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## Juan Manuel De Rosas

Juan Manuel De Rosas the governor of Buenos Aires from 1829 until 1852. Rosas has often been portrayed as a brutal, ruthless, and ineffective dictator. It is easy to only focus on the negative and in some cases the evils of Rosas's reign. This paper will explore both the prevalent negative image of Rosas, the elusive positive image of Rosas, in an attempt to gain a full understanding of not only of Rosas, but of his impact upon the people of Argentina.

Rosas was born on March 30 1793<sup>1</sup> to a wealthy land owning family<sup>2</sup> Rosas had a limited education, he was taught to read and write at home, and then at the age of eight was sent to a private school for one year, that would be the end of his formal education.<sup>3</sup> Rosas did not partake in the May Revolution of 1810, which celebrate Argentina's independence.<sup>4</sup> Rosas embraced the Spanish colonial ideology, and was not a supporter of an independent Argentina.<sup>5</sup> In 1813 Rosas left his family estates, to strike out on his own.<sup>6</sup> Although Rosas came from an affluent family, he was a self made caudillo. He gave the inheritance he received from his father to his mother. When Rosas mother

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<sup>1</sup> John Lynch, *Argentine Dictator: Juan Manuel De Rosas 1829-1852*, (Oxford: England, 1981) 12.

<sup>2</sup> Lynch, 11.

<sup>3</sup> Lynch, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Lynch, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Lynch, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Lynch, 14.

passed away she left her fortune to the poorest of her ten children and gave the rest to charity.<sup>7</sup>

Rosas entered in to a partnership with two other individuals to exploit the land and its products.<sup>8</sup> Rosas was able to gain extensive amounts of land and wealth, catapulting himself into a position of power. Most of Rosas new wealth came from grabbing vast amount of land in the newly conquered Pampas.<sup>9</sup> Unlike many of Rosas's peers, he disliked the killing of the Indians; instead he preferred diplomatic means to acquire new land.<sup>10</sup> Rosas and his associates decided to concentrate on Ranching in 1817; this helped Rosas create a large estancia in the district of San Vicente, which would serve as his power base later in his life.<sup>11</sup> Rosas treated his own estate as a small scale county. He had complete control of his estate, organizing the every last detail, and imposing his "iron will on every subordinate".<sup>12</sup> According to John Lynch the key word in Rosas Vocabulary was "Subordinacion" which meant having "respect for authority, for social order, for private property".<sup>13</sup> This emphasis on authority and social order is exactly the attitude that he had when he comes into power in 1829.<sup>14</sup>

In 1920 Rosas used his militia of Colorado's to defeat an uprising in Buenos Aires and confirm Rodriguez as governor of Buenos Aires.<sup>15</sup> This is the first time that Rosas was to use his gaucho power base to impose his will upon the upper class.<sup>16</sup> Rosas

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<sup>7</sup> Lynch, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Lynch, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Lynch, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Lynch, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Lynch, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Lynch, 24.

<sup>13</sup> Lynch, 25.

<sup>14</sup> His attitudes about how Buenos Aires and Argentina should be governed will be examined thoroughly later in the paper.

<sup>15</sup> Lynch, 28.

<sup>16</sup> Lynch, 28.

decision to intervene on behalf of a political party placed himself into the turbulent Argentine politics.<sup>17</sup> Rodriguez was grateful of the assistance that Rosas offered him and promoted him to the colonel of Calvary in October 7<sup>th</sup> 1820.<sup>18</sup> 1820 was the year that Rosas was able to truly assert himself as a powerful caudillo; he gained large land grants from the government, was given a government position, and became a respected political figure.<sup>19</sup> Rosas was able to dominate the gauchos, peons, and Indians due to his physical talents, which were superior, or equal to any of the toughest gauchos, and because of his “shrewd sense of judgment”.<sup>20</sup> Rosas with the support of the rest of the Caudillos forced governor Rivadavia to resign, and the federalist Manuel Dorrego was elected on August 12<sup>th</sup> 1827. On July 12<sup>th</sup> Rosas was “appointed Comandante General de las milicias de la Campana in the province of Buenos Aires”.<sup>21</sup> With his new promotion, Rosas experienced new levels of government and political involvement. On August 16 1827, Rosas was given a “threefold mission: to make and keep peace with the Indians; to prepare a plan of frontier expansion; and to establish a settlement in Bahia Blanca.

In 1828 there was once again political turmoil as Dorrego was captured by Lavalle and executed.<sup>22</sup> This event created another civil war in Argentina, this time it Rosas pitted against Lavalle. Rosas drew upon his popularity and influence among the gauchos, caudillos, and Indians to wage guerilla warfare upon Lavalle and his Unitarian allies.<sup>23</sup> On April 25<sup>th</sup> 1829 Rosas defeated Lavalle, establishing the Federalist Party as

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<sup>17</sup> Lynch, 28.

<sup>18</sup> Lynch, 28.

<sup>19</sup> Lynch, 29.

<sup>20</sup> Lynch, 25.

<sup>21</sup> Lynch, 34.

<sup>22</sup> Lynch, 38.

<sup>23</sup> Lynch, 38.

the dominate party of Buenos Aires and himself as its leader.<sup>24</sup> On May 1<sup>st</sup> 1930 Rosas was elected the governor of Buenos Aires, and given absolute power, thus the reign of Rosas began.<sup>25</sup>

William Gore Ousely, a British minister in Buenos Aires during the La Plata intervention sent a correspondence to Lord Aberdeen, the British Foreign Secretary describing Rosas government. As violent and anti-foreign; he was worried about Rosas's reprisals against British subjects living in Argentina.<sup>26</sup> Ousely describes current government policy<sup>27</sup> towards foreigners as intolerant, hostile, and injurious.<sup>28</sup> Ousely was worried that a "war between Buenos Aires and England, and especially protracted war, would in all likelihood, as far as regards this portion of the British, be their virtual annihilation as Britons".<sup>29</sup> Ousely believed that Rosas was so "scrupulous, his instrument are so blindly devoted to him, that any atrocity may be possible".<sup>30</sup> The brutality of Rosas played a role in Lord Aberdeen's decision to negotiate a compromise with Rosas, hoping to spare British residents of Argentina reprisals form Rosas.<sup>31</sup>

Rosas brutality was not limited to foreigners. Rivera Indarte stated that "Rosas assassinated 722 persons, shot 1393, and beheaded 3765."<sup>32</sup> Fred Rippy estimates that that more than twenty thousand people were either killed or exiled under Rosas rule.<sup>33</sup> Francis Baylies the American Charge d' affaires at Buenos Aires in 1832 thought that Rosas was

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<sup>24</sup> Lynch, 42.

<sup>25</sup> Lynch, 43.

<sup>26</sup> Wilbur Devereux Jones, "The Argentine British Colony in the Time of Rosas", *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol. 40, No. 1. (Feb., 1960): 91.

<sup>27</sup> his letter was written in 1845

<sup>28</sup> Jones, 92.

<sup>29</sup> Jones, 93.

<sup>30</sup> Jones, 95.

<sup>31</sup> Jones, 95.

<sup>32</sup> William Dusenberry, "Juan Manuel de Rosas Viewed by Contemporary American Diplomats", *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol. 41, No. 4. (Nov., 1961): 495.

<sup>33</sup> Dusenberry, 495.

ignorant of the law; Rosas had no knowledge of international or municipal law.<sup>34</sup> Rosas had the power to censor the press, close courts, circumvent criminal and civil process, and have people imprisoned as he desired.<sup>35</sup> Baylies compared Rosas to the old Spaniards, which are “proud, bigoted, narrow-minded, and oppressive-hating all foreigners”.<sup>36</sup> William Harris, charge d’ affaires to Buenos Aires in 1846 stated that “there was no freedom of speech, or even of thought”, in Buenos Aires, Rosas ruled by Fear.<sup>37</sup>

Harris also commented on the irresponsible economic policies of Rosas. Argentina’s paper system was based on absolutely nothing, and it was printed at his will.<sup>38</sup> William Dusenberry points out that Rosas may have not been completely fiscally irresponsible.<sup>39</sup> In fact Dusenberry believes that Rosas had a sound monetary policy, but was forced by certain circumstances<sup>40</sup> to print money and cause inflation.<sup>41</sup> In 1840 12,000,000 Pesos were printed and during the Anglo-French blockade 2,300,000 Pesos a month were being printed.<sup>42</sup>

John Pendleton arrived in Buenos Aires in 1851 as the new American charge d’ affaires.<sup>43</sup> Pendleton thought that Rosas had a negative impact upon the people of Argentina. Pendleton thought that the people were the most gallant and enlightened people of Latin America; they were the leading force behind the liberation of their neighbors.<sup>44</sup> But Rosas opposed “everything that was decent or respectable among his

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<sup>34</sup> Dusenberry, 498.

<sup>35</sup> Dusenberry, 498.

<sup>36</sup> Dusenberry, 499.

<sup>37</sup> Dusenberry, 504.

<sup>38</sup> Dusenberry, 508.

<sup>39</sup> Dusenberry, 508.

<sup>40</sup> The naval blockades by the French in 1838 and the blockade by the British and French in 1846.

<sup>41</sup> Dusenberry, 508.

<sup>42</sup> Dusenberry, 509.

<sup>43</sup> Dusenberry, 509.

<sup>44</sup> Dusenberry, 511.

people” this caused a deterioration of the entire population of Argentina.<sup>45</sup> Pendleton felt that Rosas severely depleted the ranks of the younger generation of Argentina, because the most talented and intelligent argentinians were killed, imprisoned, or exiled.<sup>46</sup> Most Argentines grew up in poverty and ignorance.<sup>47</sup> Lastly Pendleton condemned Rosas Economic policies for extorting the wealth of Argentina into Buenos Aires.<sup>48</sup> According to Pendleton, all imports and exports had to go through the ports of Buenos Aires, so he could control all import and export tariffs.<sup>49</sup> This pooled the tax revenue in Buenos Aires, giving Rosas effective control of the Argentine economy. Rosas only spent one percent of the tax revenue out side of Buenos Aires.<sup>50</sup>

Not everyone agreed that Rosas was such a ruthless, brutal and ineffective ruler. Ernest Quesada believed that Rosas had laid that foundation that Argentina was built upon.<sup>51</sup> F. Garcia Calderon wrote that Rosas was an eminent administrator of public finance, had far-seeing economic policies, and based his rule upon material progress and fiscal order.<sup>52</sup> Rosas’s unwavering policies helped lead France and Britain into placing a naval blockade on the port of Buenos Aires, but these same policies forced France and Britain to withdraw. This was seen as a victory for Rosas and the People of Buenos Aires, creating a sense of nationalism. John Forbes the American charge d’ affaires to Buenos Aires in 1829, stated that Rosas was noble, patriotic, a man of Moderation, and was Buenos Aires best chance for national liberty.<sup>53</sup> In 1844 Harvey Watterson was sent to

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<sup>45</sup> Dusenberry, 511.

<sup>46</sup> Dusenberry, 512.

<sup>47</sup> Dusenberry, 512.

<sup>48</sup> Dusenberry, 512.

<sup>49</sup> Dusenberry, 512.

<sup>50</sup> Dusenberry, 513.

<sup>51</sup> Dusenberry, 495.

<sup>52</sup> Dusenberry, 496.

<sup>53</sup> Dusenberry, 497.

Buenos Aires as a diplomat and was “treated with great respect and kindness by Rosas”.<sup>54</sup>

Watterson went on to write that he admired Rosas’s frankness; he also believed that Rosas was a “gentleman-very great man-a man of the people-a man who understands human nature in all its various manifestations. He is one of nature’s nobleman and a higher compliment I could not pay him”.<sup>55</sup> This statement by Watterson is a far cry from the common perception of Rosas as a barbarous, ruthless, dictator. There is more than enough evidence to conclude that Rosas was in fact a brutal ruler at times, but the statements from the likes of Watterson shows that there were positive aspects to Rosas personality and his Rule. Harris believed that Rosas was the only one that could keep the Argentine people together during this turbulent time in their history.<sup>56</sup> In essence Harrison is saying that the brutality of Rosas was necessary during this time period.

Rosas also had some economic success. Tariff revenue rose from 10,000,000 Pesos in 1835 to 60,000,000 Pesos by 1850.<sup>57</sup> International trade also experienced exceptional growth during Rosas reign, exported Ox hides rose from 823,635 in 1837 to 2,601,140 in 1851.<sup>58</sup> Rosas created an economy that was more stable and did not suffer from large slumps.<sup>59</sup> During Rosas reign “the public credit, the public treasury, and the whole country, never were in so prosperous a condition”.<sup>60</sup> Wilfred Latham also gave a very optimistic assessment of the Plata basin. He stated that “no man need want employment for a day who can work: and working, he will earn good wages in every

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<sup>54</sup> Dusenberry, 499.

<sup>55</sup> Dusenberry, 500.

<sup>56</sup> Dusenberry, 504.

<sup>57</sup> Miron Burgin, *The Economic Aspects of Argentine Federalism 1820-1852*, (Harvard University Press, Mass., 1946) 185.

<sup>58</sup> Dusenberry, 506.

<sup>59</sup> David Rock, *Argentina 1516-1987*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1987) 107.

<sup>60</sup> Dusenberry, 508.



class of labor and every trade”.<sup>61</sup> Rosas policies helped to create a capitalist friendly society and economy, this brought an influx of foreigners into Buenos Aires ready to invest into its economy. By 1850 half of Buenos Aires population was composed of foreigners that helped establish “foreign banks, commercial houses, shops, and wholesale and retail general stores”.<sup>62</sup> One of Rosas greatest accomplishments was his dealings with the Indian on the pampas. He was able to gain the Indians friendship, through hospitality and gifts.<sup>63</sup> He used Military forts as deterrence to Indian attacks, and established settlements.<sup>64</sup> He was able to avoid a costly war against the Indians that would have cost many Argentine lives and many Argentine Pesos.

Although Rosas as a ruthless and brutal dictator, he was able to accomplish many things and enjoyed the support from the majority of populace in Buenos Aires. Rosas brought political stability to Argentina, which was plagued by several civil wars between 1810 and 1829. Rosas helped transform Argentina’s weak and often floundering economy into one that was stable and growing, through foreign investment and international trade. This stabilization of the political and economic situation in Argentina, enabled Argentina to become the most prosperous country of Latin American during the later half of the nineteenth century. This achievement had the largest impact upon the people of Argentina as a whole, but it should never be forgotten the individual impact Rosas terror policies had on had people and their families.

Rosas was able to stay in power because the Argentines realized that they need to sacrifice some of their liberties for the security Rosas provided against the external

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<sup>61</sup> Dusenberry, 510.

<sup>62</sup> Dusenberry, 512.

<sup>63</sup> Lynch, 34.

<sup>64</sup> Lynch, 35.

threats facing Argentina. As Henry Fern puts it: once the Spanish king was gone, the danger from the Brazilian emperor was gone, and the threat from the British and French monarchy was gone, the only treat left to Argentina was Rosas.<sup>65</sup> Once Rosas eliminated these other threats, there was no need for him, so Rosas lost his support and his political enemies eliminated him and his dictatorship.

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<sup>65</sup> Henry Ferns, *Britain and Argentina in the Nineteenth Century*, (Arno Press, New York, 1977) 281.

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