

Pope Francis and the long shadow of Argentina's "Dirty War"

by [Lauren Markoe](#)

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WASHINGTON (RNS) In 1974, when the Rev. Jorge Bergoglio was the top Jesuit in his native Argentina, a former nightclub dancer named Isabel Peron came to head the nation -- an accidental and weak president.

Her husband, President Juan Peron, had suffered a lethal heart attack in office. She was his vice president and third wife, but she was no Eva Peron, his dramatic second wife who was beloved by the working class and served as the inspiration for the hit Broadway musical "Evita."

Isabel Peron served less than two years in office before a right-wing military coup placed her under house arrest, and launched a seven-year campaign of torture and killings of tens of thousands of trade unionists and other leftists: Argentina's Dirty War.

The bloody times ended only when the junta, seeking to divert attention from a human rights record that was drawing increased global outrage, started a turf war with Britain over the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic. The speedy and conclusive British victory also spelled the end of the military dictatorship.

But the Dirty War continues to cast a shadow over Argentina and nearly everyone who lived through it, including Bergoglio, the archbishop of Buenos Aires who was elected Wednesday (March 13) as Pope Francis.

Attempts to bring the junta and its collaborators to justice continue, and the new pope is again faced with questions of where he stood during the Dirty War, and whose side he was on.

As life in communist Poland propelled Pope John Paul II's crusade against the Soviets and coming of age in Nazi Germany shaped Pope Benedict XVI, Argentina's Dirty War posed deep, existential questions for the future Pope Francis.

Certainly Bergoglio didn't do all he could at the time to counter the junta, said Virginia Garrard-Burnett, a professor of the religious history of Latin America at the University of Texas at Austin.

She points to the fate of two Jesuit priests targeted by the junta -- a case resurrected in the media worldwide this week. The two priests were slum workers and adherents of liberation theology -- a left-leaning school of Catholic thought rejected by Bergoglio and suppressed by John Paul. They might have been spared torture, some argue, had the Jesuit leader protected them.

As a conservative, Bergoglio may have at first appreciated the junta's promise to restore order and traditional morality to Argentina, said Garrard-Burnett. But claiming, as some of his critics do, that he actually collaborated with the military? "I think goes that too far," she said.

"I don't mean to be defensive of him -- I'm a progressive myself -- but it's fair to say those questions weren't as cut-and-dried in those days as they seem to be now," she said from Oslo, Norway. "It would take a lot of courage in those days to stand up to the junta. It could get you killed. And a lot of people, prominent people, did get killed."

Bergoglio, as Uki Goni and Jonathan Watts write in The Guardian newspaper, has deemed slanderous the allegations that he allowed the two priests to be tortured, and has said he worked behind the scenes to save their lives and others.

But for many who suffered at the hands of the junta, and their survivors, there is no question that anything short of fighting for its overthrow was a moral failing.

Led by Jorge Videla, the military government orchestrated a reign of terror that plucked political enemies from their homes and sent them to sadistic torture centers where they were often raped, drugged and subjected to mock executions before they were killed. A common practice was to throw victims out of planes flying over the ocean.

The victims are called "los desaparecidos" or "the disappeared," and number as high as 30,000. Argentinians today are still searching for the remains of the disappeared and their living offspring -- scores of babies were born in their parents' torture chambers and given to military families to adopt.

Since the late 1970s, the so called "Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo" have gathered regularly in a famed Buenos Aires square to press for information about their children's fate, and that of grandchildren they never met.

The Catholic Church in Argentina did not take a uniform stand on the Dirty War. Some priests backed the military, but others worked against it and died for their outspokenness.

But Bergoglio has been outspoken more recently. Argentina's bishops apologized last year for failing to protect the junta's victims. But the apology itself drew criticism, because it also blamed the leftists who -- sometimes violently -- opposed the junta.

The apology left open the question, The Associated Press reported at the time, as to how much Catholic leaders knew of the junta's atrocities. As pope, it still may be one that Francis will be called to answer.