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James P. Brennan. *Argentina's Missing Bones: Revisiting the History of the Dirty War.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018. xi + 195 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-29791-3; \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-29793-7.

Reviewed by Debbie Sharnak (Harvard University)

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Commissioned by Casey M. Lurtz (Johns Hopkins University)

When Luciano Benjamín Menéndez died in February 2018, he was ninety years old and serving fourteen prison terms—twelve of them life sentences. A fifteenth trial and possible prison term was pending. During Argentina's so-called Dirty War, which officially lasted from 1976 to 1983, General Menéndez served as head of the Third Army Corps in Córdoba, the second-largest city in the country. The *Washington Post* has called him “one of the most bloodthirsty leaders of a violent dictatorship” and indeed, the characterization rings true.[1] While exact numbers of *desaparecidos* are difficult to ascertain, it was under his watch that the death camp La Perla operated. The most conservative estimates place the number of disappeared there at around five hundred.[2] La Perla was known for its sadistic torture sessions, and those who entered the structure were rarely seen alive again. Menéndez eventually led a failed coup against the military junta leader Jorge Rafael Videla, arguing that the commander of the army, General Roberto Viola, had been too soft on “subversives” due to an attempted easing of the repression. Menéndez remains one of the only people who ever accused Viola of being too soft—Viola was a leader of the dictatorship at a national level who oversaw some of the worst years of the repression. For this, Viola was also eventually tried and convicted of human rights violations in the aftermath of the military rule.[3]

Studying Menéndez, and the extent of his zealous and violent convictions in the pathos of the Dirty War, provides a window into exploring how the Argentine dictatorship played out in Córdoba. Córdoba was indeed one of the most violent areas of the country during the military rule. In *Argentina's Missing Bones: Revisiting*

the History of the Dirty War, James P. Brennan studies the history of the repression and its aftermath in this city, offering an accounting of the period preceding the military dictatorship, the years of the most intense repression, and the subsequent struggles over justice and memory. In this work, Brennan examines how national narratives about Argentina's military regime, refracted through particularities of Córdoba, challenge some of the historiographical assumptions about the violence. This study indeed does a wonderful job with this project. By surveying the vast literature on Argentina's dictatorship and spending time in archives in the United States, Argentina, and Córdoba, Brennan makes three main interventions. First, he shows how the violence in the region started before the onset of the actual military takeover in 1976, challenging 1976 as the beginning of the military rule and the repression. Second, he examines the multi-continental influences on how the military carried out its campaign, looking beyond the United States and instead locating both national trends and the perverse inspiration of French counterrevolutionary warfare. In noting these more varied influences, Brennan seeks to overturn the assumption that the Dirty War in Argentina was merely a product of Washington's Cold War project. Third, he takes seriously not only victim narratives but also the military and police culture to examine how readers can understand the intensity of the violence that ravaged the area and sought to erase “an entire sociocultural milieu” (p. 5). In this way, Brennan succeeds in complicating historians' periodization of the conflict, illuminating the various global influences, and demonstrating how to further understand violent periods by studying not only victims but also perpetrators.

In making these claims, Brennan offers a roughly chronological structure to the book. He starts by examining what made Córdoba different from the rest of the country, mainly by identifying the highly politicized youth culture, socially activist Catholic Church, and militant trade union movement that all worked in solidarity to “increase the radical tendencies within each” (p. 18). In this sense, Brennan explains that the military, police, union thugs, and paramilitary organizations viewed leftist militancy as a fundamental threat—one that had to be met with violence as early as 1966 and which became rampant from 1973 to 1976, even before the onset of the official dictatorship. In this chapter, Brennan takes seriously the extent of repression from these right-wing forces, but also explains that violence had emerged from the Left as well, particularly groups such as the *Montoneros*, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias*, and the *Fuerzas Armadas Peronistas*. While careful not to assert that the repression was in any way justified, Brennan attempts to understand why it might have been so harsh in this region of the country by looking at the social and cultural context that led to the military perceiving the region as a target that required such intense repression in the first place.

The following two chapters explain the nature of the repression by exploring the dictatorship’s practices, primarily the use of disappearance, death, and detention, but also how the military extended its influence into university administration and local institutions such as the judiciary and local media to exert total control. Brennan makes a case study of the La Perla death camp, one of the most notorious in the entire country for the degree to which prisoners were largely disappeared, with little hope for transfer. Even though documents related to the functioning of the camp were destroyed by the military as it left power, careful historical work studying the military, survivors, and court records allow Brennan to offer a view into how the horrific camp operated to inflict terror on those unfortunate enough to arrive at its doors.

Chapter 4 takes seriously the work of attempting to understand the perpetrators, looking in detail at the institutional dynamics of the Third Army Corps. It offers a structural view into how the military units functioned both internally and in relation to other branches of the military. In addition, it looks at the autonomy of the local military unit that allowed Menéndez’s extreme views to guide the regional repression, replete with blood pacts that implicated almost every person who worked under his command. Any conscript unwilling to cooperate risked joining the ranks of the disappeared—a pos-

sibility that indeed occurred. In this way, Brennan both puts forth a view into the particularity of how repression in Córdoba functioned and persuasively argues that the Dirty War in Argentina cannot be categorized with one national narrative. Instead it can only be understood in the context of local influences and dynamics where regional commanders and conditions impacted the extent and manner of the repression.

Chapter 5 follows Tanya Hammer and Kirsten Weld in looking beyond the United States and Soviet Union to understand the dynamics of the Cold War in Latin America.[4] It considers the various influences on how the Third Corps operated, including not only the United States, but also French counterrevolutionary warfare in Algeria refracted through Argentina’s own particular Cold War political strictures. The chapter moves past the bipolarity of the Cold War battlefield to investigate how transnational ideas about countering subversives influenced the military’s handling of prisoners beyond just as a US puppet.

Chapter 6 looks more closely at the aftermath of the conflict and attempts to reckon with the terrible violence at both a national and local level. It examines trials—both the national move for accountability as well as the specific trials surrounding notorious figures in the Córdoba repression, most notably Menéndez. The chapter explores the uneven progression toward justice that has occurred in the nation, and some of Argentina’s more pioneering attempts to bring perpetrators to account. Even though Carlos Menem overturned the initial convictions of members of the junta in 1989, the last two decades have witnessed a revival of trials and innovative legal maneuverings to hold those responsible on both a national and regional basis—in spite of continued criticism from both the Right and the Left for going either too far or not far enough.

The subsequent chapters on memory and blame critique the utility of survivor testimony for constructing historical narratives as well as the danger of dismissing leftist violence. Brennan argues that the huge number of oral histories and overriding emphasis on these testimonies limit historical analysis because social memory becomes stripped of “complexities and contradictions” when it is shaped “by those most directly affected by violence of those years” (pp. 90-91). Brennan is undertaking a monumental task here—attempting to offer a holistic account of the literature on memory studies across disciplines and then make some conclusions about its usefulness as a genre within the current political and scholarly

environment. He attempts to do this at a national level while also including the particular studies on Córdoba, all in one short chapter. Unfortunately, the true scope and complexity of the topics is slightly lost by taking on this much. With respect to historians alone, Brennan only mentions Steve Stern's trilogy on Chile in the text, and then cites only two other studies—by Macarena Gomez-Barris and Leslie Jo Frazier—from the narrow strip of the 2007-08 period, which covers only work on Chile, and only in English. Just a short list of more recent works ought to include those by Ana Ros, Francesca Lessa, Katherine Hite, Susana Kaiser, Cheryl Jiménez Frei, and Telma Lilia Mariasch, among many others, who offer a much wider view into the complexities, utility, and struggles over memory and the politics of credibility.^[5] Although a comprehensive survey may well have been impossible for his purposes, the implications of Brennan's limited belief in the utility of memory beyond just "testimony and tribute" seem to sidestep some of the more interesting conversations on memory work in the Southern Cone (p. 104). Brennan also appears to give some credence to the *dos demonios* (two demons) theory, which suggests that the dictatorship's violence was a legitimate response to the violence of the Left. While Brennan notes a difference in the scope of each side's violence and recognizes that they should not be fully equated, he does attempt to posit the very real threat posed by leftist violence in the period and the chaos within society. His argument on memory and his exploration of the two demons theory are perhaps the two most controversial claims that Brennan puts forth.

Ultimately, the book is best when it integrates (and distinguishes between) the variations in how the dictatorship played out in the "interior" with national narratives of the period. In a country so vast—and one where regional authorities maintained control and autonomy with regard to carrying out the war on subversives—Brennan's book offers a more nuanced picture of the dictatorship and the struggle over justice and memory in its wake.

Overall, *Missing Bones* is a fantastic book that asserts the importance of understanding Córdoba within the context of the history of Argentina's Dirty War and offers a model and call for more histories that distin-

guish and include narratives about both the "center" and so-called "peripheral" areas during times of violent upheaval.

Notes

[1]. Ellie Silverman, "Luciano Menéndez Obituary," *The Washington Post*, March 3, 2018.

[2]. CONADEP recorded 457, but out of approximately 1,000 prisoners during three years of operation, about 100 are known to have survived, suggesting a much higher number. Brennan, 29 and 38.

[3]. The abortive coup eventually led to his imprisonment for ninety days and forced retirement from the army, but it remains indicative of how fervently he believed in waging a ruthless war against subversives.

[4]. Tanya Hammer, *Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); and Kirsten Weld, "The Spanish Civil War and the Construction of a Reactionary Historical Consciousness in Augusto Pinochet's Chile," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 98, no. 1 (2018): 77-115.

[5]. Ana Ros, *The Post-dictatorship Generation in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Francesca Lessa, *Memory and Transitional Justice in Argentina and Uruguay: Against Impunity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Katherine Hite, "Empathic Unsettling and the outsider within Argentina Spaces of Memory," *Memory Studies* 8, no. 1 (2015) 38-48; Susana Kaiser, "Argentina's Trials: New Ways of Writing Memory," *Latin American Perspectives* 42, no. 3 (2015): 193-206; Cheryl Jiménez Frei, "Toward Memory, Against Oblivion: A Comparative Perspective on Public Memory, Monuments, and Confronting a Painful Past in the United States and Argentina," *The Public Historian* (Sept. 2017); and Telma Lilia Mariasch, "Desaparecidos: De las luchas jurídicas a la memoria cultura," *V Jornadas de Sociología de la UNLP* (December 10, 11, and 12, 2008), accessible at http://www.memoria.fahce.unlp.edu.ar/trab_eventos/ev.6215/ev.6215.pdf http://www.memoria.fahce.unlp.edu.ar/trab_eventos/ev.6215/ev.6215.pdf.

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