

This text will provide you with the historical context needed to understand the contents of the report on the human rights situation in Argentina from October 1979 - October 1980, published by Center of Legal and Social Studies (CELS) in 1981. The report can be accessed, free of charge, through the CELS website. In the last 40 years the promotion of human rights in Latin America has become more important than ever, and domestic human rights organizations have been at the forefront of this effort. The topic of human rights has become so imperative to address in contemporary politics due to the region's history of gruesome human right violations at the hands of military states. The military regime in Argentina led by General Videla from 1976 to 1983, is one of the most important cases in the development of human rights, and one of the darkest periods of history for the country.

After the death of the popular but divisive president Juan Perón in 1974, his wife Isabel Perón stepped up as president and served until 1976. At the time, the country was going through troubling economic circumstances, and as inflation rose the political climate grew increasingly unstable. Paramilitary groups from across the political spectrum were engaging in violent confrontations and the military took advantage of this instability to label Isabel as a weak and 'incompetent' leader, mostly due to her gender. 16 Few supported her, even the Peronist guerilla factions were waging war against her, therefore the idea of a military coup was initially widely supported. The 24th of March 1976, a military coup led by General Jorge Rafael Videla overthrew Isabel Perón, and famous Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges is quoted to have said, "Now we are governed by gentlemen." 17

This military regime differed from military regimes in the past because for the first time in Argentine history, power was taken by all three branches of the armed forces, jointly constituting a government Junta that enacted a series of laws and statutes which gave it constitutional powers. 18 They took a strong ideological stance, and aimed to wipe out insurgency from the left. Drawing lessons from other military regimes in the southern cone, in particular Chile, the Argentine Junta decided to keep its operations covert, and secretly began to systematically eliminate their opponents. The founder of the human rights organization, Center of Legal and Social Studies (CELS), Emilio Mignone explains that the dictatorship, "Instead of leaving the bodies of its victims on the streets, as the paramilitary groups had done, the new dictatorship created an elaborate network of clandestine task forces, torture centers, and concentration camps into which its victims disappeared." 19 This new reign of terror did not solely target the Montoneros, the left-wing peronist guerrilla organization, but everyone and anyone who could be deemed a leftist threat: trade unionists fighting for better wages, members of student unions, journalists who did not support the regime, psychologists and sociologists simply for belonging to suspicious professions, young pacifists, nuns and priests who had taken the teachings of Christ to poor neighborhoods, the friends of these people, too, and the friends of friends (Sabato, *Nunca más*, prologue). 20

16 "The Global Specter of Argentina's Disappeared." *Sovereign Emergencies: Latin America and the Making of Global Human Rights Politics*, by Patrick William Kelly, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018, p. 211

17 Ibid

18 Balardini, Lorena "The Long Struggle for Accountability in Argentina. The role of civil society's activism and State actors." *Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS) Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA) Prepared for delivery at the 2014 Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Chicago, IL May 21 - 24, 2014.* p. 2

19 Mignone, Emilio Fermin, et al. "Dictatorship on Trial: Prosecution of Human Rights Violations in Argentina." *Yale Journal of International Law*, vol. 10, no. 1, Fall 1984, p. 119 5

20 Grandin, Greg. "The Instruction of Great Catastrophe: Truth Commissions, National History, and State Formation in Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 110, no. 1, 2005, p. 53

According to the report of Nunca más (Never Again), published by the National Commission on Disappeared People (CONADEP) in 1984, over 7,000 people were 'disappeared' by the second year of the dictatorship. 21 The detention centers which held the prisoners until they were 'disappeared' were inhumane, and military personnel often used torture, starvation, rape and violence to torment the prisoners. Susana Leonor Caride was arrested-abducted on the 6th of July 1978 from her house, she was taken to a detention center:

"When I arrived they left me dumped in a yard and after a while they took me to the 'machine', a name given to the electric prod, where they continued to torture me, I don't recall for how long since I was in such a sorry condition. Once again they threw me down in the yard. leaving me there for a while until they took me to a small room, where a torturer known as 'Julián the Turk' began to hit and beat me with chains and then with a whip, swearing and shouting at me. Then they dumped me back in the yard again." 22

There are many more examples of the horrors that the victims of the regime experienced. The conditions of human rights in the country were abhorrent, and many people remained oblivious to what was occurring. It was through the efforts of domestic and international human rights organizations that the atrocities committed by the regime came to light. Understanding the origins and work of the human rights organizations at the time will allow the reader to understand why reports such as the one produced by CELS in 1981 were so important. The work done by organizations such as CELS led to the re-democratization of the country and forged the path to justice.

The history of CELS started the same way as many other human rights organizations in the country did; family members of the victims of the regime joined to look for justice and truth. 23 For example, the daughter of Emilio Mignone, Mónica, was kidnapped in her parents home and Augusto Maria, the son of Augusto Conte and Laura Jordán de Conte, 'disappeared' while completing his compulsory military service. Joining with other parents and activists, CELS started coming together in 1978 and Mignone, as President of the Argentine Permanent Assembly for Human Rights, was able to spearhead the movement by acting as interlocutor among the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), external organizations, and domestic human rights groups in Argentina. 24 CELS was at the vanguard of the effort to popularize knowledge of the Commission's visit to Argentine citizens, and aid the Commission in gathering information about human rights abuses in the country. The visit began in early September 1979, and in Buenos Aires, the line to offer testimonies circled for five blocks around the city center. In total, the Commission heard some 5,580 testimonies during their visit. 25 CELS, alongside other popular human rights organizations such as The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, risked being detained themselves to promote awareness about the gross human rights violations happening within the country. Many Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo were 'disappeared' and Emilio Mignone was even arrested for his work. According to declassified US

21 Keck, Margaret E., and Kathryn Sikkink. *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Cornell University Press, 1998. P. 108

22 Nunca Más (Never Again) - Report of CONADEP - 1984

23 "La Visita De Las Cinco: Una Historia De La Creación Del CELS." CELS, 25 Sept. 2019, www.cels.org.ar/web/2019/09/la-visita-de-las-cinco-una-historia-de-la-creacion-delcels/#:~:text=La%20historia%20del%20CELS%20comenz%C3%B3,y%20Ang%C3%A9lica%20Sosa%20de%20Mignone.

24 "Argentina and the Inter-American System." *Sovereign Emergencies: Latin America and the Making of Global Human Rights Politics*, by Patrick William Kelly, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018, p. 256

25 Ibid 6

intel which human rights organizations have worked hard to obtain, Mignone was detained in February of 1981:

1. (U) ARGENTINE POLICE FEB 27 ARRESTED EMILIO MIGNONE, JOSE WESTERCAMP, BORIS PASIC, CARMEN LAPACO, MARCELO PARRILI REYNALDO SABONI LYDIA SALAZAR, AND GABRIELA IRIBARNE. WITH THE EXCEPTION OF IRIBARNE ALL ARE HUMAN RIGHTS LAWYERS OR EMPLOYEES WITH THE CENTER FOR LEGAL AND SOCIAL STUDIES (CELS). IRIBARNE IS YOUNG HOUSEGUEST OF WESTERCAMP AND WAS WITH HIM WHEN POLICE ENTERED CELS OFFICES ABOUT 7 PM. ACCORDING TO HUMAN RIGHTS SOURCES THE POLICE EXAMINED CELS FILES AND SEIZED DOCUMENTS. WHEN MIGNONE, ONE OF THE MOST PROMINENT ARGENTINE HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS, WAS ARRESTED AT HIS HOME THE POLICE REPORTEDLY SEARCHED THE APARTMENT AND ALSO TOOK PAPERS.

2. (U) WE ARE RELIABLY INFORMED THAT THE ARRESTS TOOK PLACE PURSUANT TO AN ORDER FROM A FEDERAL JUDGE. POLICE HAVE INFORMALLY ACKNOWLEDGED TO RELATIVES THAT THEY ARE HOLDING THE EIGHT. IN SHORT, THEY ARE NOT DISAPPEARED. 26

As the declassified US report demonstrates, the work of Mignone and his companion was incredibly dangerous. Due to their high profiles they were not officially 'disappeared' but their arrest was something of worry to US officials, and the confiscation of documents also put them at risk, as it demonstrated their human rights work. The reports, such as the report on the human rights situation in Argentina from October 1979 - October 1980, was essential for outside organizations such as Inter-American Commission on Human Rights as it provided evidence and testimonies to the violence happening under the regime. The report CELS produced in 1981, describes that there was a growing atmosphere of hope in the country after the visit of the IACHR to Argentina, but that hope was quickly shattered in discovering that the governments clandestine actions were continuing. The document reports 34 disappearances in the end of 1979 and 18 throughout 1980. Though the number is highly reduced from the first years of the dictatorship, still 62 people went missing, 62 families had to grieve, and 62 bodies will never be recovered. The report acknowledges that they have no doubt that the number of disappeared people exceeds what they discovered, as families often did not denounce the disappearances to human rights organizations or did it much later. The report goes on to detail testimonies from relatives of victims, officers testimonies, discoveries on the situation of detention centers, violations to the right to information and circulation, and more.

Human rights activists, who at the end of the day were ordinary men and women, risked their livelihoods for the investigation and publication of these reports. After the fall of the regime in 1983, their work would serve as evidence in trials against military officials and stand as a symbol of justice all over the country. Even today, CELS continues to advocate for human rights in Argentina, recently working hard on the legalization of abortion. They work hand in hand with other organizations like the Mothers (now Grandmothers) of the Plaza de Mayo to continue to bring to light the abuses from the regime and make declassified information public. Whilst reading this report it is important to keep in mind the historical context but also the effort, time and dedication from human rights organizations.

26 "Desclasificados: la inteligencia de EEUU durante la dictadura" CELS, Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, Memoria Abierta, UNCLASSIFIED U.S. Department of State Case No. 0-2016-16244 Doc No. C06294763 Date: 04/27/2017 <https://desclasificados.org.ar/> 7

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