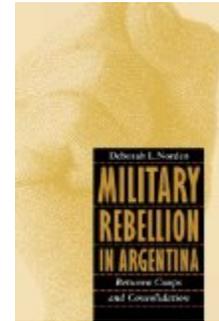


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Reviewed by Wayne H. Bowen (Ouachita Baptist University)
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Between Coup d'État and Submission: Insurrections and the Argentine Military

In *Military Rebellion in Argentina*, Deborah Norden tells the story of the Argentine military during the twentieth century, focusing on the painful transition to democracy, 1983 to 1990. In these twilight years of transition between military authoritarianism and democracy, significant elements of the Argentine armed forces expressed their opposition to the new political system through four major military uprisings. Although none of these insurrections proved successful in their goals, they did impede the transformation of the military into an integral part of the state and increased the politicization of the armed forces at a critical time during the most recent democratic phase of Argentine history. In this well-written and -researched work, Norden provides readers with a reasoned historical and theoretical interpretation of the role of the military in recent Argentine politics. Although one might quarrel with Norden's optimism about Argentina's future, especially given its current economic crisis, it is difficult to find fault with her explanation of the role of the Argentine military in the nation's most recent past.

Norden's book tells a story parallel to much of the tragedy of recent Argentine history. In the early part of the century, Argentina was the envy of the world, with higher living standards and a brighter future than even much of Europe. With fertile land, burgeoning cattle herds, growing industry, and a well-educated population descended from mostly Italian and Spanish immigrants, Argentina was not only prosperous but also unguardedly optimistic. Although until the 1930s much of the

wealth and political power was held tightly by a small oligarchic group of cattle ranchers and their industrial and merchant compatriots, the typical Argentine *gaucho* or Buenos Aires worker could look forward to a better life than his equivalents in, for example, Mexico or Portugal. Indeed, Argentines usually compared themselves to Europeans or North Americans, rather than to their continental brethren, in terms of living standards, ethnic heritage and national ambitions.

The Great Depression, however, shook Argentina to its foundations. The old oligarchic class, which had maintained power through electoral manipulation, found itself unable to cope with the hammer blows to the world economy and Argentine society. By 1930, the political situation had become unsettled. The septuagenarian president, Hipolito Yrigoyen, was suffering from the early stages of senility, while Yrigoyen's cronies and less scrupulous political allies took advantage of this opportunity to use the political system and national budget for their own ends.

It was in this environment of economic uncertainty and political decay that elements of the Argentine military intervened, launching a coup in 1930. This insurrection, the first successful military insurrection in twentieth-century Argentina, brought the army into the political arena, an arena in which it remains to this day. Norden's book examines military insurrections in the decades after 1930, attempting to explain how military officers became such important players in Argentine

politics, deposing, bolstering, weakening or supplanting civilian regimes for the next sixty years. The book is not, however, a history of the Argentine military in the twentieth century, or even in the years of dictatorship. It is instead an account of the range of military behavior between the coup d'état and submission to civilian authority.

It would not be accurate to say that there has been a dearth of writing on twentieth-century Argentina, or even on the role of the Argentine armed forces in politics. Much recent work concerning the Argentine military, however, has focused on its abysmal behavior during the years of the most recent dictatorship, 1973-1976.[1] Although this work has been necessary, the focus has been on a fairly narrow set of subjects: human rights abuses, disappearances, and trials of the perpetrators after 1983. Other books have focused on the intellectual origins of military interventionism.[2] These are and will continue to be important areas of investigation, but too many of these efforts focus on "the military" as one institution with one ideology and form of behavior. Norden's book, while admitting the crimes of the armed forces during the years of dictatorship, focuses on the internal cleavages of the military and their expression in the public arena.

As befitting the work of a political scientist, the first chapter of this book, "Democracy and the Armed Forces," focuses on sources, methodology, and theory. The author used an ample array of primary and secondary works, including newspapers, military publications, and underground materials, but her most significant source was interviews with dozens of Argentine soldiers, military functionaries, and political figures, retired or active. Though the anonymity of some of these interviewees could be considered problematic, the author's efforts to corroborate non-attributable testimony largely resolves this dilemma. Given the contemporary nature of many of the events recounted by Norden, and potential dangers to those she interviewed, her willingness to conceal her sources is understandable and commendable.

Chapter 1 also includes a discussion of democracy and the "variations of military behavior" under such a system (p. 10). Finally, the author examines the interaction between professionalism and bureaucratic hierarchy in the military. These two tendencies, associated in modern military doctrine with apolitical armed forces, can, when combined with a weak political system or other societal deficiencies, lead to a more favorable environment for military rebellions.

In Chapter 2, "The Political Roles of the Argentine

Military: Historical Overview," Norden outlines the increasing involvement of the military in politics since 1930. Whereas after the first coup d'état the military gave up power less than two years later, they seized it again in subsequent revolts, most importantly in those of 1943, 1955, and 1976. The military insurrectionists of 1943, which included a group of officers led by Colonel Juan Domingo Peron, did not present a clear platform from which to govern, relying instead on a shared ideology of extreme nationalism, resistance to U.S. and Allied hegemony, anti-democratic sentiments, a defense of military prerogatives and an unspecified commitment to social justice (pp. 23-25). With some modifications, most notably the intensification of cultural conservatism and anti-subversion, this would remain the core of the military's political ideology through subsequent decades.

General Peron, however, soon went beyond his erstwhile colleagues, becoming the tribune of the Argentine working classes. After his election as president in 1946, Peron attempted to transform the military in a more personalistic direction. He "sought personal loyalty, rather than institutional obedience" (p. 26). It was this attempt to subordinate the military to his person, as well as his conflicts with the Catholic Church, that led to the ouster of the general by the military in 1955. Peron's legacy, however, of a nation polarized between Peronistas and anti-Peronistas, remained an attribute of Argentine society.

The next two decades saw an ongoing contest among the military, the repressed Peronista movement, and weak democratic forces. Civilian presidents Arturo Frondizi (1958-1962) and Arturo Illia (1963-1966) governed weakly, unable to prevent the military from inserting itself again and again into politics. Neither was able to institutionalize the armed forces as a part of the state, and were instead forced to interact with the military as an independent player in national politics. In 1966, the military once again seized power, yielding only to a Peronista government in 1973 in the face of a weakening economy, violent Peronista and Leftist guerrilla movements, as well as the persistent popularity of Peron, then still in exile in Spain (pp. 39-45). After the death of General Peron in 1974, the weak Peronista governments of his supporters prompted the military to launch its last successful coup, in March 1976.

The story of this new military government is detailed in Chapter 3, "Disappointments of Military Rule, 1976-1983." The "disappointments" to which Norden refers are the regime's failures to accomplish its objectives: na-

tional unity, economic growth and prosperity, international legitimacy and, most dramatically, its defeat in the war for the Falkland/Malvinas Islands. The dictatorship did crush the guerrilla movements confronting it, but this “Dirty War” was carried out at a terrible cost: thousands of dead and “disappeared” civilians, most killed by the military in the years 1976-1978 (pp.58-60). Although not all officers and noncommissioned officers participated in these human rights abuses, enough did “to lend an element of unity to the military,” but also increased divisions between high-level officers who issued the orders for these actions and the lower-level officers who carried them out. The conflicts between these two echelons grew over the corruption of the upper ranks, as well as the junta’s inability to run the economy, which by 1981-82 was in a desperate condition: rising foreign debt, bank failures, and a declining Gross Domestic Product (pp. 61-62, 64-68).

The invasion of the Falkland/Malvinas Islands in 1982 did provide a temporary measure of national unity, but the subsequent defeat of the numerically superior Argentine military by a British Task Force humiliated the government. It also exacerbated the divisions within the military. Not only did middle-ranking officers feel betrayed by the poor preparation and leadership from Buenos Aires during the brief war with Great Britain, but the high command’s disdainful treatment of veterans of the conflict drove an even deeper wedge between the generals and their subordinates (pp. 74-76). In 1983, the military gave up power again to an elected president.

It was in this environment of internal military conflict, economic freefall, and the aftermath of a disastrous foreign war that the new civilian president, Raul Alfonsín, took office. In Chapter 4, “Quest for Control: Military Policies and the Alfonsín Government,” Norden examines the relationship between Alfonsín and the military. Unlike the most recent civilian presidents, Alfonsín chose a confrontational approach to domesticate the Argentine military. Severe cuts in the military budget, human rights trials of officers for crimes committed during the “Dirty War,” and attempts to subordinate the military to civilian oversight in all areas was received poorly by officers of all ranks, despite the earlier cleavages between ranks. Alfonsín’s efforts to legislate and decree the military into proper submission, coupled with what many in the military perceived as flanking attacks by the judiciary, human rights organizations, and other sectors of society contributed to a resurgent military resistance to Alfonsín—the first of a new wave of military rebellions.

These small-scale insurrections, the sources of which are examined in Chapter 5, “Emergence of Rebellion: Origins of Factionalism,” were unlike previous revolts. These rebellions, however, dramatic, were not the beginnings of military coups. Instead, they were a manifestation of cleavages within the military, not only between officers of flag (generals and admirals) and field grade (majors and colonels), but also based on ideology, professional orientation, branch of service, and political alignment (p. 108, Table 4). In contrast to previous coups, the vanguard of these uprisings comprised field grade officers, often elite Commandos and decorated veterans of the Falklands/ Malvinas War. Ideologically, they were fervently nationalistic, Catholic and Peronist. Named the *carapintadas* (painted faces) for the camouflaged faces and battle-dress uniforms worn during their rebellions, they saw themselves as under attack from the Alfonsín regime, abandoned by their superiors and unappreciated for their service to the nation during the “Dirty War” and the Falklands/Malvinas conflict.

Their rebellions, in 1987, 1988, and 1990, are presented in Chapter 6, “Evolution of Military Rebellion.” Norden argues that the most important factor prompting these revolts was, rather than opposition to specific policies of the Alfonsín government, the perception among many officers that their prestige and status were under attack by Alfonsín and his confederates in the media, judiciary, human rights groups, and the legislature (p. 126). Whereas resistance to criminal prosecution of officers for human rights abuses had provided the stimulus for the early rebellions, opposition to Alfonsín and the upper ranks of the military hierarchy soon became the more important elements in these rebellions.

Faced with growing sympathy in the army for the rebels, and a consequent inability to repress them with superior power, the Alfonsín government was forced to negotiate with these forces, offering amnesties, dismissals of unpopular generals, and increases in military salaries to end the insurrections.

Even with the election of the Peronista presidential candidate Carlos Menem in 1989, the *carapintada* movement did not permanently abate. Early relations between Menem and the armed forces were much improved over those of Alfonsín, with Menem’s blanket amnesties for previous rebellions and crimes during the “Dirty War” popular among soldiers and officers. Military salaries and equipment, however, continued to deteriorate and Menem managed to co-opt many officers seen as previously sympathetic to the *carapintadas*. The movement

gradually began to disintegrate, as some dismissed or forcibly retired officers entered politics, while others attempted to maintain their links with the military. The last significant rebellion, in December 1990, failed completely, with troops loyal to Menem quickly crushing the effort. With the most important leaders imprisoned or co-opted by the government, the *carapintada* movement effectively collapsed. Argentina has not experienced a significant military rebellion since 1990.

In Chapter 7, "Foundations of Chronic Interventionism in Argentina," Norden explains the reasons behind the role of the Argentine military as a persistent actor in politics. While many armies consider themselves the guardians of the nation, the Argentine military also regarded itself as the sole creator of Argentina, predating the nation in its origins.

Ideologically, the expansion of the conception of national security in the 1960s allowed military rebels to see themselves as opponents of internal, as well as external, enemies of the state and of the status of the military. Although these ideological elements provided the intellectual fuel for military rebellion, other more practical factors, including the limited legal punishments for insurrection and the politicization of flag-rank promotions also played a role.

In Chapter 8, "Shadows of Military Rule: Legacies of Bureaucratic Authoritarianism in South America," Norden broadens her analysis of military dictatorship to include Uruguay, Brazil, and Chile. In this brief comparative examination of the respective transitions to democracy in Argentina and the other three nations, Norden presents the most important factors determining the ease of these transitions: the economic success (or lack thereof) of the military regime, the level of "militarization" in the military regimes, and the relationship between the military and civilian populations during the period of dictatorship, exemplified by the levels of repression practiced during these periods.

In her final section, Chapter 9, "Context, Coalitions and Political Outcomes," Norden explains the successes and failures of the military rebellions. These insurrections were most fruitful when their appeals went out to the military as a professional institution, rather than to individual interests or particular ideologies. As the *carapintada* movement grew, however, it came to be seen as a discrete organization, with its own agenda, rather than as an expression of the general will of significant elements of the armed forces. In a counterintuitive fashion, the movement lost most of its support at the point at which

it seemed to be developing institutional strength, strong leadership, and a clear identity. The broader lessons are that movements of military rebellion, as in the case of the *carapintadas*, cannot project a public identity without jeopardizing their organizational existence.

While in the short term the *carapintada* movement failed, Norden argues that it did damage and delay the democratic transition in Argentina. The early leniency toward the rebellions and the *carapintadas* weakened both Alfonsín and Menem, impeding at the same time the full domestication of the military as a subordinate element of the state. Despite these results, and some still-troubling elements in Menem's rule, at least to all current appearances, we may now be able to say that Argentina "is" a full democracy, rather than in transition to that political condition.

Beyond an explanation of military rebellions in Argentina and their implications for Argentine and Latin American history, this book also illuminates the general history of the military in the Western world. In recent years, there has been discussion in the United States and other nations about the role of the armed forces in what have been called "Operations Other Than War": peacekeeping, humanitarian missions, drug interdiction, nation-building, law enforcement, and other operations. As the time spent by the armed forces on training and traditional warfighting is replaced by these new missions, some have speculated that the military could begin to see itself as more than just the guarantor of the nation's borders, allies, and foreign interests, as happened to many Latin American militaries in previous decades: "As security came to be defined in terms of a broad conjunction of social, economic, and strategic factors, with particular attention to domestic affairs, military perceptions of their appropriate roles expanded correspondingly" (p. 17).

Though this danger can be easily overdramatized, there is a risk when the military regards itself as the only institution capable of positive change in society. In this light, Norden's final words about the future of Argentina and Latin America are perhaps not entirely warranted. We can only hope, however, that she is correct in hazarding that, at least in Argentina, the "pattern of military intervention may have finally been broken" (p. 206).

With its insightful analysis of the internal politics of the Argentine military and broader interpretation of the role of the armed forces in democracies, Norden's book is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the relationship between military and political structures, transitions to democracy and military interventionism in Latin

America. Throughout, Norden's discussion of major analytical concepts—military rebellion, transitions to democracy, political families within the military, the legacy of both military rule and rebellions—remains clear and insightful. Her book makes a strong contribution to recent Argentine history and is recommended for use by researchers, faculty and graduate students, as well as in upper-division undergraduate courses on Latin America.

1. Examples of this type of work include: Jo Fisher, *Mothers of the Disappeared*. Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1995, (recently reviewed for H-LatAm by Virginia W. Leonard); Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza del Mayo*. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1994; Iain Guest, *Behind the Disappearances*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990; Amnesty International, *Ar-*

gentina: The Military Junta and Human Rights: Report of the Trial of Former Junta Members, 1985. New York: Amnesty International Publications, 1987. On the armed opposition to the Argentine military dictatorship, as well as other military regimes, see Jorge Castaneda, *Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left After the Cold War*. New York: Random House/Vintage, 1994.

2. See, for example, David Rock, *Authoritarian Argentina: The Nationalist Movement, Its History and Impact*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, and Donald Hodges, *Argentina's "Dirty War": An Intellectual Biography*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991.

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