of law and legality.

Can those former militants, today's public servants, deal with those "other truths", with those "forgotten dead"? In other words, can it be possible to fly the flags of human rights and outline public policy in this area, while being unwilling to abandon the meaning of revolution? The twentieth-century revolutionary tradition considered it necessary to temporarily withhold supreme humanist values, and to subsume them beneath the reasons of revolution. Strictly speaking, such a suspension expressed a need as well as a promise: that of the creation of a new order of emancipation, of a new humanity. As Merleau-Ponty pointed out, humanism of the Beautiful Soul and non-violence practiced by a good conscience could no less involve passive observation of evil and complicity with the various and most oppressive forms of violence in history. And so humanism, in its rigorous attempt to come into being, turned into revolutionary violence. Revolutionary terrorism was, somehow, modern humanism carried out to its ultimate consequences.

The fact that this violence has not created new human relations, the fact that it has not achieved engagement in the actual construction of an emancipatory order, is not only its unfulfilled promise but, above all, the most tragic aspect of the revolutionary failure. A failure which compels us to look into how humanism is linked to revolution, and liberalism to the left; or, as the subject of my paper suggests, to put into question the link between truths and memories.



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