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THE MADRES DE PLAZA DE MAYO:
MOTHERHOOD'S SEARCH FOR ANSWERS
DURING THE DIRTY WAR IN ARGENTINA

■
BY COLLEEN MCCORMICK

I do not go down to the hellfires /
I go up to my son cloistered
in his goodness / beauty / flight /
and tortured / concentrated /

assassinated / dispersed
by the suffering of the nation /
is some small flame growing out of the great silence of your eyes? /
I hear the night walking through your bones/ they hurt / they smell
of your trampled youth / of
the pigeon that you kept

iridescent like your voice
of a little son alone through the war /
throughout the half / the provinces
deserts of pure pain /

son whom nobody can ever make again /
I beat on the doors of death
to get you released from
these facts that don't fit you¹

In this poem, the famous Argentine poet Juan Gelman expresses the grief of losing a child to the Dirty War. Words like “tortured,” and phrases like “suffering of the nation” and “trampled youth” express the loss of thousands of young people to this tumultuous time in Argentine history. Many parents lost their children, including a group of mothers that would become known as the Madres de Plaza de Mayo. This group of women began to question the dictatorship

about the location of their children who had been kidnapped by the military government.

In order to understand these women it is first important to acknowledge the history of women and feminism in Argentina that set the stage for their lives and their movement. From its Spanish roots to Eva Perón, the society of Argentina was influenced by forces that suggested that women belonged in the home. Their most important roles were perceived to be as mothers and moral leaders. The children of the mothers that made up the Madres, however, were being abducted by the government, and no one was attempting to stop it. In order to sustain their roles as mothers they had to step up and act against the government. The Madres de Plaza de Mayo began to act, using maternalist politics as a tactic for change. They used their role as mothers to their advantage, using what they knew as mothers to appeal to the public for help and answers to where their children were. Many of their children had either been killed or were suffering in concentration camps. Even the families of the people in these camps were being attacked as well. Despite the fact that it put them in great danger, the repressive military dictatorship of the Dirty War in Argentina presented an opportunity for the women of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo to break free from the confined world of home-making. They were able to create a strong human rights organization because their history led them to strongly identify as mothers, because they used their identities to take action, and because they refused to stop fighting until they had answers

Argentina's Dirty War of 1976 to 1983 defined a period of violent disregard for human rights in a society overwhelmed by unrest and instability. Throughout the twentieth century Argentina underwent many changes politically, experiencing a variety of governments, both democratic and dictatorial. Economically its per capita income fell from fifth in the world to below fortieth.² The combination of these two problems of volatility led to social turbulence and violence

because of the government's inability to handle the basic needs of the population. Poverty struck and much of the population struggled to find housing and food. Guerilla forces sprang up to try to bring about changes in Argentina to solve the problems that the government was not addressing. Donald C. Hodges argues that these social problems were the most important factors contributing to the point of departure for the Dirty War.³ Had the people been able to feed their families and buy shoes for their children, they would not have needed to form antigovernment organizations to create change. Guerilla groups such as the Montoneros and the People's Revolutionary Army began to instigate attacks on the government.⁴ They intended to weaken the government, promote resistance, and immobilize the country to the point where a revolutionary strike was necessary.⁵

The Argentine government began to use its military to respond to the guerillas. Isabel Perón, the wife and Vice President to Juan Perón, took office when her husband died in 1974. She greatly increased the power that the military had, giving them the ability to deal with the guerillas by any means necessary.⁶ Because of the authority that they were given, they had the opportunity to implement the changes that they thought were necessary to address the unstable and failing Argentine government. But this backfired when in March of 1976 Perón's own military, led by General Jorge Rafael Videla, ousted her from the Argentine presidency.⁷ Thus began the Dirty War.

The dictatorship established a regime of unspoken violence. The Dirty War gets its name from the tactics used by the military junta to try to suppress the subversives. They implemented a system of terror known as the Process of National Reorganization, in which the Argentine people lost all rights while many were kidnapped and subjected to torture and murder. Up to 30,000 people were kidnapped by the government, an act which would become known as being "disappeared."⁸ As the disappearances progressed, the military no longer

only disappeared the subversives who they had originally aimed to eliminate. The government began to target anyone that might be considered a threat to the dictatorship, including leftists, intellectuals, journalists, and students. As the number of disappeared grew, a silence spread across the nation. From political parties to trade unions to modes of communication, no one spoke out against the atrocities. Down to the general population, no one wanted to get involved where they did not belong because of a fear of the repercussions but also because of a hope that the dictatorship might finally bring stability to their country.⁹ Even the Catholic Church, an important and influential presence in Latin America and Argentina, did not take steps towards protecting the citizenry from such violence despite the fact that killing and torturing clearly contradicted the tenets of Christianity. Few members of the Church made a stand against the Process and in fact many members tended to be conservative. The military junta even promoted a vision of themselves as defending Western Christian Civilization.¹⁰ Through this slogan they hoped to assure the public not only that they were doing nothing wrong, but that in fact they were protecting positive ideals. This vision shed an affirmative light on what was becoming a destructive situation, and created an excuse for ignoring the events of the Process. In this way, the Church and other people who turned a blind eye could refrain from acting against the junta and feel validated in their position.

Although many people kept their silence, there were still thousands of people disappearing and thousands more family members who mourned their absence. With the silence of the entire Argentine community, answers about the disappearances were not clear. They watched as their loved ones were taken from their houses or waited when their children did not return home from work.¹¹ They did not, however, know where they went or what their fates would be. Many mothers ached with the losses of their children — the many young

adults who were being disappeared. Some of these women began to search for answers. They went to their local police stations and prisons, trying to see if anyone would talk to them or give them answers on the whereabouts of their children.¹² But no one talked.

A number of mothers eventually made their way to the Ministry of the Interior to make complaints about their missing children and, although they did not find answers there, they began to find each other.¹³ Upon realization that they were all working toward the same goal, a group of mothers began to share ideas and work together. On April 30, 1977, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo met for the first time at their namesake location, led by Azucena de Villaflor de Vincente.¹⁴ It was there that the mothers found comfort in their shared losses and began their journey to military resistance and a level of social involvement that none of them had ever experienced before.¹⁵

The role of women in Argentina dates back to the country's beginning as a Spanish colony, the standards of which would affect Argentine life for hundreds of years to come. In order to understand the Madres de Plaza de Mayo it is essential to understand the background of women in Argentina and how the country's history shaped the society in which they lived. The beginning of this story starts in Spain. To define the significant cultural influences on Spanish culture, Marifran Carlson highlights the importance of both Roman and Muslim cultures, where Roman law considered women the property of men and Islamic practices promoted the separation of women in society.¹⁶ Since both of these cultures were main building blocks for Spanish culture, women in Spain were not considered fully independent or able as a result. Their status was that of second class citizens and their realm was separate from that of the male population. Gertrude M. Yeager even points out the fact that:

In Spanish the verb 'to marry,' *casarse*, literally means 'to put oneself into a house.' A married woman is referred to as *casada* (housed in) not only because of a perceived biological tie to childrearing or because she may not be phys-

ically or mentally suited for other labor, but also because, under the patriarchal system, family honor resides within her.¹⁷

This underscores the fact that the woman's place in Spanish culture was always in the home with the children. This defined her and her role as separate from men. Although this role was important, it was not valued as highly as the male's more public role. Men were a part of the political and economic sphere, but women were confined to the domestic. Women were vital in the home and in childrearing but not considered very significant in the rest of society. This same mindset was taken to Argentina and reflected in the *Código Civil*, the law code of 1870 that still considered women second class citizens without legal rights, such as the right to divorce.¹⁸ The influence of Spanish culture left Argentine women in the same predicament as Spanish women; they were traditionally thought of as separate-from and less-than men.

Men and women in Latin America were thought of as fundamentally different, their differences sometimes described with the ideas of machismo and marianismo. Machismo describes the dominance that males in Latin America demonstrated toward women. The term encompasses a variety of ways that this is expressed such as placing a strong importance on masculinity and courage, limiting the autonomy of women, and even validating physical abuse. This type of male stereotype is reinforced culturally and through class and ethnicity.¹⁹ This attitude of control and forcefulness toward women describes the reasons that they were often repressed in society. Marianismo illustrates the idea that women, as mothers, should be morally and spiritually superior to men. This comes from the influence of the Virgin Mary, the major female Christian influence in Latin America. Some scholars, such as Evelyn P. Stevens who introduced the study of marianismo in 1973, however, argue that marianismo gives women their own advantage in society. Stevens goes so far as to call marianismo, "Female chauvinism," a declaration that is

certainly exaggerated because women did not have that level of power.²⁰ Marianismo does, however, explain the idea of motherhood as important and honorable, giving mothers a special place in Latin American society. Their ability to bear children and their important role raising children were considered special responsibilities to society. This means that women were held to high moral standards. Society expected them to be morally immaculate and uphold the reputation of the family. This gave women an important role in the family but additionally held them to unrealistic expectations. Women's roles as mothers and moral leaders set the tone for the beginnings of feminism in Argentina.

Women began to call attention to and try to further their own importance and significance in society, especially toward the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century when feminism began to emerge in Argentina. This time period became conducive to feminism in part because of industrialization. Industrialization meant that many more women were joining the workforce and also attaining more access to education. Women's groups began to gather and talk about the issues that they faced such as workers' rights and women's role in Argentine society.²¹ Women now had more of a means of discussion, which led to the first feminist groups. A variety of feminist groups emerged with different ideas promoting women's labor rights and suffrage, but most groups still saw women as mothers first and foremost. Work and education became accepted because they were considered ways that women could better themselves as wives and mothers, but domesticity remained the basis of a woman's life.²² Additionally, it was still considered important for women to maintain a sense of femininity. This was promoted, for example, in the women's magazine, *La Camilia*, created by Rosa Guerra in 1852. She said that women had a right to education, but that they must still maintain their morals and humility because an educated woman could be interpreted as indecent.²³ If they were to lose their sense of

propriety it would go against the core of what a woman should be according to Argentine values. A woman must still always be a spiritual leader for the family, which was her most important role.

The Church even developed more progressive attitudes toward women and began to support the expansion of their role. According to Sandra McGee Deutsch this occurred because Argentina's industrialization also meant the emergence of a middle class that lacked need or respect for the Church. The Church had always been an important part of Argentine life and society, but had been sympathetic to the upper class and the lower class did not have a choice of whether or not to follow them. As a result, the Church opposed industrialization and also the leftist ideas that it brought with it. This led the Church toward Social Catholicism, which would become more tolerant of the progress of women.²⁴ For example, Father Gustavo J. Franceschi, a Social Catholic activist, acknowledged the fact that in some situations women had to work and thought this should be allowed. At the same time he believed that they should not be participating in the same kind of labor as men because men and women were different. Ideally, in his opinion women were more suited to work in the home.²⁵ He and a variety of other Church leaders were able to understand women's labor and even accept the idea of women's suffrage. The fact that the Church was able to accept these principles gave working women moral recognition. Women were allowed to work, as long as it was not too physical, too political, or too far outside of the women's realm, and they could still uphold their Catholic religion.

Taking a step forward to the twentieth century, women's suffrage came to Argentina under the influence of Juan and Eva Perón, although whether or not they contributed positively toward feminism is debated. Juan Perón was elected president in 1946, running as a liberator of the working class. He was widely admired because of his populist desires to improve worker's rights and promote education

for the lower classes. Additionally, he supported women's suffrage, using his wife Eva Perón as a public advocate for women's rights.²⁶ Finally, on September 17th, 1947, Argentine women were given the right to vote. This monumental milestone for Argentina was met, however, by mixed reactions. Some feminists were not pleased with this result. Members of the Left wing and the Socialist Party thought that Perón was using women's suffrage simply as a way to promote his and his wife's careers. Also they did not agree with many of his questionable political tactics.²⁷ These traditional feminists tended to come from different socioeconomic groups than the supporters of Perón and had different opinions on how the government needed to be reformed. These political differences meant a clash between the two generations of feminists, and a mixed reception to the passage of the suffrage law.

Eva Perón, the public face of Juan Perón's campaign for women's rights, promoted a modern, voting woman, but one who was still held back by her traditional role. Eva said that women needed to be represented because they had a different view of the world based in empathy and love for family.²⁸ Still she endorsed the traditional idea that a woman was first and foremost a wife and mother, declaring that it was the role that they were born to serve. She greatly emphasized the importance of a woman's femininity, criticizing the feminists of the day because they did not maintain, or even rejected the importance of, femininity. For example, in her autobiography *My Mission in Life*, Perón says, "Don't you see that this class of 'feminists' detests womanhood? Some of them do not even use makeup... Don't you see they want to be men?"²⁹ Although her broader goal was to increase the standards of life for women, these stipulations and strict definitions of what a woman should be limited their freedom to decide who they wanted to be. A woman, in her eyes, could only be a woman if she looked and acted in a traditionally womanly way. She could begin to dip her toes into politics but never in the same way

that a man could.

Eva Perón promoted the idea of giving women economic compensation for their work as housewives, giving them more reason to stay at home as mothers. She wrote:

We were born to make homes. Not for the street... We must have in the home that which we go out to seek: our small economic independence—which would save us from becoming women with no outlook, with no rights and with no hope!³⁰

The solution she wanted to be able to give to women was to pay them for their work in their home rather than expanding their opportunities to different careers, therefore making their jobs as housewives all that they would need. This would certainly be useful for families and for women, helping out their circumstances and giving their work validation, but it would do nothing to promote women's participation in any other realm than that of the household. Thus Eva Perón's advocacy sought to improve women's lives and rights in a way that still promoted a male-dominated public realm.

The Madres de Plaza de Mayo became a recognized, highly respected organization for human rights despite the intensely traditional and repressive forces they fought against. They started out simply as a group of Argentine mothers, no different than their neighbors, filling the roles that typical mothers were supposed to fill. They lacked education, political knowledge, and opportunities. Nevertheless, the circumstances of the Dirty War and the disappearances of their children sparked a necessity for their entrance into the world outside the home. They began a struggle to find their children and also to step outside the home and into the dangerous world of Argentine politics. Their roles in Argentine society and their personal outlooks on those roles were forever changed by their social activism and tireless efforts to find out what happened to their children.

The women of the Madres grew up in a society where women played a very traditional role—a role that they did not resist. The

women of the Madres were uneducated and without opportunities, yet very adept at cooking, cleaning, and ironing. Marguerite Guzman Bouvard explains that the Madres did not really oppose this kind of lifestyle; it was simply what was available for them at the time.³¹ As working class women, they or their mothers would have been targeted by Juan and Eva Perón's campaign for women. They would have been taught to maintain their feminine morality and to fulfill their roles as mothers and wives as best they could. Opportunities to do anything else were not encouraged.

That did not mean, however, that they would not have liked a chance to become educated or to work outside of the woman's realm. Many of the women of the organization tell similar stories of how they were only allowed to spend a few years in school, moving quickly from grade school to housework and learning how to cook. Irene Rosa Lizzi de Cortez, for example, says she only finished primary school, even though she really liked school and did well. After primary school she started helping at home with housework and learned to make pasta from her Italian mother.³² Hebe de Bonafini says that at age twelve her mother sent her to classes to learn to sew, embroider, and finally weave which she did not hate as much and stuck with. Despite the fact that she liked school, she was forced to learn skills that would be useful to a woman who would become a wife and mother. She says even at that age, "I couldn't understand why men could do certain things and women certain other things. Who said so?"³³ These girls realized the injustice of their situation, but unfortunately this defined the reality of the world Argentine women and girls were living in. Women did not have many opportunities to break out of their traditional role.

Men also expected women to play the part of homemakers and mothers. De Bonafini mentions that she wanted to further her education, and her children suggested that she study alongside them as they went through high school. Her husband, however, would not

permit it.³⁴ Even if these women had the aspirations to become more educated or political, men often blocked that possibility. As they did begin to take control of their lives through the Madres, this became a problem in some marriages. Nina Cortiñas, for example, discusses how she and her husband began to argue more as she became involved in the Madres because he did not want her to become so independent.³⁵ According to the traditional ideals of women and the idea of *marianismo*, by stepping out of the bounds of the household and into politics, Cortiñas was leaving her responsibilities as the model of morality for their family. This meant that she was likely to be judged as indecent, reflecting poorly on the family. Cortiñas' husband did not want his wife acting in that way, accepting the standard that it was not right.

Like the children of De Bonafini, who encouraged their mother to further her education, many other women were inspired by the work of their own children. Maria Elisa Haschman de Landin speaks of her son's desire to help those who needed it. He was motivated to join a local church group and then the Peronist Youth Organization, a left wing organization of the Peronist Party, in order to work with impoverished Argentines. De Landin explains his influence on her saying, "It's as if he had given birth to me and not me to him."³⁶ Her son became her role model and she would use the drive that she saw in him to drive her own work. When her son Martin was disappeared, his own passion to work for change pushed his mother to join the Madres and start advocating for answers. Mercedes de Meroño says, "We are proud of our children, and in turn this gave birth to our fight."³⁷ She goes on to say that women of their time worked in the household. They cooked, ironed, and knitted while their husbands took part in politics and soccer because the public and political world belonged to them.³⁸ The women's pride in their children's political actions, however, was an inspiration and this was what pushed them to learn to be political. Their struggle was for their children—their

children who they not only loved but respected for their own work to make the world a better place. Participating in the Madres de Plaza de Mayo was life-changing and even life-giving for these women. They finally had a meaningful role in the world outside their homes. Not only were they women who raised children, cooked, and cleaned, but they were mothers who were making a difference in the political world.

As these women's children began to be disappeared, their worlds were turned upside down and they began to lose control in their own domain. The military regime that led their country stole their world as mothers and caretakers. They began looking for answers, asking at police stations, hospitals, and the Ministry of the Interior, but received no response or assistance. They did, however, find other women who seemed to be in the same positions as themselves and, after discussing their similar situations, started working together.³⁹ Elida Galletti describes approaching the group of mothers around the time they started congregating at the Plaza de Mayo and at first feeling nervous. When she went to talk to them they asked, "Who do you have that's disappeared?" She says she realized that, "I felt we were all the same person."⁴⁰ They were all mothers who were suffering the loss of their children to something they could not control and could not understand. They were all in the same position—wondering, waiting, and wanting answers. Cortiñas describes the way they came together and dealt with their grief as a group. She says that dealing with the loss of a child is always a tragedy, but they were experiencing something different even from that. They did not know if their children were dead; they had no bodies or proof and because of this she says they could not "process the death."⁴¹ It was impossible to know what had happened to their children and in order for any of them to be able to move forward with their lives it was essential to find answers as a group.

This fight to discover their whereabouts became the most impor-

tant part of their lives, and they continued to challenge the government and their societal roles in hopes that they could find their children. Because their children were the most important focus of their lives, they put their own lives on the line every day, risking their own disappearances in order to find out what had happened to their children. Three mothers, María Ponce, Esther Balestrina de Creaga, and Azucena de Villaflor de Vincente as well as two French nuns aiding the group were disappeared during their work with the Madres, all of whom were killed.⁴² The threat of danger was very real—something they all knew personally—but this did not stop the women's efforts. The Madres reacted in a way that they thought was necessary. Rene Epelbaum comments on the Madres' response to being in their position: "It wasn't that we weren't afraid. We were, but we overcame it, because of our obligation and our desperation."⁴³ Although in the past many of these women felt unhappy with their circumstances or felt a desire to find more opportunities or education, that was nothing compared to the immense heartbreak of the disappearances of their children and their drive to find out what happened to them. The Dirty War not only wounded their families, but also attacked their basic role as mothers. These women felt that they were supposed to be the supporters and caretakers of the family. In order to do this they had to find their children.

The tragedy of the disappearances was the catalyst that inspired these women to assume control in their own lives, socially and politically. Evel de Detrini describes the way that they had to learn to put themselves in harm's way; to go from being "humble women of the home" to women fighting for theirs and their children's lives. She says that there was "something pushing them forward, and that was the children."⁴⁴ This was a drive they had not felt before. In this case doing their best job as mothers meant not simply putting food on the table and keeping a house where their children could thrive. It meant becoming more active in Argentine society and politics than

they had ever been before, and they rose to the occasion. The job description that these Argentine mothers had been fulfilling for hundreds of years shifted from a mundane, household motherhood to a motherhood that required political knowledge and action. In some ways they were breaking out of their traditional role, but for them it was a necessary development to be able to perform that role to its fullest.

Much of Argentina excused the actions of the military junta and the necessity of the Madres participation was aggravated by the culture of silence that pervaded Argentina. No one in the country was asking questions for them, no one was trying to find out about the disappeared. Mercedes Barros analyzes the profound silence that existed during the Dirty War, which allowed it to rage on. She notes that the majority of the population did not speak out against the atrocities of the dictatorship, which meant that many people did not know the extent of the crimes that were occurring. A main reason she gives for this silence is that the military junta claimed that they were endorsing Western and Christian values and it was difficult to make an argument against that without being judged as backwards or immoral.

⁴⁵ Main facets of society like the Church, modes of communication, and political parties enabled the actions of the military through their silence. The general population feared the potential consequences of speaking out, and held onto the idea of not sticking your nose where it did not belong.

An important perpetrator of this silence was the Argentine press which, with the exception of the newspapers *La Opinión* and the English language *Buenos Aires Herald*, did not report on the events of the Dirty War or the disappeared. Jerry W. Knudson argues that the press stayed quiet for a variety of reasons. One reason was to protect their economic interests as they were told by the government, one of their economic backers, not to talk about any aspects of the disappearances or the war. A second reason is that the Argentine press

historically tended to support forces currently in power so they supported the current dictatorship. Also, they were quiet in order to avoid the possibility of becoming the next victims.⁴⁶ This is important because the war was not talked about in the press so the Argentine people were not getting any information that truly represented what was going on. There were simply whispers of people disappearing without real explanations; rather than articles there were rumors. No one really knew what was going on and no one was willing to risk finding out. But at the same time, the Madres could not merely stand off to the side — their own children were already the victims. Their only option was to become the voices calling for answers, and to make sure they were heard using whatever tactics were available to them. They took on the brave role of breaking the silence because no one else would and entered politics because, although everyone else took a step back, they needed answers desperately.

The Madres de Plaza de Mayo accomplished what they did by using their own identities to their advantage. In this case being mothers motivated and carried their message. They employed a form of maternalist politics, and used their roles as mothers to create change. Rebecca Jo Plan and Mariam van der Klein describe the two main fields of thought about maternalism, explaining that in some situations maternalist politics are seen as a feminist ideology in which women are recognized and esteemed for their work as caregivers. In others, however, it is interpreted that the ideology does not focus on equal rights for men and women and therefore should not be considered feminist.⁴⁷ The Madres de Plaza de Mayo have often been considered maternalist reformers, and Plan and van der Klein explain that in Latin America in general, maternalism tends to be seen as feminist because of the way feminism evolved there and motherhood's important significance.⁴⁸ Maternalism gave these women their opportunity to be successful in putting together the Madres because they were able to use what they knew in order to

create a movement and appeal to the public. Marguerite Guzman Bouvard also argues that the Madres employed maternalist politics stating that, "The Mothers not only transformed political action, but they also revolutionized the very concept of maternity as passive..."⁴⁹ They were not just mothers because they gave birth, but because they acted in support of their children. They took the stereotype of a woman's role being inactive and submissive and turned it on its head. In the case of the Madres, being a mother meant fighting for their children's rights and their own rights as mothers.

As the Madres worked hard to become a strong organization, the government began to see them as a threat. The actions of the Madres were always focused on the mothers and their love for their children. As de Bonafini says, "We always kept women's feelings, mother's feelings at the top of our priorities."⁵⁰ After all, their passion for their children was what drove the movement and made it important. Showing a mother's face to the world was a relatable image that presented a clear message of a mother's love and her care for her children. Cortiñas says, however, that having this group of women, independent of men, fighting for answers did not sit well with the military government.⁵¹ They tried to turn the public against the Madres, saying that women should not act like that, calling them "Las Locas" or the "crazy women."⁵² This was an attempt to discredit their actions, saying they were just a bunch of old women so they could not know what they were doing—an argument of the hysterical woman used on many women before them.⁵³ They continued to fight, however, attempting to break past the derogatory stereotypes and to continue to work for answers.

One way that the Madres promoted their image as mothers is through the shawls they wore on their heads when they walked and protested in the Plaza. This started because the women were going to walk in a religious procession sponsored by the Catholic community of Buenos Aires because it was a good opportunity to spread their

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message to a large group of people. As there would be so many people there they thought they should have some kind of sign that would distinguish them from a distance.⁵⁴ Cortiñas says they started out using baby diapers, which was something they all had at home. The diapers became their shawls, embroidered with the names of their disappeared, which became a symbol of the mothers.⁵⁵ It was not only a way to promote themselves as part of a group, but it was also a symbol of their children. The idea of using baby diapers had a direct connection to their children, although eventually they stopped using them because they did not hold up very well. That same sentiment behind the image, however, held. They began to wear them whenever they congregated in the Plaza. The image of the shawls showed the mothers' connection to their children and it showed that they were connected to each other and united as a group.

The white shawls became an icon that represented the Madres. Visitación de Loyola speaks with great emotion as she talks about her shawl. She says, "The shawl is life... it is light... it is the love so large that they fought for." Her shawl reminded her of her children's fight for a better world and also represented her own fight. It was a personal motivation as well as a symbol to the world. In this way, the mothers used their identity to emotionally move the people who were looking on; the shawls became an emblem of motherhood and change. In a poem about the Madres, Marjorie Agosín writes "Give me a kerchief against injustice..." and in another poem, "Then they wore white kerchiefs, the same way love is worn."⁵⁶ The shawls that the women wore on their heads grew to represent the same messages that the mothers were promoting. The Argentine people could look at the mothers wearing their shawls which would come to clearly represent the themes of their mission: mother's love, fight against injustice, and unity. It was an opportunity to highlight the important parts of being a mother and show the public that in order to protect this they needed to find their children.

Another powerful way they provoked emotion through images of mother and child was through the photographs of the children that the mothers displayed. As they marched in the Plaza de Mayo wearing their shawls on their heads, they also carried photos of their loved ones who had disappeared. It was a way to be visible, which was essential to their movement. It was an opportunity to let the public know what was going on because the events of the Dirty War were kept so quiet and guarded. Agosín says of the photographs that the mothers carried, "Each photograph commemorates the presence of an absence... Is there anything more somber than some mothers walking together with a poster filled with photographs of their dead relatives?"⁵⁷ This was a powerful image, each photograph transmitting immense emotion without the Madres even having to say anything. Parents have photos of their children throughout their lives — whether it is from the first day of school, their wedding day, or a birthday — and each of these photos represents a moment. These photographs, however, were referencing missing moments, stolen from them by the military dictatorship, perhaps disappeared forever. The photos that the mothers showed to the public humanized the disappearances. They were not just some whispers about someone's friend's neighbor's husband. They were real people with real faces who were a part of these women's lives, and they were giving a face to the movement that the Madres were beginning to execute.

The photographs were used in another active attempt to draw public attention to the pleas of the Madres. They wanted attention from the press but could not get it other than in the English-speaking *Buenos Aires Herald* or a negative mention in *La Prensa*, as most newspapers did not criticize the dictatorship. As a result, they decided to try to pay for an advertisement in *La Nación* and *La Prensa*. When the advertisement was run it read, "We do not ask for anything more than the truth," accompanied by photos and names of the disappeared.⁵⁸ This was a bold step to get their message out to the

Argentine public and broke the barrier of silence that existed throughout society and in the press. It gave more responsibility to the Argentine people because they could no longer claim ignorance of the disappearances and were given concrete identities of the people who had been affected. The notice made it clear that the disappearances were truly occurring and real people were being kidnapped by the government. The advertisement also announced the objective of the Madres. These mothers asked to know what happened to their children, trying to fulfill their role as mothers, the role that was considered so important by society. They did not even ask for them to be returned, or returned alive. It sounds like a straightforward request, a simple *habeas corpus*, but as the Madres knew too well, the typical rights that they had come to accept had been taken from them as well. In addition to approaching the national press, the Madres garnered the attention of the international press making efforts to reveal the crimes of the dictatorship.

The suspicion of the international community, especially the United Nations, arose with the military coup in 1976, when the world became wary of the human rights situation in Argentina. The military junta attempted to protect their image in a variety of ways, however, including by requiring Argentina's ambassador to the UN, Gabriel Martínez, to cover up the disappearances. Martínez did all he could to keep international pressure off of Argentina and silenced anyone who spoke out against the country, and claimed the terrorist subversives were to blame for any deaths.⁵⁹ Amnesty International made steps to investigate the situation in Argentina and in 1977 sent a group of three representatives to Buenos Aires. While they were there the military tried to cover up their real identities, telling the people of Argentina that they were a group of Marxists who did not really understand the threat of terrorism in their country.⁶⁰ This did not keep Amnesty International from finding evidence of human rights abuse, however, and their report helped convince the United

States to stop sending military aid to Argentina, a move encouraged by President Carter's new Human Rights Campaign.⁶¹ The world had obviously taken notice of the actions of the military junta but because of their work to cover up and evade investigation, the picture of what the military was doing was still blurred. Nevertheless, the Madres made strides to try to clear up that picture.

The Madres took any opportunity they could to give the international community more information about what was really going on in Argentina and to share their stories. Another example of an attempt to distract the world from Argentina's economic and human rights issues was the decision to host the 1978 World Cup. De Landin said of the Argentine people during the World Cup, "The people were happy, enjoying the games. And me with my tears."⁶² The World Cup reminded the Madres of their losses and the lack of sympathy their country showed to them. It could have been a moment where they focused on their grief and allowed the world to turn their attention elsewhere. Instead the Madres used the Cup to their advantage and approached any foreign journalists they could, trying to spread their message, but keeping it as simple as possible because of the language barrier. They stated their basic mission: "We want our children."⁶³ Not only was the tournament broadcast to people in countries like the United States, but so were the words and demonstrations of the Madres. Whereas the Argentine press still only showed the games, international attention turned to the women in the white handkerchiefs and their powerful stories. With further international interest, there was hope for further international intervention.

The Madres continued to use any presence of foreign press to extend their message and endeavor to keep international pressure on Argentina which, as a result, helped keep the Madres themselves safe. Epelbaum shares the story of how she was almost disappeared during the World Cup. She describes walking down the street in Buenos Aires and suddenly being surrounded by military police and

fearing the worst. Before she could be forced into their vehicle, however, she heard the word, "Image!" from down the street.⁶⁴ Another officer announced the presence of tourists, visiting for the World Cup, and forced the officers to stop what they were doing in order to keep their image clean. They were reminded that they could not risk that kind of conduct in front of visitors from countries that had the power to influence their control. To evade judgment from foreign groups like the United Nations and Amnesty International, the military could not allow further knowledge of the disappearances to escape. The Madres understood this and tried to attract the attention of international powers because of the authority that those powers could demonstrate over the dictatorship. Other countries could not deny the horror of the human rights abuse that was occurring in Argentina if that abuse became visible.

The children of the Madres, the disappeared, suffered intense pain from the time of their disappearance. Some were killed right away, some were drugged and thrown in the ocean from planes, and some were taken to concentration camps where they would be tortured, and many killed. The horror stories of torture are repeated again and again in the testimonials and writings of the survivors of the concentration camps and the different treatments have become infamous. Many prisoners underwent electric shock, being probed with an electric prod while lying wet on a steel bed. A hood was also commonly used to keep prisoners blindfolded and unaware of their surroundings for days at a time.⁶⁵

One of the most famous of the disappeared was Jacobo Timerman, the former editor of the Argentine newspaper *La Opinión*, who upon his release in September of 1979 began to tell the world about the horrors of the Dirty War.⁶⁶ In his book, *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*, Timerman talks about his experiences in a concentration camp, illustrating for the audience just how inhumane the conditions were. He describes the tiny cell that he had to endure

— always wet, cramped, stale, and dark.⁶⁷ His captors also used psychological tactics. For example, Timerman recalls an occasion when he was blindfolded and tied to a chair outside in the cold rain. He was eventually let inside to a warm room where a guard asked him if he wanted to lie down, have something to eat, or go to bed with a female prisoner. Timerman explains, “In some way he needs to demonstrate to me and to himself his capacity to grant things, to alter my world, my situation. To demonstrate to me that I need things that are inaccessible to me and which only he can provide. I’ve noticed this mechanism repeated countless times.”⁶⁸ Because he refused to respond he was put back out into the rain. The members of the military who ran these camps knew how to get at the core of the disappeared through their torture. They used the most prisoner-personalized tactics they could and attacked physically, emotionally, and psychologically. The thoroughness of methods and desire to cut down anyone who could possibly have harmed the government’s movement enabled the Dirty War to grow to such a terrible magnitude.

The torture that women endured in the camps was targeted at them specifically because they were breaking the laws of the dictatorship, but also for breaking the gender norms, making them bad women. Female prisoners not only had to deal with the torture, but also degradation as women. Mary Jane Treacy cites the work of Chilean sociologist Ximena Bunster-Burotto that suggests that Latin American culture tended to define women either as madonnas or whores.⁶⁹ She goes on to say that women who were in politics, who left their jobs as wives and mothers in the home, were automatically considered whores. Treacy claims that this gave the torturers all the more reason to rape and abuse the women’s bodies — because those bodies no longer deserved to be treated with respect, as a mother’s would.⁷⁰ They were abused physically but also emotionally, in part, because of their sex. Through torture, they were told that they should not be participating in politics and the public sphere. Their

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captors made it clear they did not deserve any respect because not only were they a threat to the military regime, but they were a threat to their sex. Because they had stepped outside the world of the home, they had abandoned the marianismo that came with that role. In the eyes of their captors they were no longer protectors of morality but offenders of it.

The role of a mother is important in analyzing the concentration camps and torture because it illustrates the differences between the Madres, who were empowered by their own motherhood, and their daughters, who had this role taken from them. Looking at any progressive feminist movement in the Southern Cone of South America, it is important to understand that motherhood plays a very important role in the culture. Feminists in the region, although looking to further women's rights as citizens, have also always been very conscious of their importance as mothers.⁷¹ Motherhood has always been given respect and value. The Madres de Plaza de Mayo give one example of women using their motherhood as a means to attempt to procure rights as a citizen. While the Madres were out fighting for answers about their lost children, their daughters had their rights as mothers ripped away from them.

With more unthinkable tragedies, motherhood and children also became victims of the Dirty War. Many women arrived at the concentration camps pregnant or with children. These women experienced a variety of fates including not being allowed to see their children or being beaten up so that they would have a forced miscarriage.⁷² Juan Enrique Velázquez Rosano shared his story with the Argentine National Commission of the Disappeared, speaking about his experiences with his wife and children in the concentration camps. He describes a time that he and his wife were being tortured in the presence of their four children: "After beating my wife, they took the youngest child and held her upside down by the feet and hit her, saying to the mother, 'If you don't talk we will kill her.'"⁷³

The mother, Elba Lucía Gándara de Castromán, no longer had any control over what happened to her child. The military's tactics went past individual torture and began to attack the entire family. Not only would de Castromán surely have been petrified for the life of her child, but her own life and role in society was being attacked. Her captors took away her ability to protect her children which violated her most important role as defined by society. The military abused her from the core of what it meant to be a woman in Argentina.

The torture that was aimed at the disappeared mothers affected their role in the Dirty War in a different way than it affected their own mothers, the members of the Madres. Elisa Tokar, Miriam Lewin, and Munú Actis discuss a story, similarly horrifying to that of the de Castrománs, in which they remember the concentration camp at the Navy Mechanics School, known by its Spanish acronym ESMA. A couple named Víctor and Lita arrived at ESMA with a twenty-day-old baby. The baby was subjected to an electric shock and threatened to be smashed against the wall if the couple did not cooperate and talk.⁷⁴ The torturers created an intense atmosphere of fear for the parents, one that would likely get them to go along with exactly what their torturers wanted. In this way, the loss of children for the disappeared was different than the loss of children for the Madres de Plaza de Mayo. In the former case the attack on motherhood was paralyzing. It forced compliance from the people who had been working so hard against the government in the first place. Their role as mothers and their role as political activists both took direct hits. In the latter case, where the torture was removed from view, the Madres were able to take the fear and sadness they felt and draw empowerment from it by working to fix it. They felt their jobs as mothers had been expanded as opposed to taken away from them. They achieved the courage that was necessary to fight the abductors of their children.

The atrocities against families did not stop with torturing children

but continued to pervade society inside and outside of the concentration camps. Pregnant mothers in the camps lived out their pregnancies and gave birth in excruciating circumstances. For example, Gladys de H. testified to have been tortured even while pregnant, still receiving electric shocks and being beaten and raped. The electric shocks resulted in a neuro-physiological imbalance in her child when he was born.⁷⁵ Tokar revealed that while she was in ESMA the pregnant women were kept together in a locked room. "When they had to use the bathroom, they had to bang hard on the door from the inside so the guard would open it," she claimed.⁷⁶ Some of the women were forced to give birth blindfolded.⁷⁷ Outstandingly tragic as well was the fate of the babies that were born in the camps. Young babies were often taken from their mothers either when they arrived at the camps together or if the mother gave birth while captive. They were whisked away and frequently given or sold to military or military-sympathetic families for adoption.

Although the women in the concentration camps did not know their babies would be given away, the military again attacked their families. The women who wrote *That Inferno* discuss the fact that in the camps they did not know for sure what happened to the babies who were born there, they could only postulate. Lewin says that she always believed they gave the babies to the family members of the women because the pregnant women were told by the oppressors to write a letter to a family member who could raise the child until the mother was released.⁷⁸ Of course often neither of those things happened. The women died in the camps and the children were given away. This is another example of the junta taking control of motherhood and family. In this case they not only took it away from the mothers, but any family that was left behind. The people who were supposed to receive the babies never did, erasing two generations from their families.

This left many grandparents wondering about their lost grandchild-

dren. Señora Estela B. de Carlotto, for example, received a message from someone who was in a cell with her pregnant daughter, telling her where the baby should be after it was born. When the time came, de Carlotto searched the orphanage where the baby was supposed to be, and all the other orphanages in the area. A couple months later de Carlotto received another message, telling her to go to the district police station. The police told her that her daughter was dead and when questioned about the baby denied knowing anything about it. De Carlotto testified later about her potential grandchild saying that, "A short time ago it would have been six years old. I am still looking for him. And I will go on looking for him all my life."⁷⁹ Her statement demonstrates the lasting affects that the Dirty War had on the nation. Thousands of people lost their lives and thousands of people lost their loved ones. It was impossible for Argentina to recover from that quickly, even after the regime fell. At the same time, however, people like the Madres and de Carlotto continued to have faith and continued their search for answers. This included another organization, the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, which consisted of grandmothers who gathered together to search for answers to the location of their missing grandchildren.⁸⁰ They continued to ask questions about the disappeared and the generation of disappeared children that they left behind, some of which who did not even know they were lost.

Juan Gelman, a poet and author whose son and daughter-in-law were disappeared, comments on the strange grief of having lost a grandchild to the people who stole his own children in the piece called "An Open Letter to my Grandson or Granddaughter." He expands on the possibilities of what could have happened to the child and what his role as a grandparent should be in this case:

Conflicting ideas keep coming to me. On the one hand I have always found repugnant the idea of your calling "Daddy" some military or police gangster who stole you, or some friend of those who assassinated your father. On the other hand I have always wished that in whatever home you may have grown up you were well brought up

and educated and loved a lot.⁸¹

Gelman's commentary paints a picture of what the disappearances of these children meant to their families. The military not only potentially killed their children, but also stole the lives of their grandchildren from their families. They would never get to know them, tell them about their parents, or even know what they looked like. It was an affront to the familial life, leaving behind a generation with no one left. The 1985 film *The Official Story*, which explored the subject of stolen adopted children, won the 1985 Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, drawing the world's attention to Argentina in a time when its story demanded awareness.⁸² This fascinating issue was extremely compelling and ended up as a way to publicize the events of Argentina which had been so silenced during the time of the Dirty War.

Through their actions during the Dirty War, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo broke free from the gender repression that had restricted them in Argentina for hundreds of years. They took control of their situation using motherhood as the backbone for their resistance movement. At the same time, they were redefining what the role of a mother was, finding that politics and interaction with public society could be compatible with protecting the morals of their society.

The military's power began to wane around 1981, and change was imminent. There was conflict within the ranks of the armed forces, the economy was on the verge of collapse, and international opinion criticized the dictatorship.⁸³ In 1982 the military junta made a fatal mistake when it attempted a final effort to retain power and tried to take the long-disputed Falkland Islands from Britain, not thinking that Britain would find it significant enough to send a strong defense. Argentina lost the Falklands War, however, and it became apparent that the military had lost their power. The Argentine public began to rally around the Madres, protest the government, and call for elections.⁸⁴ Shortly after, Raúl Alfonsín was elected as the new democrat-

ic leader of the country and his government took control on December 10th, 1983.

The Madres continued to work for justice after the disappearances stopped. With the restoration of democracy, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo wrote a bill that would make a commission to try the military, but the bill was defeated on the grounds that it would destabilize the government. Instead a different commission was created which would only investigate the disappearances. As far as the judgment of those responsible for the disappearances, the government considered it important to keep intact their defense; it was only the top military leaders that would be judged.⁸⁵ The government claimed that only these leaders were responsible because the lower ranking military was following orders, essentially excusing much of the military for their actions regarding the disappeared. Still, many of the Madres were not happy with these results.

The Madres continued, and still continue, to use their reclaimed political rights to focus on the future of a better Argentina. In 1986 the Madres split into two groups, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo-Founding Line and the Madres de Plaza de Mayo Association. The goal of the Founding Line was to continue work toward locating and identifying the disappeared through DNA testing and also to bring more of the military to justice. The Association focused more on a transformation of the government, vying for political change and socialist reform. What all of these women had in common, however, is that through their actions during the Dirty War they were able to create a new identity for women in Argentina. Belonging to the Madres de Plaza de Mayo allowed these women to show the world the significance of motherhood, but also demonstrated to themselves and their society that women belonged in other realms besides the home. Many of the Madres were able to go back to school, continue to work in the political world, and expand their lives outside of their homes. They even began to work with other human rights organiza-

tions, especially those for women, across the globe to share their expertise and help women institute change worldwide. Through their grassroots organization, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo reminded Argentina of the importance and power of motherhood, but also seized the opportunity to expand the presence of women in the political realm and redefine what it meant to be a woman.

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