

Almost disarmed: Politics and violence in the final years of the Argentine organization Montoneros (1979–1983)

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Abstract

In this article, I analyze the debates, declarations, and silences surrounding the issue of violence during the final years of the Argentine insurgent group Montoneros (1979–1983). I examine the official documents and bulletins written while the group was in exile, as well as the statements and publications of dissident groups (the Peronismo Montonero Auténtico of 1979 and the Montoneros 17 de Octubre of 1980) and other critical groups (the Agrupación Eva Perón of 1980). From a political theory perspective, I will focus on the specificity of this space of belonging, its symbols, its representations, and its actions. In this study, I intend to (a) shed light on the final stage of the Montoneros organization, which, with few exceptions, has not been subjected to historiographical or sociological analysis, or studied by political science and (b) contribute to a deeper understanding of the dissolution processes undergone by armed insurgent groups in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s.

Keywords

Argentina, debates, dissident groups, exile, Montoneros, violence

Introduction

The armed insurgent group Montoneros came to public prominence in Argentina in May 1970 as part of a wave of revolutionary movements in Latin America from the late 1950s to the mid-1990s. Critical of the legalist and reformist approaches of traditional left-wing parties, these movements proposed different ways of understanding and bringing about revolution and the transformation of cultural, economic, and political features of common life (Marchesi, 2019; Martín Álvarez and Rey Tristán, 2012). They emerged against

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the global backdrop of the Cold War, the Second Vatican Council, the decolonization of Asia and Africa, the Vietnam War, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and revolutionary movements in the United States and Europe (Artaraz, 2006; Dreyfus-Armand et al., 2000; Gosse, 2005; Keucheyan, 2012; Marwick, 1998). Some, but not all, of the younger members of this Latin American New Left (which included Marxists, socialists, supporters of liberation theology, anarchists, and nationalists, forming a diffuse network of social mobilization, cultural revolt, and politicization) decided to resort to arms and employ rural and/or urban guerrilla strategies to intervene in their respective countries. The result was the formation of armed insurgent groups. One of the first experiences in the region—and one of the few successful ones—was the Cuban Revolution, which generated great expectations.

The origin of Montoneros cannot be dissociated from the effervescence of this global New Left in general and the Latin American New Left in particular, but it must also be seen within the context of Argentine history. Following the coup d'état that brought an end to Juan Domingo Perón's second presidential term (1952–1955), the country witnessed a succession of military governments and weak constitutional governments that had no popular mandate, since Peronism (the largest electoral force) had been banned. The governments' violations of civil and political rights were increasingly contested by different sectors of society. During the military regime of the so-called Argentine Revolution (1966–1973), numerous university, intellectual, Catholic, and workers' youth networks were radicalized (Manzano, 2017; Tortti, 1999). Within these networks, a protest discourse emerged that focused on “national liberation,” “socialism,” and “the people” (*campo popular*) (Confino and Franco, 2019). Their protests were often accompanied by demands for Perón's return from exile in Spain.

The founders of Montoneros emerged from these networks. The group's first act was the 1970 kidnapping and assassination of retired general Pedro Eugenio Aramburu, de facto president between 1955 and 1958 and a symbol of anti-Peronist repression. By 1972, social support and sympathy had turned the initial group into a federal organization made up of legal activist groups (in neighborhoods, factories, universities, and schools) and underground militant groups (Lanusse, 2005). Unlike the Cuban strategy, which focused on rural areas, the organization had an urban structure that combined political and military approaches, similar to other countries in the Southern Cone (Marchesi, 2019). It also incorporated militants from other Peronist or related armed groups: the Fuerzas Armadas Peronistas (FAP) (Peronist Armed Forces), the Descamisados (the “shirtless ones”), and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR) (Revolutionary Armed Forces). It thus became one of the two largest political-military organizations in Argentina (along with the Marxist-Leninist Workers' Revolutionary Party–People's Revolutionary Army; Carnovale, 2011). It is estimated that it had between 2500 and 5000 militants (Gillespie, 1982). This growth occurred with the discreet approval of Perón, who enabled it to participate in the national election campaign of March 1973 (won by Peronists, who were able to run for the first time in 18 years) (Tortti et al., 2014). Unlike other armed groups in Argentina and Latin America, Montoneros' inclusion in the Peronist Movement enabled its militants to hold positions of power in provincial governorates, national ministries, and Parliament (Servetto, 2010).

This came to a rapid end, however, when Montoneros militants were removed from these institutions as a result of growing tensions with other Peronists and with Perón himself following his return to the country in mid-1973. As the months went by, the conflict within Peronism became increasingly violent and dominated the national headlines. Both legal and illegal repression occurred during the Peronist governments of that time (Franco, 2012), and in 1974, Montoneros went underground, reorganized its military structure, and stepped up its armed operations, all of which contributed to its social and political isolation. Many of its militants were kidnapped, tortured, murdered, and/or illegally imprisoned, first by various state and parastate groups during the Peronist governments and then by the Armed Forces, now in command of the state.¹ During the last Argentine dictatorship (1976–1983), the state spread violence and terror, committing human rights violations throughout Argentine society (Duhalde, 2013). Toward the end of 1976, the Montoneros militants who were still alive decided to go into exile. Thereafter, they undertook various political and military activities and restructured the organization. However, by 1980, the organization was practically disbanded.

I would like to dwell on this final stage. Despite issuing numerous statements on the decisions taken during this phase, Montoneros never publicly announced its abandonment of armed violence, which was decided at the beginning of the 1980s after the failure of the political-military operation known as the Strategic Counteroffensive. The leadership of the organization—the National Leadership—ceased to refer to themselves as a “Party” of cadres and went by “Movimiento Peronista Montonero” (MPM), the name of the structure that had been created in 1977 for the development of legal politics. This happened without any formal explanation after a decade of advocating violence as a way of bringing about political change. Thus, unlike the lengthy justifications that had been produced for every operation, strategy, or change of structure in preceding years—even when underground—Montoneros, now in exile, concluded its commitment to armed violence without a word.

It could be argued that this silence is reflected in academic studies on the organization. While there are many works on the organization’s origins (Lanusse, 2005), its links with Catholicism (Campos, 2016; Donatello, 2010), its discourses and imaginaries (Sigal and Verón, 2004; Vezzetti, 2009), its relationship with the Peronist government (Servetto, 2010; Svampa, 2003), and its legal activities (Grammático, 2011), there are few that address its final stage (Confino, 2018; Cortina Orero, 2017).² Except for this handful of studies, Montoneros’ final years are not subjected to a detailed analysis, if they are even mentioned at all. The assumption is that nothing will be gained by shedding more light on the matter.

To reverse this trend and submit the final years of Montoneros to close analysis, in this article I examine the organization’s debates, declarations, and silences surrounding the issue of violence. How did one of the most important insurgent groups in Argentina break up? Why did it cease to resort to violence as a mode of public intervention? Were there any agreements in this regard? Did it criticize the previous use of violence? To answer these questions, I will analyze the official documents and bulletins written while the group was in exile, as well as the statements and publications of dissident groups (the Peronismo Montonero Auténtico of 1979 and the Montoneros 17 de Octubre of 1980) and other critical groups (the Agrupación Eva Perón of 1980). From a political theory

perspective, I will focus on the specificity of this space of belonging, its symbols, its representations, and its actions. In this study, I intend to (a) shed light on the final stage of Montoneros, which, with few exceptions, has not been subjected to historiographical or sociological analysis, or studied by political science and (b) contribute to a deeper understanding of the dissolution processes undergone by armed insurgent groups in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s.

Montoneros in exile

At the end of 1976, the National Council of Montoneros in its entirety decided to leave the country, joining the individuals who had been going into exile since 1974 as a result of the legal and illegal repression. The main cities in which Montoneros militants settled were Mexico City, Havana, Madrid, Barcelona, Rome, Paris, and Geneva, with the leadership moving to Mexico City and Havana (Franco, 2008; Gillespie, 1982; Jensen, 2010; Yankelevich, 2010). Exile meant restructuring the organization while maintaining both propaganda and political support for military action. In this way, the Montoneros leadership sought to denounce the human rights violations being committed by the dictatorship, and, simultaneously, to organize the return of its militants to confront the regime.

In April 1977, the MPM was created in Rome. Its aim was to build on and ultimately surpass the work of the Peronist Movement led by Perón himself. It demanded the restoration of constitutional rights, political parties, and democratic elections, the cessation of repression, and the release of political prisoners. It also proposed the construction of an opposition alliance. Finally, it expressed a desire for peace, but maintained that first it was necessary to strengthen the resistance to defeat the military dictatorship.³ The MPM was thus a continuation of the Partido Montonero (Montonero Party) founded in 1976 (which had emulated the Leninist system of party cadres) and the Ejército Montonero (Montonero Army) formed in 1975. This structure, which included the highest-ranking leaders and was headed by Mario Firmenich, replaced the “political-military organization” that had been deployed in Argentina.⁴

From exile, Montoneros denounced the dictatorship’s human rights violations and established support networks. It became involved in various human rights organizations, such as the Comisión Argentina de Derechos Humanos (CADHU) (Argentine Human Rights Commission) and the Comité de Solidaridad con el Pueblo Argentino (COSPA) (Committee of Solidarity with the Argentine People). Largely through the MPM’s foreign relations secretariat, the organization interacted with European social democrats, the Socialist International, the Catholic Church, and liberation movements in Africa and the Middle East (Gillespie, 1982; Robledo, 2018; Yankelevich, 2010). On a bilateral level, it also collaborated with the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) (Cortina Orero, 2017). With regard to propaganda, it maintained an active press policy (with *Evita Montonera*, *Estrella Federal*, and *Vencer*), set up a radio station in Costa Rica, created Radio Liberación (whose purpose was to broadcast recorded messages in Argentina), and produced documentary films (Cristiá, 2018; Gillespie, 1982). Military activity, however, was restricted to the Argentine territory—for example, operations against military and government facilities during the 1978 World Cup (in addition to radio and television propaganda). Unlike other actors that promoted a boycott of the World Cup (Franco,

2008; Jensen, 2007), Montoneros used the tournament to draw international attention to the crimes of the Argentine regime. As they had announced at the beginning of 1976, all this was conceived as part of the “active defense” that would prepare the ground for the “counteroffensive” that was part of its “Strategic Defense,” all of which formed part of its general political-military strategy.⁵ As had been the case since the beginning of the armed struggle, and against the backdrop of global changes in the leftist world, Montoneros linked politics to military action, conceiving politics in military terms and weapons as a resource for intervention in the public arena.

But it was the Strategic Counteroffensive that had the most significant repercussions for Montoneros’ time in exile and its trajectory as a whole. The campaign was formally approved in mid-1978, with the party arguing that the previous stage of “resistance” against the dictatorship had ended favorably (since Montoneros had not been wiped out by state repression), and that it was now a matter of encouraging the return to the country of militants keen to confront the state. This change was based on the—erroneous—belief that the de facto government was disintegrating due to increasing union disruption and differences within the Armed Forces.⁶ The plan was to launch propaganda campaigns, establish political contacts, and carry out armed attacks against members of the regime’s economic department and the business sector. As Hernán Confino (2018) explains in detail, almost 200 militants were recruited, mainly in Madrid and Mexico City, then trained in Mexico, Spain, Syria, and Lebanon, and finally smuggled into Argentina. There were two phases, the first in 1979 and the second in 1980. By returning to Argentina, the militants were not only implementing the political-military plans of the party leadership; they were also fulfilling their wish to return to the country and confirming their commitment to the revolutionary struggle and to their fallen comrades. To enter the country, they were split into political and military groups. However, most of their operations met with failure. More than 80 lost their lives at the hands of state terrorism, which had accurate intelligence on Montoneros’ plans. And in terms of its objectives, the Strategic Counteroffensive failed in all respects, neither overthrowing the dictatorship, nor forging alliances with political forces in the country, nor leading a citizens’ uprising against the de facto regime.

Dissident debates and Montoneros’ persistence

Although tensions had already arisen in exile, it was the Counteroffensive that resulted in the breaking away of two groups. The first was the Peronismo Montonero Auténtico group, which splintered off at the beginning of 1979, before the first phase of the Counteroffensive had been implemented. Its splitting off was prompted by a group of militants who had clashed with the National Leadership at the beginning of the dictatorship but had remained within the organization (Caballero and Larraquy, 2000; Sadi, 2009). They were joined by exiles who were not convinced by the leadership’s insistence on the success of the operations. Many had agreed to participate in the “Tactical Command” that would initiate the Counteroffensive, but instead of following through, they accused the National Leadership of isolating itself and forgetting the workers, that is to say, according to them, of being “*foquista*,” “vanguardist,” and “militarist.”⁷ This group included Rodolfo Galimberti, Juan Gelman, Pablo and Miguel Fernández Long,

Patricia and Julieta Bullrich, Marcelo Langieri, Arnaldo Lizaso, Héctor Mauriño, Raúl Magario, Victoria Vaccaro, Claudia Genoud, and Silvia Di Fiorio. Between February and June 1979, they published and circulated among Montoneros members in exile statements and documents that were critical of the leadership. They condemned the lack of collective debate and the leaders' authoritarianism and sectarianism. They did not reject the use of violence, however, or the idea of war: for them, the problem lay in using violence in a *foquista* fashion and not involving the "masses." They agreed with the National Leadership that opposition to the dictatorship required violence, but warned that it could only be legitimate if the working classes were involved.⁸ The National Leadership rebutted these criticisms, ratified the Counteroffensive, and ordered that the dissidents should be shot, basing their decision on the Código de Justicia Penal Revolucionario (Code of Revolutionary Criminal Justice) approved in 1975. The death sentences were not carried out, but the move naturally caused the departure of the dissidents.⁹

Several of the arguments of the Peronismo Montonero Auténtico group were later adopted by the second dissident group, the Montoneros 17 de Octubre, which broke away at the beginning of 1980. This group was formed by the militants who had been responsible for the so-called "Madrid Document" in 1979, which, unlike any other criticisms in the history of Montoneros, had been included in an official bulletin.¹⁰ They were joined by other dissenting militants. A few had returned to Argentina in the first phase of the Counteroffensive (Confino, 2018) and others had recently collaborated with the Sandinistas (Cortina Orero, 2017). The group's members included Miguel Bonasso, Daniel Vaca Narvaja, Ernesto Jauretche, Susana Sanz, Jaime Dri, Pablo Ramos, Julio Rodríguez Anido, Pedro Orgambide, Sylvia Bermann, Eduardo Astiz, René Chávez, Gerardo Bavio, and Olimpia Díaz. The new group questioned the leadership's assessment of the first phase of the Counteroffensive and its willingness to move on to the second. Like the previous group, it questioned the leadership's conviction of success and the lack of collective decision-making. It also accused the leadership of being "militaristic" and called attention to the loss of party "cadres" during the implementation of the operation. It also argued that one of the attacks carried out in Argentina (targeting the family home of the proposed victim) undermined the effectiveness of the campaign for the defense of human rights abroad. It proposed replacing the category of "war" with that of "popular rebellion." And it called for the need to reunify Peronism and build a "democratic" front to confront the dictatorship. This did not imply renouncing violence, however. The group maintained that it was necessary to deploy and step up the armed struggle with the support of the "masses" and to build a revolutionary party that would lead the "armed insurrection of the masses" and establish alliances with other political actors. At the end of its manifesto, it extolled the recent success of the uprisings in Nicaragua and El Salvador.¹¹ The problem for this group, therefore, was not violence as a form of intervention, but the failure to involve the working classes. Even the "Madrid Document" agreed with the general lines of the Counteroffensive and recognized its "positive effects."¹² Unlike the previous rupture that had led to the threat of death sentences, the Montoneros 17 de Octubre broke away without open confrontation, following a meeting in the city of Managua in Nicaragua (Bonasso, 2000). However, this did not prevent the National Leadership from accusing them of being "reformists" and of protecting the

interests of the middle classes. Sticking to its guns, the leadership had no hesitation in launching the second phase of the Counteroffensive in 1980.¹³

Finally, it is worthwhile including the Agrupación Eva Perón in this study, although it was not a dissident group that separated en bloc from Montoneros, as some of its members had participated in the organization (with the rest coming from other Peronist groups). It was formed in Madrid and Alicante at the beginning of 1980, and its members included Lili Massafarro, Nilda Orazi, Juan Carlos Scarpati, Oscar Strada Bello, Arturo Ferré Gadea, Alicia Milla, Gustavo Fariás, and Carlos Aznárez.¹⁴ For more than 2 years, they published *Cuadernos de Peronismo y Revolución*. In the inaugural issue, they published a document that was presented as a “criticism and self-criticism” of the 10 years of Montoneros activism. They condemned the “sectarianism” and undue optimism of the National Leadership, its authoritarianism, the lack of representation of the working classes (though not the organization’s vanguardism), and its erroneous diagnosis of the military government. Besides condemning the protracted people’s war and the armed struggle as the main means of achieving their aims, they stressed their own responsibility for events and the causes of the defeat (a term that none of the dissidents in exile had adopted but which Rodolfo Walsh had proposed in documents written in 1976 and 1977, though without ruling out the possibility of declaring war again).¹⁵ Nevertheless, in line with the criticisms made by previous dissidents, the document argued that revolutionary violence and military struggle were legitimate in certain circumstances and were part of the political struggle. If anything, the problem had been using violence during the constitutional period from 1973 to 1976.¹⁶

The Montoneros leadership took little heed of these criticisms. It was inclined to discredit differences of opinions and disagreements, both before and after the splits. It oscillated between quashing the debate altogether and reproducing previous explanations and representations. For example, it asserted that the debates were due to the crisis in the popular movement and to the dictatorship, rejecting any suggestion of being responsible for the actions and decisions taken by the dissidents. Despite denouncing the dictatorship’s human rights violations, it warned that concern for the loss of individual lives was meaningless to a revolutionary organization. It is true that, inspired by the triumphs of insurgents in El Salvador and Iran in 1979, it changed its strategy from “protracted people’s war” to “armed popular insurrection”¹⁷ before launching the second phase of the Counteroffensive. This modification implied nuancing the military dimension of the revolutionary project and linking violence to specific situations, combining it with the mobilization of the masses (Carnovale, 2011; Copello, 2020). But it did not imply the renunciation of violence as such. This is not surprising if we take into account the place that violence occupied in the group’s militant subjectivity. Violence had always been central in a variety of ways: it was present in local and international revolutionary imaginaries (Vezzetti, 2009); in recent Argentine history (Hilb and Lutzky, 1984); in the assassination of Aramburu, that originally gave rise to the group (Sarolo, 2003); and, more generally, in the military strategy pursued throughout the entire history of the organization (Slipak, 2015). Violence had not only been an instrument for projected ends; it had also been an integral part of the organization’s identity, its symbols, its representations, and its actions. In line with the ideas of Frantz Fanon (1963), which were widely circulated at the time, it could be said that violence, in addition to being a resource, was

perceived as a practice that instituted subjects and projects. As Alain Badiou (2007) asserts in his work on the 20th century, violence was not simply seen as objective; it was embraced as subjective and legitimized as a means to create the new man. Therefore, the insistence on its necessity (which is found in all Montoneros documents as well as those of dissident groups) is not unexpected. The Montoneros leadership did not only insist on violent struggle, however. More generally, and despite the criticisms, it maintained all the core ideas that had been part of its discourse from the beginning: its model of the self-sacrificial, heroic, resolute militant; its claim to embody the interests of workers; and, as I have been arguing, its appreciation of the inevitability of violence as a way of transforming community life. It was uncompromising in all these respects.

It should be noted that this contrasted with the shifts that were taking place at that time in some of the cities where Montoneros members had settled, rubbing shoulders with Argentine intellectuals, artists, and politicians who had also been forced into exile. For many, the experience of exile entailed a gradual dampening of revolutionary convictions and a move toward faith in liberal democracy, centered around respect for human rights and individual life, acceptance that the revolution had been defeated, and belief in democracy as a political regime (Franco, 2008; Jensen, 2007; Yankelevich, 2010). In 1979 and 1980, for example, the Mexican magazine *Controversia para el examen de la realidad argentina* published a series of criticisms of revolutionary militancy, censuring vanguardism, foquismo, bureaucratization, authoritarianism, contempt for democracy, and the failure to understand the working classes (Gago, 2012; Gauna, 2020). It was also taken for granted that the revolution had been defeated. Although some of these ideas were in line with those of the dissidents, several articles in the magazine went further, distancing themselves from the insurgent organization and setting out the conditions for a radical change of imaginary. For example, as Hugo Vezzetti (2009) recalls, Héctor Schmucler dared to ask, “Are human rights valid for some and not for others? Are there ways of measuring human life that grant value to one life and not to another?” These questions chipped away at the core of the group’s militant subjectivity by proclaiming the universal character of human rights and severing the link between violence and revolutionary politics. In other words, they questioned the assumption that violence was legitimate for certain reasons and in certain circumstances.¹⁸

However, as I have shown, far from joining in these discussions, the leadership held its ground. It rejected the idea of defeat that had begun to circulate in some exile networks and maintained its commitment to the revolutionary struggle. Moreover, it used the epithet “defeatist” to dismiss any doubts or differences. It should also be noted that the dissidents were not so radical. Their criticism of the revolutionary project was half-hearted, even after the political failure and loss of lives caused by the Counteroffensive. None of the splinter groups renounced violence as a form of political intervention and a way of confronting the de facto regime. Some supported the military approach and others the idea of an armed insurrection—an idea that, as mentioned above, had already been declared by the National Leadership. I would also like to point out that many of their doubts were in line with the ideas of dissident groups that had emerged in Argentina (and which also criticized the National Leadership’s vanguardism, foquismo, militarism, and/or the absence of political alliances) (Slipak, 2021). This puts into perspective the disruptive nature of the Counteroffensive as a time to rethink and replace earlier symbols, at

least during 1979 and 1980. While the later dissident groups rebutted many official Montoneros statements, their criticisms were timid in relation to other debates among those in exile and did not shift the original direction of the group.

As I have suggested above, I consider that all this can be interpreted by focusing on the characteristics of Montoneros since its inception. Its aim was to encourage dedicated, whole-hearted, committed militants who would be heroic, disciplined, and ready to sacrifice themselves. As in many of the armed rebel groups of the time, but with its own Peronist features, dissent and disobedience to orders were repressed and punished (Tarcus, 1998–1999; Carnovale, 2011). This resulted in the creation of a particular space of belonging and bonding among militants, which resulted in uniformity and made it difficult to voice or process any disagreements and differences that might arise (Slipak, 2015). Even when in exile, discussion was shut down and the same course was maintained. But exile also showed up how the leadership's doggedness contrasted with the move to other political discourses in other networks and with the failures of Montoneros' political ambitions in an Argentina that bore little resemblance to the one they were describing. In these latter years, the group's refusal to accept change led to a kind of break from the reality on the ground.

To understand this, it is worth referring to two of Hannah Arendt's observations. First, Arendt's studies of war and the groups of the New Left in the 20th century demonstrate how a sense of belonging tends to blur differences between individuals. She warns how the fear of violent death can promote closeness and cohesion and generate a loss of individuality within the group. Rather than spheres in which one is able to show one's individuality, they tend to be intense communities with no place for distinction or plurality among individuals (Arendt, 1970, 2018). Second, in her analysis of totalitarian regimes, Arendt (1951) concentrates on a mechanism that, although it was crystallized in these regimes, had existed throughout the modern age. This was the concept of ideology, understood as the logic of the idea. She uses ideology to describe the point at which thought separates itself from reality, maintains its course, and refuses to adapt to what is happening in the world around it. It seeks to explain and deduce everything (past, present, and future) from an axiomatic premise and turns in on itself. In short, the idea detaches or frees itself from experience.¹⁹

I believe that these observations shed some light on the final phase of Montoneros (although this does not imply in any way drawing an equivalence between all these events). It is certainly true that the leadership rebutted the criticisms that, despite much difficulty and ambiguity, were emerging. There was also clearly a dynamic in which differences among the militants were denied. And yet, in spite of the evident failure of the Strategic Counteroffensive and shifts in thinking among groups in exile, Montoneros remained intransigent in its purposes, representations, and logics. In a triumphalist tone, it took for granted that the revolution would ultimately succeed, when in truth the group was practically disbanded and had suffered the murder, detention, or disappearance of most of its militants. By rigidly upholding its symbolic pillars, it seemed to become detached from its surroundings.²⁰

Thus, going beyond the personality of the leaders, which tends to be the focus of other studies (Anguita and Caparrós, 2005; Celesia and Waisberg, 2010), Arendt's political theory analysis of the way in which spaces of belonging are configured and sustained

provides a useful way of understanding the hesitant criticism, the National Leadership's refusal to change course, the persistence of its identity matrix despite its failures and the winds of change blowing in from exile, and its rigidity and resistance to take on board what was happening around it. Arendt's analysis also enables one to understand the group's reluctance to renounce violence, which had always been one of the core elements of the group's militant subjectivity. And it may just explain the group's silence when the military strategy was finally abandoned.

Violence and politics after the counteroffensive

As Hernán Confino (2018) has shown, rather than any kind of ideological transformation, it was only after the kidnapping in February 1980 of the entire first military group that had returned to Argentina in the second phase of the Counteroffensive that the National Leadership dismantled the armed group that was due to follow. This coincided with the capture of militants in Brazil as a result of the international cooperation of other governments in the region (under Operation Condor; McSherry, 2005). After these events, the military campaign was abandoned and the Counteroffensive was limited to propaganda, political contacts, and a general strategy of sending militants back to Argentina during the course of the year (many of whom would also be imprisoned). However, the party did not publicly declare a cessation of the armed struggle, neither as part of the Counteroffensive nor in general, after 10 years of seeing it as a mode of political intervention.²¹ There was no public explanation from an organization that—even when underground—publicized all its actions and decisions.

From then on, the Montoneros leaders adopted the name MPM in the hope of returning to the political arena in the final years of the dictatorship. They circulated various documents and statements from exile in which they continued to refer to violence and made no mention of the reasons for the abandonment of the armed strategy. For example, in an April 1980 document, the MPM expressed the need for free elections, the reestablishment of political rights, and peace in Argentina. However, the document ended with a warning that “as long as the people are oppressed and the homeland is not theirs, the struggle is an obligation, a right, and a necessity.” On the subject of former armed campaigns, it affirmed that they had been the “legitimate violent resistance of the people.”²² In other words, the document was not at all unlike those written since the beginning of the exile period, demanding both free elections and the continuation of armed interventions. Furthermore, a November 1981 letter to political prisoners written by Roberto Perdía (number two in the hierarchy after Mario Firmenich) asserted that the Counteroffensive had brought about a “general advance in the struggle of the masses” and that it had been “one of the most successful decisions” in the group's history. It thus denied the resounding failure of most of its specific objectives and its general political intentions (which included leading and/or constructing an opposition alliance to defeat the dictatorship). It also made no mention of the many lives lost (excessive even for an organization that believed in self-sacrifice). Finally, it added that to fight the regime it was necessary to create an alliance between Peronism, radicalism, and small and medium-sized entrepreneurs and that:

As for our current project, we think that a policy of accumulation of politico-military forces requires the mobilization of the people [. . .] The enemy, in its attempt to model a new country and avoid the persistent haunting presence of the popular movement, has generated through its predatory actions an explosive situation which, well exploited, will enable us to lay the foundations for a revolutionary transformation. [. . .] Our insurrectionary strategy allows us to take advantage not only of the historical experience of mobilization, organization, and struggle of the Peronist movement, but also to advance all forms of opposition to the Dictatorship. All reformist approaches have failed, and so to go beyond them we will have to develop this conception of popular rebellion. This conception differs from our previous "Protracted People's War" in that the main objective is not to develop military power as such (with platoons, sections, groups, etc.), but to escalate the necessary social struggle. [. . .] This type of mobilization is more complex, and it will be the enemy's own negative and repressive action which will pave the way for higher forms of action. [. . .] [The Party] is the vanguard of a movement of the masses and not something foreign to them, so we believe that as part of this struggle the revolutionary leadership (typically known as the "Party") will have to incorporate the most consistent members of the Popular Resistance. [. . .] The aim of this leadership will be to conduct the struggle of the whole popular movement, integrating the necessary effectiveness in leading protest action, the accumulation of political power, and the preparation and execution of the military elements that will make it possible to confront the challenging conditions of the insurrectionary struggle.²³

Once again, the promotion of political alliances is connected to the belief in violence and in a military approach. It is true that the letter explained the replacement of the "protracted people's war" with an "insurrectionary strategy" and "popular rebellion." However, as I pointed out, this change had occurred in 1979, following the success of the Nicaraguan model, but it had not affected the course of the Counteroffensive at that time. For the rest, more than a year after having abandoned de facto the strategy of armed struggle, the document repeated typical tropes associated with the group's insurgent subjectivity: the "revolutionary leadership," "the vanguard," "higher forms of action," "the military elements," and the "accumulation of politico-military forces." Thus, this was a continuation of the original beliefs of the Montoneros organization, which, despite the failure of the last political-military operation and the dissident criticisms, had been maintained by the National Leadership in a rigid and inflexible manner. In this context, it was highly unlikely that there would be discussion and analysis of the cessation of the armed strategy. The end of violence had not been a response to the group's symbolic collapse, but rather to a real failure that could not be fully voiced as it would erode one of the core elements of the group's revolutionary subjectivity. Montoneros continued to cling on to its key tenets, casting a veil of silence over the almost complete dismantling of its networks, as well as its isolation from Argentine society and from an increasing number of networks in exile.

This persistence was also notable in the Falklands War of April 1982. As it is well known, there was initially widespread enthusiasm for the war, both in Argentina and among those in exile. Although the war eventually brought about the collapse of the dictatorship, the initial occupation of the islands managed to momentarily bring together a wide range of social, political, and trade union sectors, which demonstrated fervent nationalist enthusiasm and a desire to go to war. Among other gestures of support, the unions mobilized in the Plaza de Mayo, claiming sovereignty over the islands and

condemning the foreigners (Aboy Carlés, 2001; Canelo, 2016; Franco, 2008, 2018). However, Montoneros propaganda went even further. They not only celebrated the decision to invade; they called for an amnesty so that “both exiles and political and trade union prisoners could take up their position in the struggle within the national territory.” They added that “working-class militants and combatants have provided ample proof of their capacity to fight effectively to the last drop of blood.” Once the war was over, Montoneros criticized the surrender to Britain. They believed that it was an “act of betrayal” to the “nation” and warned that “the dictatorship had not been determined enough to defeat the British aggression in a forceful and definitive way” and that “defending sovereignty does not require technological superiority, but patriotism.”²⁴ They contrasted the performance of the military government with the determination, fighting spirit, and sacrifice (even of their lives) of Montoneros militants. They thus sought to participate in the war actively and saw it as a continuation of its military, heroic, self-sacrificial, and triumphalist identity—in other words, a continuation of its way of conceiving the relationship between politics and violence.²⁵

In the final months of the dictatorship—whose end owed nothing to the insurgent strategies and much to a process of political, social, and economic attrition, exacerbated by the shocking defeat in the war (Franco, 2018)—the Montoneros leaders sought, unsuccessfully, to play a leading role in the elections. As early as March 1982, before the Falklands War, they presented the “Bases para la Alianza Constituyente de una Nueva Argentina” (Foundations for the Constituent Alliance of a New Argentina) in Madrid and Mexico City, a proposal that called on various “anti-oligarchic” sectors to form a “national solution within a pluralist and democratic system.”²⁶ Later, in July 1983, they returned to the project in a document entitled “La responsabilidad de todos” (The responsibility of all), addressed to the “national and popular forces.” The document stressed their “desire for peace and democracy” and asserted that their use of arms had been a response to a constitutional obligation to arm themselves in self-defense against state terrorism (needless to say, they omitted to mention their maintenance of the military strategy during the democratic governments elected between 1973 and 1976). They explained that their previous errors had not been a response to sectoral interests but to “national” and “democratic” interests. However, they made sure to sign off the document with the words “patria o muerte” (fatherland or death), as they had always done.²⁷

In short, Montoneros’ identity had hardly shifted at all between the end of the armed struggle and the end of the military dictatorship. The group clung to the symbols of the previous decade: the idea of the self-sacrificial, heroic militant; the necessary link between the political and the military; and the belief that violence was a legitimate means of intervention. Even with the group practically dismantled, its leaders repeated their old convictions, unlike other actors in exile who shifted or broke with previous positions, as illustrated in the previous section. In short, they blocked out what was going on around them. Only once the 1983 elections had been called did Montoneros’ symbols undergo a slight modification, placing greater emphasis on political alliances, the formation of fronts, and electoral democracy. Along with other Peronist exiles, they ended up as part of the *Intransigencia y Movilización Peronista* current, led by Vicente Saadi, a Peronist politician with little influence in the Justicialist Party at the national level with regard to the elections.²⁸ Thus, discredited inside and outside of Peronism, and isolated from

society, Montoneros occupied a marginal place in the Argentine transition, which demanded breaks with the recent past and set about organizing society in new ways.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored the debates, declarations, and silences surrounding the issue of violence during the final years of one of the most important armed insurgent groups in Argentina in the 1970s, Montoneros. To do so, I have studied official documents and statements, as well as the interventions of dissident groups.²⁹ Contrary to much of the literature on the subject, I have sought to give analytical weight to this period, attempting to identify the characteristics of the process of abandonment of revolutionary violence.

The study has shown that, despite the debates, the Montoneros organization had difficulty changing its symbols and representations. The National Leadership in particular rejected the emerging differences and remained rigid and inflexible in its overall approach. It ignored the opinions of others in exile, whose attitudes underwent a gradual shift away from revolutionary logic and toward more liberal-democratic positions and a questioning of the automatic link between politics and violence. It also ignored the successive failures of its political-military project, which included the murder and detention/disappearance of a large proportion of its militants at the hands of the dictatorship. For their part, the dissidents, despite their harsh criticisms and confrontations with the leadership, tended to continue to believe in violence as a mode of political intervention, even if they didn't share the belief in the military strategy or the idea of war. At the beginning of 1979, the Peronismo Montonero Auténtico splinter group argued that legitimate resistant violence and the military strategy should involve the masses. And, in 1980, the Montoneros 17 de Octubre insisted on the abandonment of war and stated that political alliances were urgently needed, but warned that popular rebellion should not exclude violence if it involved the masses. Unlike the previous groups, the Agrupación Eva Perón accepted the defeat of the revolution but asserted that armed struggle and violence were necessary in certain circumstances.

I believe that there were thus three connected issues that affected the Montoneros organization, which may also be worth taking into account when considering the wide range of armed groups of the Latin American New Left. First, until its very last moments, the insurgent identity of the group was underpinned by a tendency to demarcate and reproduce a rigid space of belonging that resisted change and clung on to its constitutive representations and symbols. It was highly inflexible and blocked out any changes and disruptions coming from the world around it. The examination of the organization's final phase helps to illuminate and problematize this irreversible rigidity, which was maintained even as political discourses were shifting. Montoneros' ideology seemed to have become detached both from the gradual loss of legitimacy of the armed struggle and from its political failures (accompanied by the murder and detention or disappearance of most of its militants). Second, the analysis has shown that Montoneros' identity was reluctant to admit, accept, or incorporate the differences and disagreements within it (which ended up resulting in splinter groups) and was oriented toward uniformity. Finally, the usual instrumental understanding of violence (Gillespie, 1982; Lanusse,

2005) sheds little light on the complexity of its link with politics. As we have seen, violence was far from being merely a means or a resource of intervention that could be detached from the group's projected ends (and able to be discarded when the context required it); it was profoundly connected to the group's identity and political ambitions. As I have tried to explain, violence was intimately tied to the group's self-conception and gave meaning to its life as a community. Renouncing violence, therefore, could not simply be a mechanical gesture; it called into question the very foundations of the group's revolutionary subjectivity. This is likely why it was so difficult to voice.

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Notes

1. According to Richard Gillespie (1982), at the beginning of 1977, the dictatorship had assassinated and disappeared 2000 militants. However, given the clandestine and illegal nature of the repression, it is impossible to determine precisely their number.
2. The list is not exhaustive; it is only intended to give readers some guidance on the large number of academic studies on Montoneros, with the exception of its final phase. I have not included journalistic works or testimonies.
3. "Documento de Roma," *Movimiento Peronista Montonero (MPM)*, April 1977.
4. On these structural changes, see: *Evita Montonera*, no. 8, October 1975: 25–26; no. 12, February–March 1976: 26–27; no. 14, October 1976: 13–22; and *El Montonero*, no. 11, 24 April 1976: 9–11.
5. *Evita Montonera*, no. 12, February–March 1976: 6.
6. *Boletín Interno*, no. 8, Partido Montonero, October 1978, and no. 9, May 1979.
7. At that time, in the discussions that took place within the New Left, it was very common to criticize another group as "foquista" or "vanguardist," accusing it of isolating itself and forgetting to work with the popular sectors. The term *foquista* comes from Guevarism and the term *vanguardist* from Leninism, but both were often used to criticize a strategy that does not take the masses into account.
8. "Reflexiones para la construcción de una alternativa peronista montonera auténtica," *Peronismo Montonero Auténtico*, June 1979.
9. See the Código de Justicia Penal Revolucionario, 1975, and "Sobre la desertión de cinco militantes del Partido y cuatro milicianos en el exterior," Partido Montonero, 1979. In October 1979, the dissident group published the critical documents that Rodolfo Walsh had written in 1976

- and 1977, and that had been ignored by the leadership: “Los Papeles de Walsh,” *Cuadernos del Peronismo Montonero Auténtico*, Peronismo Montonero Auténtico, October 1979.
10. “Documento de Madrid. Ante la crisis del Partido. Reflexiones críticas y una propuesta de superación,” *Boletín Interno*, no. 13, Partido Montonero, February 1980.
 11. For all these arguments, see “Documento de Madrid,” *Boletín Interno*, no. 13, February 1980, and untitled, Montoneros 17 de Octubre, April 1980.
 12. “Documento de Madrid,” *Boletín Interno*, no. 13, February 1980: 4.
 13. *Boletín Interno*, no. 13, Partido Montonero, February 1980: 13.
 14. See the profile of Juan Carlos Scarpati at <http://www.robertobaschetti.com/biografia/s/92.html>. See also Strada Bello (2010). I would like to thank Eudald Cortina Orero for providing me with this information.
 15. “Los Papeles de Walsh,” *Cuadernos del Peronismo Montonero Auténtico*, Peronismo Montonero Auténtico, October 1979. The Walsh papers are dated 27 August 1976, 23 November 1976, 2 January 1977, and 5 January 1977.
 16. “Reflexiones críticas y autocríticas acerca de la experiencia revolucionaria en Argentina: Los Montoneros (1970–1979),” *Cuadernos de Peronismo y Revolución*, no. 1, May 1980.
 17. For all this, see *Boletín Interno*, no. 13, Partido Montonero, February 1980. Of course, the position of the Montoneros leadership in its official bulletins (and its strategic rather than ideological use of human rights) does not disregard the shifts in thinking that individual militants may have had, especially those who made the denunciations (for the case of Mexico, see Confino, 2018).
 18. *Controversia*, no. 1, October 1979: 3. Schmucler sought to question the partial defense of human rights by Montoneros in exile, which was applied to the victims of state terrorism but not to those affected by insurgent violence, which, admittedly, was not on the same scale as the horror of the dictatorship. Discussions continued many years later about Oscar del Barco’s letter following the murders committed by the Ejército Guerrillero del Pueblo (EGP) (People’s Guerrilla Army). See the compilations by Belzagui (2008) and García (2010).
 19. For a more in-depth study on the application of Arendt’s analysis to the organization, see Slipak (2015, 2019).
 20. This does not exclude the feelings of guilt, debt, or affection that were behind many individual decisions and actions (which sometimes weighed as much or more than belief in the final triumph of the revolutionary project). In this regard, see the previously cited analysis by Confino (2018) on the motives of the militants who returned to Argentina during the Counteroffensive. But I believe that these personal experiences were also part of the identity matrix (in particular, the heroic, self-sacrificial ethic, and the total and all-encompassing sense of belonging) that the remaining members of the organization doggedly sought to maintain, without taking account of what was happening around them.
 21. According to Marcelo Larraquy (2006: 208), there was a meeting in December 1980 that approved the end of the armed struggle, but, as Confino makes clear, there is no documentary record of it. According to the testimony of a militant who communicated with Confino, a letter along those lines was also sent to Pope John Paul II, but there is no documentation to support it (Confino, 2018: 309).
 22. “Al pueblo argentino: La justicia social y la soberanía popular son el camino hacia la democracia y la paz,” MPM, Secretaria General, 20 April 1980: 10, 13, 15.
 23. “Carta a los presos políticos,” Roberto Perdiá, 1 November 1981: 2–4.
 24. “Ante la amenaza inminente de invasión inglesa a las Islas Malvinas,” MPM, La Habana, 9 June 1982: 4; “Ante el agravamiento de la crisis anglo argentina,” MPM, 28 April 1982: 3; and “Gobierno de emergencia nacional o rebelión popular,” MPM, 24 June 1982: 1 and 2. Furthermore, as Confino (2018: 345) relates, two Montoneros leaders sought to enter

- Argentina to offer the military government support in the conflict, but the consul in Peru warned them that they would be arrested. Silvina Jensen (2007: 147) also describes the meeting with the president of Mexico in which support for the Falklands War was expressed. Undoubtedly, the Falklands War and its repercussions for Montoneros requires a more extensive and complex analysis. I leave this point for future research.
25. It is worth mentioning that Montoneros' position on the Falklands incorporated an image that had been central to the organization since the early 1970s, and which influenced both the legacy of historiographic revisionism (Quattrocchi-Woisson, 1995) and some of Perón's speeches from his time in exile. This was the image of the authentic Argentine nation that needed to be liberated from the permanent threat of foreign and imperialist interests (Slipak, 2015). A few months earlier, in January 1982, Firmenich had stated that "Argentina's national history is marked by an intermittent civil war, sometimes covert and sometimes blatantly obvious." "Al pueblo argentino," Mario Firmenich, 12 January 1982: 1.
 26. Press release, "El peronismo montonero presenta Bases para la Alianza Constituyente de una nueva Argentina," 22 March 1982.
 27. "La responsabilidad de todos," MPM, July 1983.
 28. In this context, they published the newspaper *La Voz* (Mancuso, 2015). The Justicialist Party was the political party of Peronism, which at that time was reorganizing to compete in the October 1983 elections, in which it lost to the Radical Civic Union.
 29. This investigation does not take into account the opinions of militants who were not part of the National Leadership or of the dissident groups. I leave this point for future research.

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