

Legacy of tarnished brass

Most of Argentina's former top military brass went on trial this week, charged with mass murder and torture. In Latin America, where armed forces are a combination of police force and patriotic institution, putting soldiers on trial is serious and risky business.

Let's flash back, for a moment, to the early 1970s. Marxist, middle-class revolutionaries, called Montoneros, plunged Argentina into a state of widespread terror. These university radicals, like their kindred souls in Italy, the Red Brigades, were bent on creating so much terror that the army would be forced to overthrow the weak civilian government to restore order. Then the nation would have been ready for true Marxist proletarian revolution.

Bombs went off daily: Banks were robbed. Politicians, labor leaders, journalists, military officers and police, all were murdered by the hundreds by Montonero hit squads. Kidnapping became epidemic: The children of every prominent Argentinian were in mortal danger from Montonero terrorists.

After four years of such outrage, Argentinians could stand no more: City life was becoming a nightmare. Then-president Isabel Peron (not to be confused with Evita) went to the armed forces and ordered them to "declare war" against the Marxist urban terrorists. At first, the military was reluctant to fight against its own people; but the mounting terror finally convinced its leaders that only they could prevent national collapse.

So, like good soldiers, they set out to eradicate the Montonero terrorist underground with its network of supporters, including segments of Argentina's liberal community, communists and leftists within the unions and academia.

Like all anti-guerrilla wars, the campaign against the Montoneros was savage, dirty and bloody, a fight to the death in the shadows. The French, during the bitter battle of Algiers, had shown the

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way two decades earlier: Use informers, spies and torture to identify your enemy than go out and exterminate him.

The civilian government of Argentina and the public simply closed their eyes to what the armed forces were doing: "Just get rid of the terrorists, but spare us the details," was the popular reaction. Laws and civil rights were waived; soldiers were told to "win the war against terrorism."

Not surprisingly, Argentina's military did precisely that. But to get at the Montoneros and uproot them, the armed forces had to shatter their support infrastructure. Thousands of leftists were arrested and interrogated; many were released; others, judged to be anti-social, simply disappeared. After years of patient, dirty work, the military finally managed to identify and destroy the terrorist underground and its bourgeois life-support system. But the price was frightful.

According to recent figures, 9,000 Argentinians — leftists, terrorists and innocents alike — were killed by the armed forces and their bodies hidden. Thousands suffered unspeakable pain in secret military torture centres; tens of thousands were held without charges.

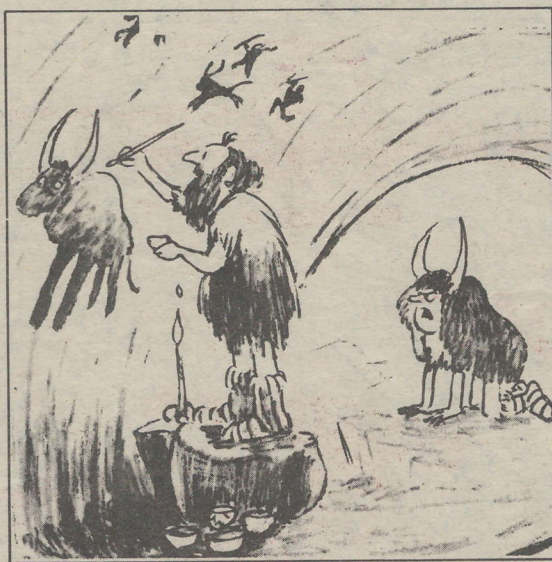
Afterward, peace returned to Argentina; the generals finally overthrew Isabel Peron in 1976 and ruled the nation until the fiasco of the Falklands War drove the humiliated soldiers out of office. In came the civilian government of Raoul Alfonsin with a promise to prosecute the military.

Here is a tragic dilemma: Argentina's soldiers were ordered by the civilian government to go to war against terrorists; they did and defeated the Montoneros by using terror. Now they are being denounced as criminals. Yet without the use of counter-terror, the Montoneros would not have been defeated and Argentina might well have collapsed.

The rise of urban terrorism poses this awesome dilemma to democracies. Before we condemn Argentina's military, strutting popinjays though they may seem, recall that Trudeau also called out the army to police Quebec, and in response to only a few dozen relatively minor terrorists. Would we have reacted like the Argentinians — closing our eyes to army brutality, had our cities been convulsed by murders, bombings and kidnappings?

The Argentinian armed forces far exceeded any norms of humanity or law but, recall, they were "at war." It's fine to denounce them now that peace and order are restored, but what about a decade ago when the nation neared collapse? To military men, all of this looks like a giant betrayal: They were first used as a tool to crush the enemy and now as scapegoats to placate lingering public anger. The army's tanks may yet roll into downtown Buenos Aires.

Punch



"How much longer do I have to wear this thing?"