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The Role of Evita in Peron's Presidency

Eva Duarte Peron was born in the small Argentine village of Los Toldos on May 7, 1919, the fifth and youngest illegitimate child of Juana Ibarguren and Juan Duarte. Her father was an estancia manager from Chivilcoy, and Evita (little Eva) "was a member of a 'parallel family,' a second family outside the law which, although quite common, could never be recognized officially."¹ Evita overcame her lower class background by becoming an actress in Buenos Aires and, more importantly, by marrying Juan Domingo Peron in October 1945. Peron won the Argentine presidential election of 1946 and remained in power until his downfall in 1955. A central feature of the Peron presidency was Evita's involvement in Argentine political affairs; the exact role that Evita played in her husband's political success continues to be debated. It is significant that Evita's death in 1952 at the age of thirty-two "dramatically weakened the populist caudillo's attachment to Argentine workers and women;"² her absence may have contributed to the eventual collapse of the Peron presidency.

Peronists portray Evita as an idealized faithful wife who could claim no role in Peron's political success. Anti-Peronists, on the other hand, portray her as an ambitious

¹ Lucia Fischer-Pap, *Evita Peron, Empress Theodora Reincarnated*, (Rockford: LFP Publications, 1982), 31.

² Benjamin Keen. *A History of Latin America*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2004, 333.

agitator who utilized propaganda to incite the lower classes against. However, the truth concerning Evita's role in Peron's presidency lies somewhere in between these two interpretations. Evita created a new feminist model for Argentine first ladies because of her involvement in the political system. However, she generally worked within Peron's political goals and made her political ambition subordinate to his objectives, thus revealing limits to her political ambition and feminism. Overall, Evita, as Peron's connection between the masses and her husband, served a vital role in his political career.

A discrepancy exists between Peronists' and anti-Peronists' portrayal of Evita's role in her husband's political career and her significance for the Argentine political system:

By the time Evita died on 26 July 1952, she had become the source of two widely contradictory myths coexisting side by side as if their subject were two different persons. In one, she was the beloved saint who had sacrificed her life for the poor; in the other, the ambitious *parvenue* who used her power to satisfy her insatiable thirst for revenge... These two images have permeated Argentine politics... and have also made their way into the literature on Peronism.³

Peronists represent Evita in a far more positive light than do anti-Peronists, and the best example to illustrate this difference is the discrepancy in the portrayal of Evita's role and level of "participation in the crisis of 17 October 1945."⁴ This event was "a significant moment in the history of Peronism because it paved the way for General Juan Domingo Peron's first election to the presidency (February, 1946)."⁵ The crisis began on October

³ Marysa Navarro, "Evita and the Crisis of 17 October 1945: A Case Study of Peronist and Anti-Peronist Mythology," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 12, No. 1 (May 1980), 127.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

9, when Peron was compelled to resign from the cabinet posts of the Vice-Presidency, the Ministry of War, and the Secretariat of Labor. He subsequently found himself arrested and imprisoned on Martin Garcia Island. His military and labor followers expressed their support for Peron and achieved his liberation; whilst “the government wavered, they succeeded in bringing him back to Buenos Aires and, on 17 October, at the end of a day-long massive mobilization, they celebrated his triumphant return.”⁶ Peronist and anti-Peronists present conflicting depictions of Evita’s involvement in bringing about her husband’s release, and these contradictory descriptions provide excellent examples of their views on Evita’s political role in general.

Peronists typically dislike granting Evita any credit for Peron’s political success, and their portrayal of the crisis of 1945 is no exception. Peronist sources “did not attribute a militant attitude to her, but maintained only that she remained ‘loyal’ to Peron.”⁷ Mary Main’s description of Evita’s actions during Peron’s imprisonment does not correspond to the traditional Peronist portrayal:

But while Peron sat in his room--he was not put in a cell--on Martin Garcia and grumbled about the weather, and the Opposition quibbled over points of leadership, Eva showed neither weakness nor hesitation. She had wept and stormed around with fury when they had taken her lover off but no sooner was he gone than she began to fly around among their erstwhile friends, shrieking at them, bullying them, cajoling them and threatening them, demanding his release.⁸

Evita’s actions, as described in the Peronist sources, were those of a faithful lover who

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Navarro, “Evita and the Crisis of 17 October 1945,” 130.

⁸ Mary Main, *Evita: The Woman with the Whip*, (New York: Mead, 1980), 79.

was simply “supportive even in his darkest hour.”⁹ Although this portrayal of Evita facilitates her reputation as a devoted follower of Peron,¹⁰ she receives no credit for executing “his rescue operation.”¹¹ A more likely explanation for Peron’s release, according to Peronists, would be “the intense loyalty [Peron] inspired in the industrial masses”¹² and the pressure they, along with the military, exerted on the government of General Edelmiro J. Farrell. Although Evita is portrayed favorably by Peronists as a traditional loyal woman, her political role remains nonexistent.

Whereas Peronists argue that Evita played no part in Peron’s release from prison and his subsequent triumphal return to Buenos Aires, others have argued that Evita would also have been unable to assist Peron even if his situation had necessitated her help. Prior to Peron’s imprisonment, Evita and Peron were not married, and her political contacts were limited to his close friends; she was essentially devoid of any significant associates in the labor movement or the military. For the most part, Evita could not defend Peron.¹³ Anti-Peronist writers, however, argue that both of these interpretations are incorrect. In keeping with their representation of Evita as a politically ambitious agitator of the lower classes, anti-Peronists assert that Evita played a vital role in the liberation of Peron. She organized and executed his rescue, which they viewed as a “clever coup engineered by a small group of persons who had remained faithful to him and hurriedly managed to round

⁹ Navarro, “Evita and the Crisis of 17 October 1945,” 136.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Navarro, “Evita and the Crisis of 17 October 1945,” 130.

¹² Navarro, “Evita and the Crisis of 17 October 1945,” 128.

¹³ Navarro, “Evita and the Crisis of 17 October 1945,” 129.

up a mob.”¹⁴ Although these sources are unclear as to how Evita accomplished this exploit, from whom she received help, and why anyone would have been willing to listen to Peron’s lover,¹⁵ anti-Peronists strongly believe that Evita was able to affect such as change. This stubbornly held belief is part of the anti-Peronist legend and portrayal of Evita as a political propagandist who incited the working class against the Argentine oligarchy.

The anti-Peronist legend depicted a woman who knew instinctively what to do in a moment of crisis, strong and sure of herself despite her initial reaction. Both her emotional outburst and her actions, however, reflected Evita as she appeared in the nineteen-fifties: the passionate rabble-rouser who chastized the oligarchy, declared her unending love for Peron and the *descamisados*, urging them to defend him with their lives, as well as being the second political figure in the Peronist hierarchy...she was the obscure, uneducated and vulgar upstart...¹⁶

Taking the biased Peronist and anti-Peronist representations of Evita into consideration, the true nature of Evita’s role in Argentine politics and Peron’s presidency should now be analyzed. Evita, because of her political involvement, became an atypical example for Argentine first ladies. “Argentines...had never seen anything like it. For them, a lady’s place--and that went for the First Lady--was in the home. But from the moment of the inauguration, Evita Peron changed all that.”¹⁷ The argument that Evita was a feminist leader who worked toward her own political advancement may be demonstrated by her support of the right of Argentine women to vote. As soon as Peron

¹⁴ Navarro, “Evita and the Crisis of 17 October 1945,” 137.

¹⁵ Navarro, “Evita and the Crisis of 17 October 1945,” 130.

¹⁶ Navarro, “Evita and the Crisis of 17 October 1945,” 137.

¹⁷ John Barnes, *Evita, First Lady: A Biography of Evita Peron*, (New York: Grove Press, 1978), 65.

became President, Evita made certain that women's suffrage remained prominent among the government's legislative program. When support for the suffrage bill wavered in Congressional committees, Evita, upon returning from her European tour in 1948, "marched into Congress and told the deputies that she would not leave until the bill was passed."¹⁸ After two days had passed,

...one hundred thousand Peronistas flocked into Plaza de Mayo to hear Peron promulgate the new law and to hear Evita assure the women, as well as the men, that a new era had dawned for Argentina...The next step was to mobilize the power she had unleashed. On July 26, 1949, Evita brought into being the Peronista Feminist Party...She was named President of the Party, of course, and she took all the other executive offices as well.¹⁹

Evita's insistence on increasing the political rights of women suggests a feminist agenda; it is also notable that her designation as the head of the Peronist Feminist Party would serve to augment her political power. However, it could be argued Evita was less interested in helping Argentine women and her own political career than she was in helping her husband retain his political power. Evita once said, "Just as only workers could wage their own struggle for liberation, so too could only women be the salvation of women."²⁰ Perhaps Evita's words had an influence on the presidential election of 1951, in which "90 percent of registered women, eligible to vote for the first time, went to the polls and some 65 percent cast their votes for Peron."²¹ Between 1949 and 1951 the Peronist Feminist Party had attempted "to secure for their party as many registered

¹⁸ Barnes, 113.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Keen, 333.

²¹ Ibid.

women voters as possible. The members were organized into teams of two or three each, and sent out to canvas every neighborhood, in the capital as well as all other major cities.”²² Although the Feminist Party gave women a voice in Argentine politics, the primary objective of the Peronist Feminist Party appears to have been to gain women voters for Peron. Additionally, despite the notoriety that the party gave Evita, her dedication to the party’s cause was more likely an element of her overriding concern for Peron’s political career than an result of any personal political ambitions.

The portrayal of Evita as a feminist possessing insatiable personal political motivation appears to be inaccurate. In addition to devoting herself to the Feminist Party with the ultimate goal of helping Peron, Evita rejected the nomination to the vice-presidency.

Perhaps the best example of the relationship between his ultimate authority and her freedom of action was the issue of her candidacy to the vice-presidency. Although she wanted it and allowed the Partido Peronista Femenino and the CGT to stage a massive demonstration for the proclamation of the Peron-Peron ticket, when he opposed it, she retreated and refused to accept the nomination.²³

Evita’s autobiography also elucidates her humility in the face of her husband’s political power, and her belief in her dependence on him: “Everything I am, everything I have, everything I feel belongs to Peron.”²⁴ Essentially, the purpose of the Peronist Feminist Party and the Eva Peron Foundation, although they were controlled by Evita, was to

²² Lucia Fischer-Pap, *Evita Peron, Empress Theodora Reincarnated*, (Rockford: LFP Publications, 1982), 195.

²³ Marysa Navarro, “The Case of Evita Peron,” *Signs* 3, No. 1 (Autumn 1977), 240.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

“complement the social goals of Peron’s government.”²⁵ An accurate assessment of Evita’s political motivation would be that she worked within Peron’s goals and would never undermine his power for her own purposes.²⁶

The primary way in which Evita worked within Peron’s goals and helped his political career was as his “liaison with labor.”²⁷ In September 1946, Evita moved to the ministry of labor, which proved to be the *descamisados* “all contact with Peron was to be channeled through his wife, his personal representative in the ministry.”²⁸ Evita utilized her talent for inciting the masses with emotional speeches for Peron from 1946 to 1952.²⁹

Whereas he was ‘the leader’ who elaborated the doctrine, explained it, and led the road toward social justice, she was the rabble-rouser who whipped up emotions; urged the *descamisados* to ‘offer their lives to Peron’ as they had done on October 17; professed an undying love for Peron, the workers, and the poor; and lashed out violent diatribes against the oligarchy and other enemies of ‘the people.’³⁰

Her social origin was also an asset for Peron and his desire to reach out the working class, and Evita never failed to mention that she was also a poor *descamisada* as well.³¹ The vital role Evita had in linking Peron with the working class is proven by his increasing “isolation from the *descamisados*”³² upon Evita’s death.

Despite the conflicting portrayals given of Evita by Peronists and anti-Peronists, the truth concerning her role in the presidency of Peron, and Argentine politics in general,

²⁵ Navarro, “The Case of Evita Peron,” 239.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Navarro, “The Case of Evita Peron,” 237.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Navarro, “The Case of Evita Peron,” 238.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Navarro, “The Case of Evita Peron,” 240.

can be ascertained. Evita improved the status of women in the Argentine political system by advocating women's suffrage and by establishing the Peronist Feminist Party. Her involvement in these matters granted her political notoriety; however, her personal political ambition was not great enough to induce Evita to accept the nomination for the vice-presidency. Her rejection of this nomination was a direct result of Peron's aversion to the idea. Her acceptance of his authority over her as his wife reveals the limits to her feminism. She believed she owed everything to him, thus she was not compelled to pursue a separate political agenda. Her vital role as his connection to the working class was made clear in the years following her death; the downfall of the Peron presidency in 1955 may have been caused in part by his increasing disassociation with the working class facilitated by the death of Evita. The role of Evita in Peron's presidency was that of a loyal and tireless advocate for her husband, as well as for the working class; upon her death, the connection between Peron and the masses was less apparent and bound to come to an end.

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