

RHYS RICHARDS

BLOOD ON THE CROSSBAR

THE DICTATORSHIP'S WORLD CUP



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The Hosts

The death of General Actis

The decision to award the 1978 World Cup to Argentina was announced in 1966. In the 12 years between the decision and the staging of the event, eight different people would lead the country. There would be two *coups d'état* and a military junta would be established, only to be toppled by the prodigal return from exile of Juan Domingo Perón. Finally, in 1976 a military junta would be established to oust Perón's widow, the unelected former vice-president Isabel Perón.

With the country teetering dangerously close to civil war throughout the early to mid-1970s, there would have been every reason to assume that staging a World Cup would be a step too far, or an unwanted distraction for the Argentinian government. However, the junta pushed on with staging the tournament. Buoyed by their recent claim of power, the dictatorship saw the social and political opportunities to establish their regime in the global gaze. General Jorge Rafael Videla was the *de facto* leader of Argentina's sixth military junta, and although to modern, Western sensibilities the idea of a military coup is horrifying, in South America at the time it was seen by

many as an established mode of toppling lame or corrupt governments. Indeed, at the time the majority of citizens would have believed the military to be better equipped to deliver the World Cup than 'Isabelita's administration'. A hangover from the days of the wars of independence on the continent, militaries – no longer fighting conquistadors – now looked inwards and saw themselves as 'guarantors of social order'.¹

As de facto leader of Argentina, Videla delegated the organisation of the World Cup to a newly created committee, the Ente Autarquico Mundial (EAM). General Omar Actis was tasked with heading up EAM and organising the hosting of the tournament. The general had retired from active military duty in 1972 and was assisted by naval captain and eventual vice-admiral, Carlos Lacoste, right-hand man and close friend of Admiral Emilio Massera. Argentine journalist Ezequiel Fernandez described Actis as an austere man, who wanted an austere World Cup.² The retired general felt that Argentina had no need to comply with the demands of FIFA president João Havelange, who promised to deliver the first World Cup in colour. The organisation also expected the host nation to update its stadiums, ensuring the facilities were state of the art.

Actis's appointment was far from a universally popular choice within the junta. His moderate approach to matters

1 Dr Peter Watson (teaching fellow of Latin American studies at the University of Leeds). 2020. *These Football Times* podcast, *Political Football: The Story of the 1978 World Cup: Violence, Protests, Controversy and a Stunning Home Glory*.

2 *A Dirty Game*. Documentary dir. Jaap Verdenius and Kay Mastenbroek, 2002.

and criticism of the tournament's expenditure was detested by Massera, who believed it needed to be delivered at any cost. Massera considered delivering the World Cup to be vital to the image of Argentina, a notion on which he and General Jorge Videla clashed. Despite Videla being an ever-present figure at Argentina matches throughout the World Cup, the man who had never set foot inside a stadium prior to the tournament initially considered the World Cup to be an unnecessary extravagance. Admiral Massera, an intimidating figure, either by hook or by crook convinced Videla that the World Cup was wholly necessary, and the tournament took place as he had intended.

General Actis was assassinated on 19 August 1976; shot by five gunmen en route to his first press conference since the establishment of the military junta. Actis was reportedly expected to criticise the vast expenditure on the tournament at a time of soaring inflation. The general's murder was officially cited as an assassination carried out by a left-wing terrorist organisation, which were commonplace prior to the coup but had significantly reduced at the time of his murder. The *New York Times* remarked: 'There was a noticeable lull in terrorist killings of this type.'³

Over time, opinion has shifted on the responsibility for the assassination. Most sources now accept that Actis was murdered by forces within the junta, horrified that he would expose their recklessness with the economy and derail the World Cup plans. According to Dr Pablo Albarces of the University of Buenos Aires, 'Everybody

3 Juan de Onis. 'Guerillas kill 2 in Argentina', *New York Times*, 20 August 1976.

in Argentina, including the generals, knew he had been killed by the navy.⁴

After General Actis's death the responsibility of organising the tournament would fall to Lacoste. Still fiercely loyal to his superior, Lacoste's ascension meant that Massera now had a direct hand on the tournament. Lacoste's navy connections would serve his career well as he would eventually become caretaker president of Argentina in an 11-day handover period between Roberto Viola and Leopoldo Galtieri. Indeed, Lacoste would be a beneficiary of nepotism for the rest of his days. One of his more profitable friendships was with none other than FIFA president João Havelange, who made him vice-president of FIFA in 1982. When democracy was restored in Argentina, Lacoste was charged with embezzlement of funds from the World Cup's organisation committee and investigated for the murder of General Actis. Despite these accusations, Havelange campaigned tirelessly for Lacoste to retain his role within FIFA.⁵ This demonstrated how intertwined the dictatorship in Argentina was with world football's governing body at the time and explains some of the influence Argentina had over things that would benefit the team, such as the kick-off time in their infamous second-round match versus Peru and the appointment of the referee for the final.

Lacoste's approach to the World Cup was more carefree than Actis's measured, conservative method and mirrored

4 Alan Tomlinson and John Sugden. 2016. *Football, Corruption and Lies: Revisiting 'Badfellas', the Book FIFA Tried to Ban*. Routledge.

5 David Yallop. 1999. *How They Stole Our Game*. Poetic Publishing.

Massera's 'deliver the tournament at any cost' mantra. Lacoste's ascension to the head of the EAM meant that the men who ran the tournament were the same men who ran the detention centres, including Admiral Emilio Massera. A cabal of Argentina's most powerful men was involved in the day-to-day running of the detention centres, with the flagship torture centre, ESMA, designed and maintained by the Navy.⁶

Why host the World Cup?

Dr Peter Watson – teaching fellow of Latin American studies at the University of Leeds – speaks of the opportunity of 'nation branding'.⁷ This is the idea that a major sporting event can bring tangible economic and social prosperity to a host country, where a nation can show off its infrastructure, organisation and capabilities to host people from all over the world. The 1978 World Cup provided Argentina with all the necessary ingredients for a much-needed nation-branding exercise. If successful, the military would be able to rebrand the nation, promoting law, order and patriotism, while pushing threats of communism and anarchism to the fringes of society.

The World Cup was long overdue in Argentina. From a sporting point of view, Argentina holds a superiority complex over its neighbours, and members of the Argentine Football Association (AFA) would have been embarrassed

6 Malcom Coad. 1980. 'The "disappeared" in Argentina 1976–1980'. *Index on Censorship*, 9(3): 41–43. doi:10.1080/03064228008533069

7 Interview with Dr Peter Watson 2021 – teaching fellow of Latin American studies at the University of Leeds.

that Uruguay, Brazil and Chile had beaten them to the punch in hosting the World Cup. Argentina has historically had close ties with Europe, due to its colonial history with Spain and the mass immigration of Spanish, Italian and, to a lesser extent, British people. The UK's legacy in Argentina is defined by the round ball, the game of the refined and a gift from middle-class Europeans to Argentina. The opportunity to stage the world's greatest tournament would symbolise Argentina's arrival at the top table of global powers. It was an aching ambition of many of the generals, despite their ambivalence towards the game itself.

In sporting terms, Argentina's relationship with Europe is a paternal one. '*Somos tu padres* – We are your fathers' is a phrase heard often in Argentinian football, where one team (the father) displays its dominance over their rival (the son). Toppling the European giants was a rite of passage for Argentina: a victory over Europeans, particularly Spain and the UK due to the historical context, was viewed as evidence of a maturing football nation. To all involved in the organisation of the tournament, hosting the World Cup was the equivalent of inviting your parents round for dinner in your first grown-up flat.

The World Cup was also an opportunity for the junta to flex its muscles, to show how secure the country was, that they had overcome the left-wing subversives and were now an established, secure state. During this Cold War era, many nations across Latin America were struggling with armed conflict between 'left-wing agitators' and totalitarian regimes, and a successful tournament would

signal a victory for law and order in the eyes of the military.

The junta would have been helped by their opponents, Los Montoneros, promise of a relative ceasefire during the World Cup. The Montoneros – an armed left-wing guerrilla militia – vowed not to execute any operations within 600 metres of any of the World Cup venues and to ensure that no spectators, journalists, tourists, teams or delegations were harmed.⁸

Indeed, scores of the left-wing, Perónist guerrilla group supported the hosting of the tournament on Argentinian soil. Their fight with the military junta was a battle for hearts as well as minds and to oppose the staging of the World Cup would have been ideological suicide. For the people of Argentina, the national team, *La Albiceleste*, were a source of great national pride, a rare beacon of unity in an increasingly fractured society. Professor Raanan Rein notes:

‘By 1978 the guerrilla movements lost much of the popular support they enjoyed in 1975–1976. Pretending to represent the popular will, movements such as the Montoneros of the People’s Revolutionary Army could not allow themselves to turn their back on the most popular sport in the country. Most Argentines wanted their country to host the World Cup games and hoped for their nation to win the cup. As they were losing the military battle, Montoneros and the People’s Revolutionary Army were desperate to maintain some popular support. Therefore,

8 Nicolas Sagaian. ‘Montoneros operations during the 78 World Cup, the offensive that wasn’t’. Papelitos.com

formally or informally, the guerrilla movements had to reach a truce with the military dictatorship.⁹

Having suffered as many as 3,000 casualties between 1976 and 1977,¹⁰ the fragmented and almost decimated factions launched a propaganda war with the government – moving away from the bombs and using stickers instead. Popular slogans used in their literature were ‘Argentina Campeon – Videla to the wall’ and ‘This match shall be won by the people’. These slogans clearly demonstrated that the Montoneros were supporters of the national team, seeking to challenge the regime’s attempt to use the team to represent them.¹¹

Hosting the World Cup was also an opportunity for the junta to put a face to their regime. They were up against a one-man cult of personality in the ghost of Juan Perón, a personality that still exists in Argentina today in the ideology of Perónism. The opening ceremony would have been the first time many had heard Videla speak. To compare with the classic Dutch 4-3-3, the junta were very much a three-pronged attack: army, navy and air force – the three branches of the armed forces, rather than a one-man show. Although a household name, General Jorge Videla was not a charismatic character; he was the antithesis to populist right-wing leaders such as Hitler and Mussolini.

Former editor of the *Buenos Aires Herald*, Argentina’s premiere English language newspaper, Robert Cox recalls

9 Interview with Raanan Rein, 2020.

10 Nicolas Sagaian. ‘Montoneros operations during the 78 World Cup, the offensive that wasn’t’. Papelitos.com

11 Nicolas Sagaian. ‘The Silent Resistance’. Papelitos.com

Videla as ‘an uninteresting man. Completely lacking in any charm. Not a menacing guy, a little weasel with a thin moustache.’¹² In fact, it was Videla’s lack of charisma that made him the ideal candidate to lead the junta. The army was split between supposed moderates and extremists, and Videla was viewed as a safe pair of hands, necessary to placate the divisive elements of the armed forces. It was widely assumed at the time that whoever led the army would one day become the de facto leader of the country, such was the regularity of military coups in this era of Latin American history. So, to no one’s surprise, the commander-in-chief of the army assumed the post of President of the Republic after the 1976 coup.

Prior to the disappearance of thousands of citizens deemed as ‘subversives’ by the military, there was great hope that Videla’s regime could finally bring peace to the troubled streets of Argentina. Cox himself admits that he ‘wanted to believe in Videla because he stood between the people and the extreme right wing. The ones who believed in the conquests. They had ideas of conquests throughout Latin America, they looked at themselves as Christians who were fighting for the Catholic faith and Western civilization. They were fighting what they thought would be the Thirdrd World War. Which nobody else had recognised.’ Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Ildebrando Pascarelli of the Argentinian army stated: ‘The struggle we are engaged in does not recognise any natural or moral limits; it is beyond any discussion of what is good or evil.’

12 Interview with Robert Cox, former editor of the *Buenos Aires Herald*.

This example of hyperbolic rhetoric demonstrates the lengths the military were willing to go to to establish their order. The junta frequently referred to themselves as ‘the moral saviours of the west’.¹³

The military, the media and the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo

Crucial to the success of the military was controlling the messaging of the World Cup. Massera, more than Videla, saw the opportunity to communicate directly with people in their homes – to take inspiration from old enemy Eva Perón and flood the radio waves during a time of exceptional nationalism, to be the voice of Argentina. At least in this respect the Montoneros could find a level playing field. During Argentina’s second match of the tournament, against France, the Montoneros managed to jam the signal and interrupt the transmission. Although the images weren’t disrupted, the organisation was able to transmit its own commentary, a 13-minute, uninterrupted message where they spoke of 5,000 dead and 20,000 disappeared citizens at the hands of the dictatorship.¹⁴

In contrast to the guerrilla radio transmissions of the Montoneros, the established media in Argentina was broadly behind the military and the staging of the World Cup, thanks in no small part to intimidation from the dictatorship towards the media. At first the press was wined

13 Quote by Ezequiel Fernandez, Argentine journalist. *Dirty Game*. Documentary dir. Jaap Verdenius and Kay Mastenbroek, 2002.

14 Nicolas Sagaian. ‘Interferences by Montoneros during the 78 World Cup – Radio Liberacion’. Papelitos.com

and dined by the dictatorship, who even gave journalists a tour of ESMA, the notorious detention centre, although they were careful to avoid showing them the places of torture. Cox recalls, ‘They [the dictatorship] were trying to improve their relationship with the press. Initially they tried to suppress, but then they realised they couldn’t shut things down, so they tried to control [the press].’

The government scheduled a briefing between the military and media prior to the tournament. Cox said: ‘Before the World Cup, they called us all in [the media]; the minister for the interior Albano Harguindeguy, a big fat guy who looked like Goering, said, “You behave yourselves, you don’t report anything [negative]. The world is watching Argentina and everything is fine here.” Of course, none of the journalists asked any questions. The message was clear, they were to toe the party line and showcase the best of the tournament, no lenses were to be pointed internally at the dictatorship. Investigative journalism was not a discipline encouraged by the Argentinian military, as Cox discovered when he first arrived. ‘In my first press conference, I was astonished that nobody took any notes. Because at the end, you got a press release from the government. And you published it, just as it was.’

Nonetheless, Cox had pertinent questions that he wanted to ask the government, particularly about the names of journalists who were beginning to number among the disappeared. ‘At that time I was pursuing why so many journalists were being kidnapped. I followed him [Harguindeguy] into his office because I had a list of journalists that were missing. Where are they? What’s

happening? Harguindeguy denied any knowledge of the disappearances of the journalists.'

During this era the television and radio were taken over by the government but newspapers still enjoyed relative independence. The printed media were able to question or criticise the government but the large publications broadly chose not to, understandably for self-preservation upon fear of death. Without media coverage of the industrial-scale disappearances, many of the stories passed by word of mouth. Cox recalls, 'There wasn't any good knowledge, apart from what people saw in the street, and chose not to see. You saw these thugs gunning through the streets in their unmarked cars. The Ford Falcon took on a sinister meaning. They were used by the death squads, and they took people off to be murdered. People managed not to see that, people were able to enjoy the World Cup. Some people didn't know, and some people chose not to know.'

The *Buenos Aires Herald* was an outlier in the press and under the stewardship of Cox began to ask questions of the junta. In 1959, when Cox arrived, the editors weren't particularly interested in reporting on Argentina. Instead they focused on international news. Their concern was the readership, which was mainly foreign businessmen and the remnants of the British community. However, things would change after the coup as they began to print the names of disappeared journalists each week. Cox laments that reporters from Argentina's biggest newspaper, *Clarín*, were reticent to hold the dictatorship to account and wouldn't question them on anything of value. Cox recalls speaking to Videla and asking, 'Señor Presidente, what

about the kidnappings?', when a *Clarín* reporter interjected and said, 'We appreciate you have to do things a certain way. Like Julius Caesar,' appealing to Videla's ego and an administration always seeking to be seen as noble.

To many in the media, the oppression and control of the dictatorship was seen as a means to an end. Cox suggests that they believed they would improve their human rights record once they had expelled the dissidents. They allowed militia groups to act on behalf of the dictatorship and didn't challenge their behaviour. The groups would raid houses based on the most elementary of evidence and arrive at the wrong places. They would steal possessions and make tremendous mistakes. The pratfalls of these militia groups were never reported in the newspapers.

Cox's reporting of the disappearances would soon put him under the spotlight of the military, whose officials arrived at his house, armed with machine guns and took him away. He was taken to a recognised prison in police headquarters, used to torture people. 'The first thing I saw, painted on a huge wall in front of me, was a huge swastika with the words "Nazi Nationilismo".' Cox was charged with 'publication of information about subversive activities' and questioned before being released and moved to the nearby Hotel Sheraton. His detainment was reported in international newspapers, proving that the news about the nature of the autocratic government was beginning to spend overseas.

Much is made of the relationship between Nazi Germany and Argentina in the mid-20th century. The relationship between the German and Argentinian

military was somewhat symbiotic as the Germans trained the Argentinian military and the latter would pay tribute to the former in its military uniform and trademark goose-step when marching. Even former high-ranking Nazis such as Adolf Eichmann were able to disappear to Argentina following the Second World War. In a 1980 report on the detention centres, it was discovered that 'overt Nazism is practised widely in the camps. Jewish prisoners are singled out for especially harsh treatment and Nazi regalia, including flags, are openly displayed,' echoing Cox's experience.¹⁵

For many of the domestic media, the arrival of the foreign press was seen as an opportunity to get the real story of Argentina out. The group most desperate for foreign intervention were Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo, the group of mothers who marched together around the plaza campaigning for answers on the whereabouts of their missing children. They were desperate to discover the fate of their children and met a wall of silence domestically. The dictatorship identified this threat and produced a smear campaign, portraying these women as the 'mad women of Plaza de Mayo'. Haydée Gastelu, an original member of the group, interviewed by Uki Goñi, addressed this, saying, 'Of course we were mad. Mad with grief, with impotence. They took a woman's most precious gift, her child.' Gastelu's son numbered among the disappeared, a student abducted and murdered during the dictatorship's sweep of intellectuals.

15 Malcom Coad. 1980. 'The "disappeared" in Argentina 1976-1980'. *Index on Censorship*, 9(3): 41-43. doi:10.1080/03064228008533069

Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo's greatest hope and the dictatorship's greatest threat were one and the same, the foreign press. Crucially, in opening its doors to the world, the dictatorship had invited unwanted attention to its darkest secret. Robert Cox identifies the staging of the World Cup as the catalyst for the investigation into the disappeared: 'That's the time [1978 World Cup] the foreign press began taking an interest, which enraged the military. That started to help the situation. People in Argentina began taking an interest in what was happening.'

Groups had popped up in France, the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe to protest about the human rights abuses in Argentina and to challenge the staging of the World Cup. Amnesty International began a campaign to brief journalists travelling to Argentina to cover the tournament about the atrocities taking place there. One of these interactions between Mothers of Plaza de Mayo member Marta Moreira de Alconada Aramburú and Dutch journalists illustrates the desperation of the mothers and how the arrival of the foreign press was an enormous source of hope for them. She cried, 'We just want to know where our children are. Alive or dead, we want to know where they are. We don't know who to turn to anymore: consulates, embassies, ministries, churches – they've all shut their doors on us. That's why we're begging you to help us, you are our last hope. Please, help us. Help us, please. You are our last hope.'¹⁶

16 Ailin Bullentini. 'The international press and the mothers of Plaza de Mayo, the other side of the World Cup', *Papelitos.com*

The dictatorship's treatment of Las Madres would become increasingly heavy-handed since the group's inception in April 1977. Later that year, founding member Azucena Villaflor was abducted from her home in Avellaneda following the publication of a newspaper advertisement naming the disappeared children of the mothers. Villaflor was transported to the ESMA detention centre and never seen alive again. Almost 30 years later, in 2003, the body of Villaflor was exhumed and discovered to have suffered injuries consistent with impact against a solid surface following a fall – suggesting that she was a victim of the 'death flights'. The murder of Villaflor was attributed to notorious torturer and naval officer Alfredo Astiz, nicknamed the 'blonde angel of death'. Astiz was sentenced to life in prison in 2011 for his role in the kidnap and murder of Las Madres founders Villaflor, Esther Ballestrino and Maria Ponce. Astiz was also convicted, *in absentia* in France, for the murder of French nuns Alice Domon and Léonie Duquet in 1977, after their disappearance in Argentina.¹⁷

The military were hamstrung to do anything to harm foreign press in the way they could harm Villaflor and could do little to dissuade journalists arriving in Argentina from speaking with critics of the government. What they were able to do, however, under the guise of security, was control who the travelling footballers and their nation's delegates spoke to. In partnership with FIFA, players and officials were explicitly banned from engaging with Las Madres

17 'Argentina "Angel of Death" Alfredo Astiz convicted', BBC website, 2011.

de la Plaza de Mayo. This did not stop Las Madres from sending letters to the players and to journalists, requesting their help in amplifying their voices.

Many urban myths exist around the relationship between the players and Las Madres. One is that Swedish goalkeeper Ronnie Hellström had attended a march with Las Madres. Hellström was attributed with the quote: ‘It was an obligation I had with my conscience,’ describing his meeting with the group. However, years later he would pour cold water on this fable in an interview with Argentine journalist Ezequiel Fernandez, saying, ‘It wasn’t me. No. I remember seeing them, but I didn’t go to the Plaza. A couple of players went, but I don’t remember who.’¹⁸

The player in question was Dutch defender Wim Rijsbergen. Injured during the Netherlands’ final group match against Scotland, Rijsbergen remained with the Dutch squad for the second round but would play no further part in the tournament. With more free time on his hands than his compatriots, he enjoyed a little more freedom to explore the city. ‘We were not allowed to leave the hotel. Only one player from our team saw the Madres. He left the hotel and told us.’¹⁹ These are the words of Arie Haan and Ernie Brandts, members of the Dutch 1978 World Cup squad, and the player in question was, of course, Rijsbergen. Thanks to the efforts

18 Julio Boccalatte, Perfil del unico jugador Holandes que pudo haver la visita Rijsbergen, en bicicleta a ver a la Madres, Pagina 12, 2022.

19 Julio Boccalatte, Perfil del unico jugador Holandes que pudo haver la visita Rijsbergen, en bicicleta a ver a la Madres, Pagina 12, 2022.

of Amnesty International and Dutch comedy duo, Bram Vermeulen and Freek de Jonge, the Dutch squad were probably the one most aware of the atrocities taking place in Argentina. Their presence in the tournament had been highly controversial in the face of a boycott campaign that gathered great momentum. Rijsbergen's understanding of the situation was deepened by his meeting with Las Madres and he would remain in contact with them for many years, forging a long-term friendship with one member, Nora de Cortiñas.

The mothers were unaware of the true horrors and wanted to know where their children were being held. The belief at the time was that they were imprisoned somewhere in the country, with many believing they were held in tropical locations near the border with Paraguay. The reality, of course, was much more gruesome. Within the walls of ESMA, 3,000 detainees were murdered. In the early days this was in the most primitive of fashion: shot and burned on the barbecue. The perverse act echoed the Argentinian tradition of a Sunday 'asado'. Much like the Nazis' final solution to exterminate the Jews, the dictatorship faced a logistical problem of disposing of the bodies from their city centre location. Soon they would take to the skies and throw their victims out of aeroplanes into the Río de la Plata. They had to keep flying further out, as the bodies kept washing ashore in Mar del Plata.

Las Madres begged for information as they faced complete radio silence from the authorities. No information, no reassurances and no acknowledgement. Cox states, 'The World Cup was so noisy, the celebrations so loud, they

drowned out the sound of the disappeared.’ None of the major newspapers printed the stories of the disappeared, other than the *Buenos Aires Herald’s* list of names. Cox laments, ‘All they had to do was print a letter from one of the mothers, but they chose not to. There was a reason. Argentina had lived under military rule so many times. The first coup was in the 30s. During military dictatorships, you learned as a journalist, you wrote what the government told you.’ Perhaps the *Herald’s* publication in the English language, or Cox’s status as a British citizen, meant they weren’t scarred by Argentina’s autocratic military history, which allowed them to be bolder in their stance, questioning the military.

Despite the wall of silence domestically, the foreign press began taking an interest in the human rights abuses, which Cox describes as ‘enraging the military’. In addition to ESMA, other detention camps were established around the country. Detention centre Club Atlético was renowned for detaining socialist ‘dissenters’, sometimes housing as many as 1,500 prisoners, far surpassing its 200-person capacity. ‘El Banco’ boasted a surveillance office, focusing on foreign visitors during the World Cup, principally journalists. The military were demonstrably fearful of what journalists would discover during the tournament and with whom they would speak. Prisoners in these camps who had connections with foreign journalists were tortured and interrogated to discover what messages they had shared with the outside world.²⁰

20 Malcom Coad. 1980. ‘The “disappeared” in Argentina 1976–1980’. *Index on Censorship*, 9(3): 41–43. doi:10.1080/03064228008533069

The legacy of Argentina 1978

While it's true that sport doesn't exist in a vacuum, the days and weeks of the 1978 World Cup were a reprieve for many Argentines from the world that surrounded them. Whenever La Albiceleste took the field, the country, albeit temporarily, was in ceasefire. Guerrillas and generals, left wing and right wing, torturers and tortured, faced the same direction, towards a field or a television set, and idolised the same national heroes.

The streets of Buenos Aires were no stranger to bloodshed in the 1970s but the city basked in the glow of World Cup fever for those few weeks in 1978. Argentine journalist and broadcaster Fernando Spannaus recounts, 'It was the best time to be in Buenos Aires, ever. It was freedom. At a glance.'²¹ Many of the restrictions on personal freedom were lifted during this time and, after Passarella's men had triumphed in the final, it's said that as much as 60 per cent of Buenos Aires took to the streets to celebrate with their compatriots. The sounds of motorists blasting their horns in unison with the chants of 'AR-GEN-TINA' formed the soundtrack of the junta's united nation. But under the surface, deep divisions remained.

Claudio Tamburrini, a former goalkeeper for Almagro, imprisoned for being a political activist, speaks of the perverse ceasefire during the World Cup when he states, 'Sport makes torturers and tortured embrace after the goals are scored. During the World Cup, Argentinians replaced critical political judgement with

21 Interview with Fernando Spannaus, 2021.

sporting euphoria.’ However, the unity provided by these moments of sporting ecstasy was short-lived. ‘They went back to torturing us afterwards,’ former prisoner Adolfo Pérez Ezquivel laments.²² It’s impossible to unweave the intertwined experiences of prisoners and torturers during the 1978 World Cup. Perhaps it speaks of the success of the government’s strategy that for 90 minutes, while Argentina took the field, the whole country was united. Videla used the platform of the opening ceremony to speak of ‘the peace we all wish for. As people with dignity and freedom,’²³ and for a limited time the promise of peace had come to pass.

Robert Cox believes that the World Cup victory and subsequent explosion of national pride emboldened the more extreme elements of the military: ‘I think they thought, we’ve done it. Now we’ve succeeded, nobody’s going to care about what we do. After this, their torture and murder went ahead with impunity. But at least during the celebrations of the World Cup, I was hopeful, thinking, perhaps Argentina will get out of this horror.’

Cox’s stay in Buenos Aires was coming to an end. Following an attempted kidnapping of his wife Maud, his son David received a letter containing a death threat. In his final meeting with the president, Videla asked Cox to stay in Argentina. He vowed to give Cox protection from the militia groups and stated, ‘I wish I could go home. But, if I left, a general would come with his sword and swamp the country with blood.’

22 *Pele, Argentina and the Dictators*. Goalhanger films. 2020.

23 General Jorge Videla’s speech during the opening ceremony.

Videla would later, on his deathbed, confide in a trusted journalist that the military had decided to kill ‘between 5,000 and 6,000 people’ but, of course, this is a very conservative estimate, with thousands more known to have been murdered by the state.²⁴ In such times, when an arbitrary figure can be plucked out of thin air as a justifiable number of citizens to exterminate, it’s impossible to consider the dictatorship as a pragmatic mediator between extremists.

Alfredo Gonzalez and Horacio Gullermo de la Paz authored a 1980 report, ‘Testimony on Secret Detention Camps in Argentina’, in which they stated that the military junta ‘never intended to limit its attentions to the guerrillas’. The men spent the World Cup in El Banco detention centre, escaping when in transit in 1979 and finding asylum in São Paulo, Brazil. According to their estimates, fewer than one in five of the detainees were members of armed opposition groups such as the Montoneros or had any such connections. Instead, having seized control during the coup in 1976 and ridden the wave of extreme nationalism during the World Cup triumph of 1978, the dictatorship sought to crush any and every dissenting voice in Argentina.²⁵

24 Interview with Robert Cox, 2021.

25 Malcom Coad. 1980. ‘The “disappeared” in Argentina 1976–1980’. *Index on Censorship*, 9(3): 41–43. doi:10.1080/03064228008533069