

The Politics of Remembering State Violence in Argentina's Jewish Community

This talk represents part of the research conducted for my undergraduate thesis. In the thesis as a whole, I talk about first the relation of Jewish Argentines to the state during the 1976-1983 dictatorship and second about struggles between Argentine Jews to narrate the facts and meanings of that experience, during the dictatorship, immediately after the collapse of the junta, and more recently, in the past decade. It is that second theme that I will discuss today.

After the collapse of Argentina's military dictatorship in 1983, newly elected President Raúl Alfonsín created a National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP) to investigate the mass murders and forced disappearances perpetrated under the *de facto* government. Although the field of memory of Argentina's last dictatorship remains contested, the CONADEP's report, *Nunca Más*, created a semi-official narrative of the recent past, in particular with regard to the question of how to understand the use of state violence by the armed forces and their collaborators. Among the disappeared, individuals with some connection to Jewish identity numbered disproportionately. By some estimates, the proportion of *desaparecidos* who are considered Jewish by some criterion is ten times greater than the proportion of Jews in Argentina compared to the general population. The *Nunca Más* report does not discuss the possible reasons for this discrepancy and makes no mention of cases of Argentine citizens having been disappeared for the “fact” of being Jewish. At the same time, *Nunca Más* does address the question of anti-semitism in the dictatorship's secret detention centers. The report explains how the leaders and guards of such centers frequently subjected individuals who they believed to be Jews to unique forms of physical and psychological torture. The post-dictatorship consensus on the issue seemed to be that while no one was disappeared for being Jewish, being considered or outed as Jewish in the detention centers meant meeting with harsher treatment on the part of the forces of repression. This conclusion appears consistent with the evidence presented in *Nunca Más*. New

historiographic research suggests a slightly more complicated picture. Within the “Jewish community” itself, of course, as within most parts of Argentine society, narration of the facts and meanings of state violence during the dictatorship did not start with the CONADEP, but rather during the events themselves.

Within Argentina's Jewish community, the central actors trying to narrate the facts and meanings of the repression of the dictatorship, from the time of the dictatorship to the present, have been the leaders of the Jewish political establishment, on the one hand, and the family members of desaparecidos, together with a few individuals fighting the repression, on the other. Not all family members of desaparecidos, of course, became politically active or involved publicly in the struggle to uncover the truth about the desaparecidos. As Elizabeth Jelin has observed, the family members of desaparecidos who did not begin *during* the dictatorship to be politically active in some way in pursuit of truth and/or justice, tended never to become politically active in any open manner in the post-dictatorship.¹ More generally, the question of what one did or didn't do during the dictatorship looms large in the attempts of individuals and institutions to construct memory of the dictatorship's violence after the fact.

By 1984, two competing narratives of the dictatorship had clearly emerged within different parts of the Jewish community. Both positioned the actions of the individuals in each group within a larger understanding of the facts and meanings of state violence during the dictatorship. The Jewish political establishment, represented primarily by the DAIA – the Delegation of Argentine Jewish Associations – has claimed since its creation in 1935 to speak for and represent Argentine Jews politically. In 1984, in the first major statement of the DAIA after the fall of the military junta, on the question of how some Argentine Jews had been affected by the junta's violations of human rights, the DAIA issued a report on the cases of some of the Jewish individuals detained and disappeared during

¹ Elizabeth Jelin, “The Politics of Memory: The Human Rights Movements and the Construction of Democracy in Argentina”, *Latin American Perspectives*, (21:2), Spring 1994, 45.

the dictatorship.² Strikingly, the DAIA report lists the names of Jews detained and disappeared, indicating alleged political and/or criminal activities for each individual. In the aftermath of six years of the majority of Argentine society saying “por algo será” - the disappeared must have done something to deserve their fate – the fact and tone of this list did not go unnoticed. In an outraged reply soon after, a group of Jewish family members of the disappeared wrote a public response to the DAIA, stating that the DAIA had not even superficially consulted with or interviewed any family member of desaparecidos or survivors of state violence in the preparation of their report. Further, the family members wrote, the DAIA had failed to help the desaparecidos during the dictatorship, and now, in the post-dictatorship, was telling a version of events under the dictatorship that appeared to justify the repression, echoing the narrative of the perpetrators themselves.³

The late journalist Gabriela Lotersztain, while writing a book posthumously published as *Los judíos bajo el terror: Argentina 1976-1983*, interviewed all of the leaders of the DAIA who agreed to speak with her. In a chapter entitled “Una cuestión ideológica,” Lotersztain notes that in her interviews with all of the former officials of the DAIA,

“one theme that was repeated with notable frequency...was a criticism of the ideology of the young Jews who were politically active in the Peronist left. All of these interviewees coincided in affirming that a high percentage of the Jewish desaparecidos were active within this political bloc, a formation within which, the interviewees emphasized, there were strong 'anti-semitic, anti-Zionist, and anti-Israeli elements.’”⁴

In the 1970s, many young Argentine Jews were politically active in a number of different leftist movements and sectors. Why then would officials in the DAIA obsess over the idea of young Jews working on the *Peronist* left? Although some of the DAIA leaders perhaps associated the Peronist left in general with the Montoneros, a branch of left-wing Peronist youth who had taken up arms in pursuit

² Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas. “Informe especial sobre detenidos y desaparecidos judíos 1976-1983”. Buenos Aires, enero de 1984. DAIA Archive.

³ Raquel de Arcuschin, et al. “Réplica al informe especial sobre detenidos y desaparecidos judíos 1976-1983 publicado por la Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas (D.A.I.A.)”. DAIA Archive.

⁴ Gabriela Lotersztain, *Los judíos bajo el terror: Argentina 1976-1983*, Buenos Aires, Ejercitar la memoria, 2008. 46-47. My translation.

of their political goals, this explanation is insufficient. First, within the Peronist left in the 1970s, the Montoneros were the exception, not the rule, in a larger movement where the vast majority of social activists sought to achieve their political goals through means other than violent revolution. Second, even if the leaders of the DAIA would not have agreed with this assessment, the fact remains that other left-wing organizations for whom the DAIA presumably had little sympathy, had equal or even more noticeable concentrations of Jewish youth working within them. To take the example of another armed organization, observers during the dictatorship note that it was actually the ERP - the Revolutionary People's Army, a Leninist-Trotskyist urban guerrilla force – that had a particularly high proportion of Jewish members.⁵ For the officials in the DAIA, nonetheless, the idea that Jewish desaparecidos were disproportionately left-wing Peronists is the salient point.

The strong anti-Peronism of the DAIA's leaders at the time probably reflects the middle and upper-middle class background of the Jewish establishment's leadership, as well as a generational bias, since after all most of the Jewish desaparecidos also came from middle-class backgrounds. Over the course of Perón's long exile, which ended only in 1973, unprecedented numbers of middle-class youth found in Perón a symbol of the possibilities of change and social justice – youth whose parents, by and large, had opposed Perón during his period of power. Paradoxically, of course, the period of Perón's exile also saw the growth of right-wing branches of Peronism, including some of the organizations and individuals who would begin systematically killing and terrorizing leftists and left-Peronists in the early-to-mid 1970s.

Recent research by Israeli historian Raanan Rein provides some answers as to why the DAIA might have focused on the supposed Peronist character of Jewish desaparecidos. According to Rein, contrary to the popular historical stereotype of Peronism as a largely antisemitic movement, relations between Argentine Jews and Perón's government, in power from 1946-1955, were actually more

⁵ E.g. Leonor Blum, “Are Argentine Jews Persecuted? If so, why?” *The Baltimore Sun*, 2 February 1978. DAIA Archive.

complex. Rein argues that many Jewish workers, intellectuals, and businessmen supported Perón during his time in power. After Perón's fall, when he was overthrown by a right-wing military coup, Jewish institutions such as the DAIA feared the idea of being associated in any way with Perón and began making a “systematic attempt...to completely erase from memory the support of certain Jewish sectors for Peronism.”⁶ Part of this strategy also meant separating the official Jewish institutions from “Jews suspected of collaborating with Perón's regime,” a “rejection” that lasted until at least the late 1960s.⁷ Finally, notes Rein, while this fear of being associated with Peronism partly motivated the official institutions to erase the memory of Jewish support for Perón, so too did considerations of class. “The reservations that many Jews held towards Peronism did not have to do so much with their ethnicity as Jews, [however] but rather with their economic status, [which for] many of them was middle-class.”⁸

The DAIA response to the fact of Jewish desaparecidos was thus shaped by class, politics, and generation. In addition, DAIA leaders deployed a distinct – and narrow – idea of Jewish identity in order to criticize Jewish desaparecidos, leftists, and Peronists. What responsibility, after all, did the DAIA have to Jews who associated themselves with “anti-semitic elements” and 'terrorists'? The discursive position of the DAIA leadership during and immediately after the dictatorship brings out three problems of politics and memory of these events within the Jewish community.

First, the DAIA's emphasis on Jewish Peronists and their supposed ties to anti-semitic politics demonstrates how the organization agreed with many of the basic assumptions and goals of the military dictatorship, if not all of its methods. According to the *militares* who seized power in 1976, Argentina's “terrorist” left was the source of the country's chaotic instability and violence. The *militares*, according to this narrative, were saving the Argentine republic by destroying the left, or by, in the language of the

⁶ Verónica Engler, interview with Raanan Rein. “Ya no podemos manejar falsas dicotomías.” *Página/12*. 10 August 2009. <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/dialogos/21-129735-2009-08-10.html>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

time, removing the cancerous growth. It is in this context that DAIA officials from the 1970s emphasized the left-wing and Peronist political identity of many of the desaparecidos.

Second, this discursive position appears to have functioned during the dictatorship as a method to distance the DAIA and the rest of the officially identified Jewish community from the Jewish desaparecidos. This discursive position worked both in order to protect the DAIA from the danger of associating with desaparecidos or the family members of desaparecidos and to justify doing nothing for the desaparecidos at the time. Third and similarly, this discourse works to justify in the present what the DAIA leadership did and did not do during the “Proceso.”

Moisés Camji, an ex-DAIA official from the era of the dictatorship, told Lotersztain that “the majority of the subversive movements of that era [the 1970s] were linked to Arab terrorism...of course none of this justifies the military repression. But I am trying to demonstrate how delicate the equilibrium was that the DAIA had to keep in order to maintain itself equally far away from left-wing and right-wing extremism, respectively.”⁹ In this single quote, the ex-DAIA official (1) deploys the idea of the social movements of the 1970s as “subversive movements” - using the language of the dictators, *years* after the end of the dictatorship, (2) argues that Jewish leftists were associated with the specter of “Arab terrorism,” and (3) uses words taken directly from the theory of “los dos demonios,” the idea that Argentina in the 1970s was beset by two equivalent evils, the extremisms of right and left, which both victimized an innocent, passive Argentine society that wanted nothing to do with politics. Moreover, invoking the specter of “Arab terrorism,” Camji combines Argentine hegemonic discourses of the dictatorship, with a right-wing Zionist idea of Jewish identity. Both are ostensibly constituted in opposition to a terrorist other – in Argentina the leftist, in the Middle East, the Arab. This particular expression of “being Jewish” is constructed as a national identity that excludes Jews who do not support the goals or methods of the nationalist movement. On all of these questions, Lotersztain makes no comment, but she closes her collection of quotes on the topic with the words of Jewish human rights

⁹ Lotersztain, *Los judíos bajo el terror*, 47.

activist and journalist Herman Schiller, who says that “The DAIA considered the desaparecidos to be terrorists, and [that for that reason] they were outside of the community.”¹⁰

In the past decade, the DAIA has taken on a new institutional policy of apologizing to the family members of desaparecidos for having “made errors” during the dictatorship and assuming some responsibility in the past and present to these individuals. The DAIA archive on “state terrorism” created as part of this project, contains, among other things, a treasure trove of contemporary newspaper clippings showing how the DAIA responded to anti-semitism during the dictatorship. These articles attest to the DAIA's commitment during the dictatorship to fighting “neo-nazi” and “anti-semitic” activity, both of which are certainly appropriate for an organization supposedly representing human rights, but a far cry from speaking out or intervening on behalf of the actual victims of state and paramilitary violence at the time. The question remains for the DAIA's responsibility to Argentine Jews, whether fighting symbolic displays of anti-semitism served during the dictatorship as a complementary part of representing Argentine Jews politically, or a convenient excuse to do nothing before the facts of disappearance and torture.¹¹

The struggle to define memory of state violence during the dictatorship among Argentine Jews presents a microcosm of the ongoing questions of justice and memory in Argentina, where the vast majority of repressors have never gone to jail or even faced trial for their hand in crimes against humanity and systematic human rights violations. But beyond the question of those criminally responsible for the violence of the dictatorship, lies the question of societal and political responsibility within and without Argentina's borders. Argentine public opinion and the symbolic actions of the Jewish political establishment have both shifted markedly in the last two decades towards recognizing the severity of damage done by the dictatorship, including the elimination of 30,000 people, but the continued process of coming to terms with the past in order to create a better future in Argentina will

¹⁰ Lotersztain, *Los judíos bajo el terror*, 47.

¹¹ An example of this sort of documentary evidence is “Entre nazis e israelitas,” *Última Clave*, 2 August 1976. DAIA Archive.

ultimately require everyone involved to examine within their own communities what they did and why as part of and/or in response to state violence in Argentina's recent past. Although I have not discussed today the US role in Argentina's dictatorship and repressive regimes throughout Latin American in the twentieth century, I include US citizens in this statement.