

Memory through Mobilization

In the week before the Madres' thousandth march around the Plaza de Mayo on 27 June 1996, the Madres' House, on Hipólito Irigoyen down the street from the Congress building, resembled a cross between a socially active convent and a youth center. Simply dressed women scurried about in search of lists they needed to continue their work. Phones rang, and women lowered their voices out of habit, protecting the anonymity of their callers. Journalists waited patiently for the audience promised to them. Teenagers, some with violet hair and black leather jackets, came looking for wires or paint for the huge folk figures and signs they were preparing for the demonstration. A low buzz provided background noise for the action, punctuated by louder questions and statements about Hebe de Bonafini. De Bonafini, who has been the leading spokeswoman for the Asociación de Madres since the 1980s, is a hero to some and an abrasive autocrat to others, including some former allies. Nevertheless, like her or not, she represents the Madres' insistence on telling about the atrocities of the Argentine dictatorship of 1976 to 1983 and continued acts of repression in the present.

At the Madres' House, Hebe de Bonafini was a subject of concern: she had lost weight, her voice was cracking, and her doctors said she must cut back. Outsiders visiting the Madres sat in the small dining room that serves as a waiting room. A journalist and a cameraman chatted as they waited for Hebe de Bonafini to come so that they could take pictures for an article that would help publicize the march. The other Madres offered tea and went about their business.

My Argentine friend Alejandra and I had made an appointment to meet Hebe de Bonafini, whom we knew from newspaper pictures dating back to the mid-1980s. I had also seen her from afar over the years, as she led marches and addressed demonstrations. When she arrived, she looked thinner but also bigger. She was filled with the sense of purpose that has driven her and the other Madres since they realized that by insisting on a full historical reckoning of what went on during what the military called the Dirty War, they had an important part to play in shaping their country's future and fulfilling their children's political and social goals. De Bonafini came in, took charge, and immediately began arranging her schedule: she wondered whether we would mind if she spoke to the journalists first. Reporters are the Madres' lifeline, helping them get their message out. They always want to publicize the names of criminals walking among them. The Madres, who join no political party, hold a distinguished position on the left. Having broadened their notion of injustice beyond the disappearances, the Madres associate state violence and the disastrous economic straits in which Argentina continues to find itself.

While we waited to see de Bonafini, we gathered pamphlets and clippings that the Madres have arrayed on shelves in the dining room and looked at photographs of the Madres, especially Hebe de Bonafini, sanctified by the famous white kerchief, meeting with political leaders from all over the world. To pass the time and cover our sense of being intruders when we wanted to belong, we began to read. The material scattered around for visitors like us includes flyers, pamphlets, and the monthly periodical, the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, that the Madres publish since 1984. The journal includes articles by a variety of men and women who share the Madres' sense of urgency about keeping the record straight in the saga of crime without punishment in Argentina.

With disappearances as the Argentine government's preferred form of terror, making people and ideas visible has been the central dynamic of the Madres' effort to keep their version of history alive through street demonstrations. As my friends and I emerged on 27 June 1996 from the subway into the freezing late afternoon light of the Plaza de Mayo, we discovered a festival. Vast banners and huge puppets hovered just above the heads of the tens of thousands gathered to march with the Madres. Milling about, looking at the groups with signs and collecting the flyers everyone was giving out, it was hard to remember how dangerous it had been for the Madres to mobilize during the dictatorship and how few had supported them. In fact, the crowd was not as united as it had first

appeared. Once the movement began, it was hard to say who was leading and who following. But it was clear that there were distinct groups and different banners.

The members of the Asociación de Madres de Plaza de Mayo, with Hebe de Bonafini in the middle of a large phalanx of elderly women, had probably started marching. But they might have begun at the same time as their former colleagues, the group known as Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo-Línea Fundadora (Founding-Line Madres of the Plaza de Mayo). They withdrew from the Madres in January 1986, but they share the Plaza de Mayo every Thursday afternoon at 3:30 P.M. And they continue to demonstrate and speak out about abuses of human rights and about the worsening economic crisis. Close to the Founding-Line Madres, but marching with their own banners, the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo) add another dimension to the *ronda*. The Abuelas, founded under the name Abuelas Argentinas con Nietitos Desaparecidos (Argentine Grandmothers with Missing Little Grandchildren) in October 1977, five months after the Madres first assembled as a group in the Plaza de Mayo, devote themselves to finding grandchildren, of whom there may be as many as four hundred, captured as infants or born to pregnant women who were abducted and tortured while they were pregnant and usually murdered after giving birth.

MAKING SPECTACLES OF THEMSELVES

The Madres and Abuelas transformed the Plaza de Mayo into a democratic space that afternoon, as they had on so many other afternoons and evenings when they came together in pursuit of their version of justice. In contrast to the Madres' commitment to making its views known in public, the junta did its work in silence and secrecy. In an attempt to control public perception of what was transpiring in Argentina, the military tried to remove the Madres from the public eye after the World Cup of June 1978. Unable to openly repress the women while the eyes of the media were upon them, the junta waited until their guests had gone home. Then the junta secured the Plaza de Mayo, erected metal barriers, and permanently posted a police cavalry to keep out the Madres. The Madres, hoping to maintain their collective identity although they could no longer march in the plaza, incorporated as an association on 22 August 1979.¹

The military not only terrorized the population by imposing silence about the disappearances; they also began both to deny their crimes and

to pardon themselves. On Army Day, 29 May 1979, the junta tried to legislate its view of recent Argentine history when General Roberto Viola, then head of the junta, referred to “those who have disappeared forever,” and attempted to gloss over the question of responsibility. He claimed that although “the army regretted” what had happened, “there would be no explanations.” And the always quotable military governor of Buenos Aires province, General Ibérico Saint Jean, added that “all Argentines would benefit from throwing a . . . blanket of silence over the disappeared.”² The Madres countered the image of a blanket of silence with the idea of a spectacle by speaking for those who were absent to anyone who would listen and by appearing everywhere they could find an audience.

Because the Madres insisted on acting in public, the junta was increasingly forced to come out of the shadows to defend itself. To counter adverse international publicity, they hired Burson-Marsteller, a leading New York ad agency, to initiate a defensive campaign before September 1979, when the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States was scheduled to hold hearings about human rights abuses in Argentina.³ The ad campaign attempted to promote the idea of Argentine rectitude by distributing cards people could mail to Amnesty International proclaiming that “somos derechos y humanos” (we are right and human), a play on the expression *derechos humanos*, or human rights.⁴ The government got tens of thousands of people to plaster their cars with decals carrying this self-righteous slogan, and billboards and signs echoed the statement in an attempt to discount the stories of disappearances. Thrilled by the Argentine victory at the Youth World Cup in Japan, a popular radio sports announcer exhorted his audience to march on the Plaza de Mayo, where the Madres had snuck in, to demonstrate that real Argentines, not human rights advocates, were “derechos y humanos.”⁵ Before the Inter-American Human Rights Commission arrived, the government dismantled the torture center at ESMA (Escuela Mecánica de la Armada, the officers club of the Naval Mechanics School), apparently killing some of the prisoners and sending others to more clandestine camps.⁶ At the same time, the junta decreed Law 21.068, called “The Presumption of Death Law,” which said that anyone who had been missing for more than three months between 6 November 1974 and 6 September 1979 could be considered dead. The government offered reparations.⁷

After the junta turned to Madison Avenue, the Madres intensified their identity as *locas*. Appearing crazy and uncompromising became a

way to get the attention of their fellow citizens. If fear governed so-called reasonable behavior, then behaving unreasonably challenged the apparent rationality of government terror. But the Madres themselves underwent a change. Until the Madres were driven from the plaza in 1978, most of them probably believed that their children were still alive. The Madres' forced removal from the plaza seemed to put to rest their expectations of ever seeing those loved ones again and converted many of them to their children's political ideals. They moved toward what observers have called "the socialization of motherhood." Paradoxically, the Madres' renewed sense of loss intensified their commitment to young people and to fighting. They staged guerrilla forays into the plaza in 1978, 1979, and 1980, proclaiming the presence of their loved ones. One mother explained:

I think that I'll never see my husband and my son again. But I think that they are present in all the young people who are with us and in our remaining children. I never say that I've lost them, lost them forever. We have them with us, not physically, but they are here with us. My two other children live at home with me, and every time we touch something that belongs to my son or my husband, we say, take care because that is Hector's, [or] yes, take it, but take care because that is Papa's. I never say "was" about them.⁸

The Madres' refusal to call the disappeared "dead" even caused friction with some of their allies. When Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, the founding director of the Servicio de Paz y Justicia (Service for Peace and Justice) of the Ecumenical Movement for Human Rights, received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1980 for his work in Argentina, he offered 10 percent of the prize money to the Madres, with whom he had worked. His commitment to them nevertheless failed to assuage the women when some of those accompanying him on his European tour denounced the thousands of deaths in Argentina. The Madres were outraged. In a document issued on 5 December 1980, the Madres claimed that they wanted and expected to see their children back alive and standing up for the same principles for which they had been abducted. And the Madres stormed back into the plaza in early 1980, never again to be separated from the polis in which they and those who marched with them created a democratic space.

From that space, the Madres defend their view of Argentine history against the military's self-amnesties and self-justifications. For example, on 28 April 1983, a year after the Malvinas War and six months before elections were to be held for a constitutional government to replace the

dictatorship, the junta issued their Final Document. They admitted that “they had sometimes committed errors, as in any wartime situation, when [belligerents] sometimes exceed the limits [of justifiable activities] and violate fundamental human rights.”⁹ While officially acknowledging that kidnapping and disappearing people (always in the passive voice with no attention to who had carried out the abductions and murders) “was the [issue brought against them] that had the greatest legitimate impact on human sentiments,” the junta still tried to justify its actions.¹⁰ The government claimed that all those who had disappeared had been “terrorists” and could be presumed dead. The Madres continue to deny both statements.

THE MADRES DIVIDED

The disappearances had united the Madres; constitutional government tore them apart. Differences of class, religion, and politics were bound to divide the women. In the first years of the junta, when grief was paramount in the lives of the Madres, there was no need to discuss differences. It was customary then to claim that their children hadn’t done anything. Early on, Juana de Pargament remarked, “Our children wanted every family to have a decent home, enough food and clothing, and they wanted every child to have the opportunity to go to school.... Our children worked in the *villas* as doctors, building homes, teaching. When people understand why they were taken, what they wanted, they are going to understand us and we’ll have something better.”¹¹ But after the return to constitutional government, Madre Graciela de Jeger explained that the Madres “don’t want the names of the victims. We know who they are. We want the names of the murderers. We want them to tell us what happened. They have to explain what they don’t want to explain. This is the meaning of *aparición con vida* (bring them back alive).”¹²

Initially, the arbitrary abductions of largely young people were enough to unite their mothers. At first, viewing themselves and their children as victims was a very powerful position, one that placed moral capital in their hands. But the Madres’ removal from the plaza in late 1978 brought them into closer proximity with one another. While some went out to work and continued to be preoccupied with caring for their remaining relatives, a core of women began to spend more and more time in the center. Being in nearly daily contact with one another required more structure and engendered more conflict. The Madres had

to work out routines and intensify their division of labor. Meeting two or three times a week forged the Madres into a more coherent group, but they gained their solidarity at the price of hierarchy. Increasingly, Hebe de Bonafini and those who admired her leadership skills moved to the top. Whereas in the first two years staying alive and finding answers had provided direction for the group, formulating strategy became more important after they were banished from the Plaza de Mayo.

The Madres had taken on a collective identity by the time Azucena Villaflor, Esther Careaga, and María Eugenia Ponce disappeared in December 1977. But Azucena had led by enhancing the self-confidence of those around her. Had she lived, she might have been able to help the other Madres intensify their skills at confronting the government. But she too might have had to establish more formal positions in order to maintain the organization.

The resumption of constitutional government on 10 December 1983 presented the Madres with all kinds of strategic problems. Because such a long period elapsed between the time the armed forces were discredited following the end of the Malvinas War in June 1982 and the actual transition to civilian rule, the Madres were desperate to save anyone left alive in the prison camps. The Madres looked for someone in the constitutional government who shared their determination to bring the military to trial. As far as the Madres were concerned, the first president, Raúl Alfonsín, should have used his position as commander in chief to take over the 340 clandestine torture centers in police stations and military compounds. Some centers, such as ESMA, La Perla, and El Vesubio, had been subjects of testimony by survivors. At ESMA, prisoners such as Sara Solarz de Osatinsky and Norma Susana Burgos remained alive in part because they had skills needed by Admiral Emilio Eduardo Massera of the first junta. He hoped to become the new Perón, the leader of a vast populist movement, and he regarded the left-wing Peronist Montoneros as possible foot soldiers in that effort. The two women formed part of a group known as “the staff” who worked on the files. These consisted of photographs and standardized forms with places for the names, aliases, dates of arrest, family data, membership information, and material about prisoners’ familiarity with firearms and explosives, as well as their prison identity numbers.¹³ The Madres wanted the new government to find the records, which would provide additional evidence to reconstruct the junta’s actions. By publicly documenting the history, the Madres hoped to prosecute individual soldiers, sailors, and police and punish them for their crimes against humanity.

To do that, they would need to establish a historical record of what had transpired during the “Process of National Reorganization.”

When lawyer Raúl Alfonsín ran for president on the Radical Union ticket in September and October 1983, the Madres met with him and pled fruitlessly with him to pledge to release all political prisoners within forty-eight hours of taking office. Subsequent evidence proved the validity of their claims that some prisoners were still alive when the military stepped down. Cecilia Marina Viñas was seven months pregnant when she was abducted along with her husband in July 1977. At ESMA she delivered a son. Though her mother continued to search for her grandchild, the family gave up hope that Viñas herself was alive. But shortly after Alfonsín took office in December 1983, she called home seven times, saying that the guard where she and others were being held occasionally let her use the phone. Her parents taped one conversation, in which she plaintively asked about her young son, whom she thought was safely with his grandparents. Despite the family’s efforts to get the new government to find her, authorities did nothing. Her last call came in April 1984, leaving supporters to wonder whether she and others might have been found had the authorities investigated their cases.¹⁴

While the Madres were interested in saving lives, Alfonsín was concerned with restoring the rule of law. To do that, he reversed the military’s self-amnesty and revised the military codes.¹⁵ But he didn’t move fast enough or forcefully enough for the Madres, who equated time with life. They were outraged by Alfonsín’s failure to arrest the leaders of the security forces and put their fate in the hands of newly appointed civilian judges, or to provide subpoena powers to “a bicameral investigatory commission to condemn those responsible for the flagrant violations of human rights perpetuated in [the] country.”¹⁶ Instead of having Congress, which had full powers to subpoena the military, investigate the disappearances, Alfonsín appointed a board of distinguished citizens, which the Madres considered to be a weak body of inquiry, to form the *Comité Nacional de Desaparición de Personas* (National Committee on Disappeared People, CONADEP). Under the directorship of Eduardo Rabossi, Under-Secretary for Human Rights, and the chairmanship of novelist Ernesto Sábato, the committee drew only on voluntary testimony and had to complete its work by 20 September 1984. Rabossi, a committed liberal and an optimist, was surprised that the perpetrators were not in any hurry to unburden their consciences.¹⁷

Focusing on descriptions of abductions, torture, and executions and conditions in the clandestine centers where prisoners had been held, the

committee lacked authorization to investigate the plans by which state terrorism took form, bring charges against individuals, or determine the line of command. The committee had no power to investigate who, if anyone, supervised the various branches of the police and the armed forces. Why, for example, were certain people killed and others kept alive? Who decided policy about torturing and murdering captives? Most importantly, how many prisoners remained alive when the junta stepped down? The Madres were not willing to proceed without a full explanation of why the junta targeted particular people and what happened to them in detention. Did the leader of the last junta, General Reynaldo Benito Bignone, give orders to have prisoners executed at the same time as he ordered their photographs and the records of their captivity destroyed? The Madres wanted the blanks filled in, and obviously their demand was anything but academic. As one Madre explained, "The systematic use of repression and state terrorism as a method of government is what [we] want to reveal and combat."¹⁸

Afraid of a cover-up, the Asociación de Madres officially boycotted CONADEP and refused to testify or share their substantial archives. Many Madres feared that airing horrific stories without prosecuting individuals would merely routinize the torture, making it seem as if it was destined to take place. As an organization, the Madres wanted the government to assess responsibility and assign blame to particular people. Asking for trial and punishment for the guilty was a call for full public disclosure about the history of the dictatorship.¹⁹

On 20 September 1984, ten months after deliberations began, CONADEP presented the president with a fifty-thousand-page document and a secret addenda—never released to the public—listing 1,500 officials implicated in the assassinations. Tens of thousands of people, but not the Madres as a group, mobilized to commemorate that historic moment. For the Asociación de Madres, the publication of the report was a first step to undoing history. They blamed the committee for turning in a list of corpses instead of providing indictments of those guilty of what they considered to be "crimes against humanity."²⁰ "If Congress passed a law that declared the abduction and disappearance of people as a 'crime against humanity,' " torturers would know, according to Renée Epelbaum, one of the original Madres and later president of the Founding-Line Madres, that someday they would be held accountable for what they had done.²¹ Unwilling to accept a mere chronicle of atrocities that assigned no blame, investigated no union or party's complicity, and provided no meaningful explanation, the official organization of the Madres

rejected the proceedings. They did not want a document like a medieval chronicle, in which calamities seemed to be acts of God. They rejected accounts that presented “a world in which things *happen* to people rather than one in which people *do* things.”²² The Madres’ opinion was only confirmed when the book *Nunca Más*, made up of excerpts of the hearings, became an instant bestseller and required beach reading during the summer of December 1984–January 1985.

With the list of horrors circulating so freely but no indictments for the guilty, the Madres intensified their efforts to shape public opinion. According to their own history, they “wanted to have [their] own thought in the street.”²³ There were two ways of getting their ideas out: through print and through constant mobilization. At the end of December 1984, the Madres launched a monthly newspaper, *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, to succeed the bulletin they began in 1980 with the help of sympathetic journalists. The Madres’ newspaper provided another public outlet in addition to the space they occupied in the Plaza de Mayo. But the street demonstration—a mixture of spectacle and shaming ritual—remained their preferred method of publicizing the historical evidence they had gathered about what had really happened during the dictatorship and how it was being covered up.

The Madres’ continued criticism of Alfonsín and his democratically elected government provoked him to cruel retorts. Frustrated by lack of support from the Madres, he accused them—but not the former torturers—of promoting “subversive terrorism” that detracted from the national interest.²⁴ Since the justification for all the Latin American military dictatorships of the 1960s through the 1980s was that they were defending national security, in the name of which they tortured and murdered opponents they called “subversives” and “terrorists,” the Madres were understandably outraged. As early as 13 December 1983, Alfonsín addressed the nation about his human rights program. He announced his decision to prosecute the leaders of the dictatorship as well as the left-wing organizations.²⁵ In what became known as the theory of the “Dos Demonios” (Two Devils), Alfonsín, and later *Nunca Más*, promoted the idea that Argentine society had endured a civil war between leftist guerrillas and the military, who were both equally responsible for the violence.

Outraged, the Madres responded to Alfonsín’s most recent slurs in an editorial in January 1985, probably written by the editor, María del Rosario Cerruti, outlining their hopes for a nation committed to democracy and social justice:

To the president, who claims to be democratic, it is necessary to explain, once again, in case he's forgotten, what the meaning of "national" is to us. What is authentically national is a population who develop the wealth of this country for their own benefit; it is to receive an adequate wage, to have enough food, to have a home; it is to be able to educate our children, to have health protection, to improve our intellectual and technical capacity, to have our own culture and to have freedom of expression; it is to have armed forces to drive [trucks], planes and boats that transport troops and materials to places of natural disaster, who work with the people in an efficient and rapid way; it is to have a police force that protects freedom and respects all citizens; it is to have impartial judges who guarantee justice; it is to have duties and rights that can be exercised freely; it is simply to have the right to life, but with dignity.²⁶

Moving at what the Madres considered a glacial pace, Alfonsín's administration nevertheless accomplished what few other governments going through a transition to democracy have been able to do: it indicted, prosecuted, and convicted leaders of three of the four juntas and the commanders of the military regions into which Argentina had been divided. By reforming the military code, which had jurisdiction over criminal acts carried out on military grounds, the new government succeeded in moving trials to civilian courts if the military did not indict or try offenders within a reasonable amount of time, and gave prosecutors rights of appeal to civil court.²⁷ When the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces failed to reach a verdict about the commanders of the junta after nine months of deliberation, the civil court took over the prosecution in April 1985. However, between April and December 1985, while the civil trial was underway, the government also indicted seven prominent leaders of left-wing groups.

As the trials began, the Madres used the streets to tell their side of the story of Argentine state terror. On 25 April 1985, they held the March of the Masks to Court. Constantly trying to get the attention of their countrypeople, as they had with the silhouettes in 1983, the Madres organized a pageant in which everyone except the Madres wore masks. The white masks, with high foreheads and hollow eyes, evoked those who had disappeared.²⁸ A particularly poignant moment occurred when one of the masked figures stopped to nurse her baby.

In contrast to the Madres' peaceful demonstrations, the military attempted a coup, leading the government to declare a state of siege beginning in October 1985 and lasting two months. At the end of December, the judges of the Federal Court found guilty and sentenced to life

terms General Jorge Rafael Videla and Admiral Emilio Eduardo Massera of the first junta. The remaining junta members got from four and one-half to eighteen years, except for four who were exonerated.²⁹ In 1986, the trials of the twelve regional military governors and seven hundred mid-level officers wended their way from the military to the civilian court. On 2 December, the courts sentenced some of the most nefarious police officers, prison doctors, and military officers to between four and twenty-five years in prison, as the military grew restive.³⁰ Three days later, when the courts claimed that the statute of limitations had run out in the trial of naval officer Alfredo Astiz for the 1977 murder of teenager Dagmar Hagelin, Alfonsín issued the Full Stop Law, “Punto Final,” which mandated that all potential defendants had to be tried by April 1987.

That law provided one of the few areas where the military and the Madres were united. In Alfonsín’s defense, his friend and aid Carlos Santiago Nino claimed that the decree sped up the pace of the indictments. By March 1987, four hundred officers were on trial.³¹ In reaction to the trials, mid-level military men attempted a coup during Easter week of 1987. On 13 May 1987—far too quickly, according to the Madres—Alfonsín sent Congress a draft of the Due Obedience (Obediencia Debida) Law, justifying the exoneration of mid- and lower-level officers whose trials were already underway. The law was passed on 6 June 1987.³² Ignoring Nuremberg precedents, the government of Argentina claimed that there was no individual responsibility for crimes committed under orders. They did not include rape, kidnapping of children, or theft of real property among the protected activities because of the line of command, but the military was not satisfied with the reprieve. They organized four additional military uprisings in 1988 and 1989. In October 1989, President Carlos Saúl Menem (who succeeded Alfonsín in July 1989) pardoned the 280 high-ranking officers who, unaffected by the Due Obedience Law, were still on trial. Then, on 30 December 1990, Menem freed all the commanders who were still serving prison sentences.³³ Proving that in Argentina at least might did make right, the government provided evidence for the Madres’ claim that the democratic government was still largely subject to military threats.

RIDICULE AND MEMORY

Dependent on presenting their views in the court of public opinion, the Madres renewed their use of shaming techniques to make their presence

felt. They attended the initial trials of the commanders, wearing their scarves and sitting in silent protest. But each time Hebe de Bonafini tried to put on her scarf, the prosecutor had her remove it. In what would have been comic had it not been so deadly serious, de Bonafini simply replaced a scarf embroidered with names of the disappeared with a plain white scarf. The prosecutor asked her to remove that one as well, saying that she was wearing a political insignia. Outraged, she complained that the former commanders wore their uniforms and the police wore their caps; why couldn't she wear a plain white scarf? When the chief prosecutor judged her scarf out of order, de Bonafini complained that while they were absolving all the assassins, the court was condemning her simple white kerchief.³⁴ In democratic Argentina, fighting about scarves and thus appearing obnoxious helped to clarify political positions. With that in mind, the Madres around Hebe de Bonafini continued to act "unreasonably," mocking the government at every opportunity.

The Madres keep themselves in the public eye through periodic street demonstrations on holidays they created. The Madres of course have held weekly marches every Thursday since 30 April 1977. They also punctuate the year with annual commemorations: 24 March is the anniversary of the military coup in 1976; on 10 December, the March of Resistance celebrates Human Rights Day.³⁵ The Madres celebrate other dates in addition to these two anniversaries, in which the Madres consecrate themselves to achieving social justice and a government concerned with promoting human rights. For example, they mark turning points in their own history. These include the anniversaries of the abductions of 8–10 December 1977, decade anniversaries of the Madres' first march in 1977, the Madres' 450th march around the square in April 1985, the thousandth march around the square on 27 June 1996, and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the coup on 24 March 2001. Some years, the Madres join other groups, for whom significant holidays include 8 March, International Women's Day; May Day, in solidarity with the international working class; and 5 October, Mothers' Day in Argentina. The Founding-Line Madres, whose commitment to internal democracy led them to withdraw from the larger group of Madres in January 1986, marched at the end of May 1986 along with the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, the Latin American Federation of the Associations of Families of the Detained and Disappeared (FEDFAM), and the Families of the Detained-Disappeared for Political Reasons, to honor those who died in the junta's power.³⁶

As unwilling participants in a managed transition to what some view as a “frozen democracy,” the aging group of Madres has linked the past and the present.³⁷ Even at the cost of appearing ridiculous, the Madres convey their analyses of how the past lives on in current policies that subordinate social good to the obligation of paying an exorbitant national debt racked up by the military and its successors.³⁸ For those who feel that the Madres try to cover too many issues, saying, “You cannot fight against every human rights abuse in a democracy with the same dedication with which you fought against military abuses during the 1970s,” the Asociación de Madres answers that it must. When critics say that neoliberal efforts to impose tuition for higher education and university entrance exams have nothing to do with human rights, Hebe de Bonafini and the Asociación de Madres insist that they do.³⁹ How far they are willing to go and how confrontational they are willing to appear—especially in defense of young people—has become an important measure of the continued urgency they feel about achieving a more just society by linking contemporary repression to its historical antecedents under the dictatorship.

KEEPING COUNT

In Chile, Guatemala, El Salvador, Bosnia, and South Africa, finding the bodies of those murdered by death squads and the military has become part of the process of seeking justice by documenting the past. Some of the most horrifying moments in the South African Truth and Reconciliation hearings of 1994 were the testimonies of security forces describing how they roasted prisoners alive on spits or beat activist Steve Biko and let him slowly bleed to death. In Chile, the controversial proposal of the “Mesón de Diálogo” (Dialogue Roundtable) in June 2000 turned on whether, without admitting guilt, the armed forces would disclose where the lost bodies were hidden.

Even that goal has become a source of conflict between the Asociación de Madres and the government. Right after taking power, Alfonsín ordered the exhumation of graves on the outskirts of cemeteries. With the help of physical anthropologists, the government undertook the process of identifying skeletons and decomposing bodies. During the dictatorship, bodies had been turning up on the banks and estuaries of Río de la Plata and the South Atlantic beaches. Rumors, later substantiated by the 1995 confessions of Naval Captain Adolfo Scilingo and others, supported anecdotal evidence from people living near naval

bases, who heard planes take off late at night and return in the early hours of the morning. Decomposed bodies washed up on the shores of beaches in Argentina and neighboring Uruguay. Scilingo revealed that all high-ranking officials at ESMA and many at Bahía Blanca participated in “el Vuelo” (the Flight) in which drugged, naked, but still living prisoners were dropped into rivers or the ocean.⁴⁰ These remains supplemented those with gunshot wounds or signs of torture, which were sometimes dumped by soldiers in empty lots or burned with tires in camps such as El Vesubio, known for its perpetual black smoke.

President Raúl Alfonsín’s effort to carry out massive exhumations after taking office in late 1983, though at one level a way of documenting history, met with the wrath of the official Asociación de Madres. “We respect those Mothers who want the exhumations, of course, but we don’t, as an organization, agree with it,” stated Hebe de Bonafini.⁴¹ She went further, calling the display of the skeletons outside the medical departments and the photographs of the cadavers “a truly macabre circus.” “Can you imagine the terror? Thousands of dead people thrown on tables and for what, to frighten people.”⁴² Her objection was not to the bodies; the bodies, the Madres acknowledged, were the bodies of their children. But by focusing on the dead, in her opinion, the government was simply trying to close the book of history without providing a full accounting. For the Madres, agreeing that their children—that all the disappeared, all of whom they claimed as children—were gone would turn the mothers of the disappeared into the mothers of the dead. Speaking again for the Asociación de Madres’s official position, Hebe de Bonafini explained at the time that they were not interested in visiting the places that served as concentration camps and torture chambers and they did not want to see the exhumed bodies. They thought the killers should be brought to justice and serve their sentences.⁴³ They hoped the Under-Secretariat for Human Rights would not simply retrieve and identify bodies, but “identify the assassins.” Some Madres claimed that they had no desire to examine cadavers while assassins remained free.

But frequently parents, such as Nieves Ayress’s mother in Chile or Founding-Line Madre Dr. Laura Bonaparte in Argentina, received anonymous phone calls telling them that their children were being held at a specific place, or that their child’s body could be found in a mass grave, or, as in the case of Marcelo Gelman, the son of sculptor and Abuela Berta Schubaroff and poet Juan Gelman, that the body had been reburied after it was discovered in a decomposed state.⁴⁴ Hebe de

Bonafini opposed public exhumations without the express consent of all of the families, arguing that the evidence about forced abduction, torture, and genocide was ample—there was enough historical documentation. According to de Bonafini, what the country lacked was the will to bring the guilty to justice.⁴⁵ As far as rituals were concerned, the Madres preferred street demonstrations or trials, with their procedures for establishing the truth.

For some relatives of the disappeared, and especially for the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, however, the bodies provided welcome clues. Some mothers and mothers-in-law of the disappeared, whose daughters or daughters-in-law had been among the women who were pregnant when they were kidnapped, embarked on efforts to find missing grandchildren. The Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo decided in 1977 to find the lost children. They focused on those abducted as infants and toddlers and sought out babies who might have been born to imprisoned women.⁴⁶ Not knowing whether or not a child had been born, many of the Abuelas were especially eager to find the bodies of the mothers. By examining the skeletal remains for fissures in the pelvic bones, forensic anthropologists could tell whether or not a woman had given birth. As early as 1980, the Abuelas gained support from geneticists. Latin American emigrant doctors and their U.S.-born colleagues developed ways of matching antigens in blood cells and later of examining the DNA of close relatives to see if there was a genetic match.

For example, according to Rita Arditti, Estela de Carlotto, one of the founders of the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo and its longtime president, learned through exiled survivors of La Cacha concentration camp that her daughter Laura, whose body had been returned to her filled with bullet holes, had given birth in 1977 to a boy she had named Guido after her father. Grabbing Laura's child from her at birth, her attackers claimed to have taken him to his grandmother. To taunt Laura, the officers told her that her mother had rejected the child and did not want to have anything to do with either her daughter or her grandson. Unconvinced, the young mother told another prisoner that her mother would never abandon her or her child and would fight the military with all her strength.⁴⁷

Another grandmother, Haydee Lemos, discovered her fourteen-month-old granddaughter on her doorstep in 1977, five days after her pregnant daughter Mónica and her husband were kidnapped. A decade later, according to Rita Arditti, a casual meeting between Estela de Carlotto and an old friend of Mónica's revealed that both had been at the

Pozo de Banfield (Banfield Pit) outside La Plata, where Mónica had given birth to another girl. By further chance, Lemos discovered that a child had been adopted by a policewoman and her husband. Through a complicated procedure of genetic testing, the Abuelas were able to prove that the child belonged to the Lemos family, who gained custody.⁴⁸ For the Abuelas, the chance to examine individual bodies offered the possibility of rescuing the life and personal history of another human being.

BREAKING APART

The basic disagreements between the two groups of Madres relate to three issues of principle: government reparations for those who disappeared, monuments and plaques, and exhumation of the bodies. The decision of the Asociación de Madres de Plaza de Mayo to boycott the hearings of CONADEP had not been unanimous. Many individual Madres shared the view of other human rights organizations that the committee might turn up new evidence about what had happened to those who had been detained and disappeared. Like other Argentines, they needed a “story” to help explain the sequence of events that had overtaken their families and their country. Some of the Madres did go to the camps to examine the bodies, seeking after so many years some connection to the physical embodiment of their children. Those mothers continued piecing together narratives about what had happened to their children after they were abducted.

The transition to constitutional government divided the Madres into two groups. The largest group remained with Hebe de Bonafini and kept the name of the Asociación, the apartment they had purchased, and the monthly newspaper. Those who left in January 1986, calling themselves the Línea Fundadora, the Founding-Line Madres, included many of the women who had first assembled with Azucena de Villaflor to march in the Plaza de Mayo in late April and May 1977. Even Hebe de Bonafini agreed that those who seceded had been instrumental in creating the Madres and had shared leadership during its early years.

The split, like most divorces, left less than the sum of its parts. Personality differences appear to be the main cause of the eruption. From the perspective of the Founding-Line Madres, the problem is with Hebe de Bonafini and the power she wields in her group. The Founding-Line Madres view de Bonafini as authoritarian, impatient with those who differ with her, corrupt, overly quick to take ultra-leftist positions, and

prone to using coarse and insulting language as a means of provoking authorities and gaining attention for the Madres. In the year after the break-up, de Bonafini recognized that many of those who had seceded did not like the way she acted toward Alfonsín and the government, but she was convinced that she was right.

De Bonafini, in turn, considers the Founding-Line Madres to be elitists who looked down on her and many of the other working-class Madres. Many of those who left, like Renée Epelbaum, Nora de Cortiñas, and Laura Bonaparte, were either Jewish or married to Jewish men, although no one on either side admits that anti-Semitism might have contributed to the conflict. Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, who is close to Hebe de Bonafini and Juana de Pargament, tries to represent both sides of the conflict. To Bouvard, disagreements over whether to participate in the CONADEP hearings and whether to support the government's attempts to exhume bodies were the real divisions among the Madres.⁴⁹

De Bonafini disparages the Founding-Line Mothers and their marches in the Plaza de Mayo: "Look how few of them [come] on Thursdays. Five, six, or eight [come] to the plaza with a megaphone to list the [names of the] disappeared. This is something totally...useless because at that level they have no resonance. It would be something else if they named those who did the repressing, but they would consider that too intransigent, something hard, and they only like acting like 'pacifists.'" ⁵⁰

Despite the bad blood, the product of a difference in style and the domination of Hebe de Bonafini as the leading spokeswoman for the Asociación de Madres, there are important strategic differences between the two groups. These sometimes mimic the political differences that might have caused their own highly sectarian children to have been antagonists. Critics such as Bouvard make the Founding-Line Madres appear more naive than they are when they underestimate the importance of the Founding-Line Madres' demands that they should choose individually whether they wanted to go to the hearings or attend the exhumations and that they should maintain their alliances with other human rights groups, including the Abuelas and the Families of the Detained and Disappeared. Familial values tie the Founding-Line Madres to the Families of the Detained and Disappeared, who also lost relatives, and to the Abuelas, whom the Founding-Line Madres have known for a long time.

The differences between the two groups may also be structural. Many associations committed to egalitarian relationships think that de-

centralization is intrinsic to democratic practices. This was a widespread belief of the New Left and the feminist movement of the 1960s in Europe and the United States. The contrary view is that division of labor necessarily leads to fixed hierarchies and more authoritarian structures. Clearly this was a charge that the Asociación de Madres and Hebe de Bonafini took to heart: once the Founding-Line Madres withdrew, the larger association formalized its procedures, and began to hold weekly meetings of the governing board and annual meetings of affiliated Madres groups from outside Buenos Aires. Nevertheless, Hebe de Bonafini is increasingly the group's principal spokeswoman. The Asociación de Madres is consistent and systematic, and it is willing to stand alone to make a political point. De Bonafini is right that her practice and that of her group would be classified as "hard," fixed as it is on principles and a determination to be an irritant that may well account for the continued impact the Madres have on Argentine society.

The Founding-Line Madres, by contrast, practice a more decentralized politics, based on what the New Left in the United States called "participatory democracy," or what Renée Epelbaum called "consensus." Less practiced in formal political programs, their structure is also more fluid: "Since we began in 1977, we have worked in the same way. There were no posts, no positions."⁵¹ Following a system I have called "artisanal," all the members of the Founding-Line Mothers work at a variety of tasks, making commitments to the projects undertaken.⁵² Seeming to regard the Founding-Line's way as consistent with the way the Madres began, Epelbaum also recalled that although she and Élide de Galletti initially wrote all the flyers and bulletins the Madres published and others took them to the printers, "We did what we knew best, each of us, and it had nothing to do with posts or positions. The Línea Fundadora is and has to be—as the Madres always were—a collective movement."⁵³ The Founding-Line Madres are certainly more open to a variety of strategies, working both in public and private to bring the past to light. Constantly opening their hearts to individuals, the Founding-Line Madres work in personal ways.

Those in the Asociación de Madres de Plaza de Mayo claim that the Founding-Line Madres are also more reformist, and thus less conscious of the ways capitalism and imperialism have affected movements of liberation all over the world. To Argentine journalist Alejandro Diago, de Bonafini gloated that several of the Madres who left with the Founding-Line had already returned to the Asociación in 1988. Moreover, she boasted that her group "continues to march, produce ideas, travel

abroad to tell people their new [strategies] to keep renewing their work, while the others don't accomplish much."⁵⁴ Bouvard, possibly reflecting de Bonafini's opinion, argues that the Founding-Line Madres "intended to work within the political system as an interest group rather than as a radical opposition group that continued demonstrating and marching against the government."⁵⁵ This is the perennial charge of centralized groups against those that are decentralized, and is seldom accurate.

The charges Hebe de Bonafini frequently has made against the Madres of the Founding-Line—that they don't know how to organize demonstrations, spread the word inside Argentina and abroad, or develop new strategies—highlights something both groups know: the Madres, like other grassroots organizations, stand or fall on public attention. When critics charge that the numbers attending the Madres' demonstrations have diminished, the Madres of the Asociación answer that they are not running football matches. On the other hand, when their numbers soar, they proclaim them, as they did after the commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the coup in 1996 and the twenty-fifth in 2001.

Although the Founding-Line Madres continue to march in the plaza every Thursday and on important holidays, they have diversified their public activities. They generate cultural events such as the street "occupation" at the Plaza Las Heras in December 1995 and the Bridge of Memory in October 1996, and they try to reach young people through school programs. Determined to make contemporary youth recognize themselves in those who were detained and disappeared, the Founding-Line Madres filled trees with large pictures of their children and put out some of their treasured items. Marguerite Feitlowitz quotes Renée Epelbaum as saying that they organized street festivals to celebrate their children's lives, not their deaths: "Their disappearance was someone else's crime, not our children's identity."⁵⁶ In 1997, the Founding-Line Madres helped students at the Colegio Nacional de Buenos Aires (National High School of Buenos Aires) honor ninety student predecessors who were abducted. The Founding-Line Madres developed a widely attended art exhibit about their children's lives. And in La Plata, Founding-Line Madres helped students to assemble biographies to place on plaques at the Colegio Nacional de La Plata.⁵⁷ Hoping to promote activism among the next generation of young people, the Founding-Line Madres link the lives of contemporary youth to past generations. Despite hurt feelings and anger on both sides of the Madres' divide, in fact both groups remain united in their desire for full disclosure, in their

need to engage with fellow citizens in the public square, and in their commitment to mobilizing in order to express their political views. Both groups continue to march in the Plaza de Mayo.

As in postwar Germany, the issue of reparations has created antagonists, raising questions about whether reparations for survivors are entitlements or blood money. Nearly half of those abducted were working-class people, largely in their twenties and thirties, and many of them were parents of young children. Often the abducted provided the sole support for their families. Some family members lost their job while trying to save relatives. Grandmothers and other relatives who struggled to raise the surviving children needed the financial support provided by reparations. In 1994, under President Carlos Saúl Menem, the government legislated reparations to family members of the disappeared and other victims of “state terrorism,” presumably including survivors. Since some richer families also had lost their wealth paying ransoms or turning over deeds to corporations (still in the hands of individual military officers), reparations were welcome to many. By 1997, when the government issued three billion dollars in bonds to cover the costs, about eight thousand people had claimed their funds under the 1994 law, and others had until the year 2000 to claim theirs.⁵⁸ At the same time, the government passed a law granting the children of the disappeared exemption from military service.

The Asociación de Madres under Hebe de Bonafini’s leadership tried to make reparations synonymous with forgiving the military and “selling out.” As de Bonafini sarcastically remarked:

Money will never substitute for justice. Now they want to give \$100,000 to every mother. What a sum! When there is no money for education, when there is nothing for seniors, when there is nothing for the mothers [of those who died in] the Malvinas [War]. When there is no money for health care. When there is no money for books. How interested this government is in buying our consciences. . . . We, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, will never permit them to pay with money what they owe in justice. Our children’s lives have no price; there wouldn’t be enough money in the world to make up for [their loss]. . . . This is the domestic [internal] debt; it is the debt they have to us, the debt of justice, the [price is] prison for the assassins.”⁵⁹

De Bonafini and the Asociación de Madres claim that being the offspring of someone who disappeared is no honor, and that no one should have to serve in the military. The Founding-Line Madres follow those victims of the Nazis who argue that nothing the perpetrators do can make up for their crimes, but they should at least take responsibility

through reparations to the children of the disappeared, many of whom could not get an education or develop job skills without these benefits.

A related issue concerns plaques, memorial parks, and the preservation of some of the torture centers. With Old Testament fervor, de Bonafini rails against icons that represent the death of the disappeared. When the families and friends of those who disappeared from the humanities faculty of the University of La Plata, where de Bonafini's daughter-in-law studied psychology, wanted to include a plaque for her, de Bonafini denounced them. Using the same arguments she leveled against the Founding-Line Madres, de Bonafini claimed that the only acceptable monument to the dead was continued commitment to the social struggles in which they engaged. De Bonafini excoriated students at the school of architecture at the University of La Plata for engraving the names of the disappeared on the steps of an amphitheater there. And she threatened to tear down plaques hanging in the courtyards of the school of anthropology and the school of psychology that include pictures and biographies of disappeared students. Some of those who hung plaques on police stations that served as clandestine prisons or collected photos and biographies of the students believe that de Bonafini should not dictate how others grieve.⁶⁰

Taking her cue from those who say, "Don't cry, organize!" Hebe de Bonafini has little patience with what she regards as sentimentality, viewing such ideas as dangerous. On 23 March 1999, the day before the twenty-third anniversary of the military coup, de Bonafini and the Asociación de Madres were appalled by a ceremony at Costanera, on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. Mabel Gutiérrez of the Families of the Detained and Disappeared placed the first stone, dedicating a monument to the victims of state terrorism in what would be a thirty-acre Park of Memory.⁶¹ Gutiérrez emphasized that such a monument would not "pretend to close wounds, nor would it end the quest for truth and justice." She assured the gathering that the monument did not indicate the sponsor's recognition of the death of the disappeared, nor an end to the struggle to punish those responsible, but that the park would simply be a place in which to remember.⁶² With Carmen Lapacó of the Founding-Line Madres and Estela Carlotto, president of the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, in attendance, the ceremony to honor the dead proceeded.

Despite the care Gutiérrez took in explaining what they hoped to achieve with the park, a counterdemonstration took place. The Asociación de Madres de Plaza de Mayo, the Group Against Police and Institutional Repression, and the Ex-Detained and Disappeared for Polit-

ical Reasons opposed the monument and rejected the sponsorship of the municipal government of Buenos Aires, a group they claimed was riddled with torturers.⁶³ Showing to some degree the simplification and outright distortion of claiming that Alfonsín supporters were no different from the torturers, the group attacked Aníbal Ibarra, the cochair of the City Council, who had been one of the two prosecutors of the military commanders and had helped the Abuelas locate lost children. Although the democratic government might be correctly viewed as too moderate, Ibarra certainly was not one of those involved in genocide.

For de Bonafini and her group, monuments and exhumations are for the dead, and she insists that the spirits of those who disappeared live on. In one of the Madres' political flyers, written in the form of a letter to a son, a Madre, calling herself simply "Mamá," writes that "all those traitors who claim to be repentant are interested in assuring your death, your total death, and they want to pay me for your death. I insult them. When I look in their eyes, they lower their gaze. Do you know why? Because I look at them with your eyes and I speak to them in your voice." The flyer, dated April 1995, is entitled, "To Give Birth to a Child Is to Give Birth to Thousands of Children."⁶⁴

MEMORIES AND COMMITMENT

The Madres continue to fight to shape the official history of the dictatorship, and they have been willing to risk everything to shock their compatriots into remembering. The Argentine public is no more eager to think about the past than it is to consider the financial debacle, some of which was caused by the military dictatorship. The juntas carried out atrocities in secret and effectively amputated an entire generation from the body politic. Argentine governments, first by denying the disappearances and later by attempting to forget the disappeared, tried to sever the past from the future. Matilde Mellibovsky, a Founding-Line Madre, asserted that "they eliminated the generation that comes after me, they isolated me from the future, they separated me totally from any continuity." But she knew from the beginning that she wanted "to recuperate [the past] through memory."⁶⁵

Creating historical memories, even if the two groups of Madres differ about how best to prevent their country's amnesia, is intrinsic to both groups and to their hopes for the future. The need to remember is one reason why the Madres have granted so many interviews and written down so many of their stories. While many have argued that in the

face of structural adjustment and global economics, the forms of repression have become truly invisible, the Madres insist that in the past they revealed the all-too-inhuman face of repression, and they know how to do it again.

On the last day the junta ruled in December 1983, Hebe de Bonafini outlined a theory of permanent resistance: "For us the struggle isn't going to change; it's going to continue exactly the same. Instead of putting our demands to the military, we are going to put these demands to the constitutional government."⁶⁶ Early on, the Madres expressed their need to keep demonstrating, at first to prevent future army coups, but then to "voice publicly, if necessary, our disagreement with policies or decisions that we judge to be of dubious effectiveness or to be mistaken. It is our obligation to do so, since this is the duty of all good citizens within the framework of a pluralistic and free democracy in which dissent should be expressed in a civilized manner."⁶⁷ Though differing in tactics and rhetoric, both groups of Madres extoll the need for direct democracy. Only by open argument with those in power can they ensure that their version of history will get a fair hearing in Argentina. The democratic project, which both groups of Madres pursue, of combating the potential for state terrorism continues with the next generation of activists.