

Argentine dictatorship 40 years on

Forty years ago, on 24 March 1976, a military junta led by General Jorge Rafael Videla staged a putsch and formally took power in Argentina. The putsch was just the final step in the process: in the preceding years, Videla's henchmen had arranged for hundreds of opposition figures to be tortured and killed. And so began – under the banner of anticommunism and the fight against guerillas – one of the bloodiest military dictatorships of the last century, which saw an estimated 30,000 people murdered or disappeared before it ended in 1983. By the time the military putsch was carried out, there was no longer a credible armed guerilla movement – it had been wiped out over the years before. It was students, school-goers, lawyers and journalists who suffered under the dictatorship's massive repression. The highest death toll was among Argentina's worker and trade union movement, which stood in the way of the neoliberal restructuring policies pursued by the military junta and the business elites.

Western states and corporations played a devastating role during this and other South American dictatorships, as highlighted in recent discussions on the German-Chilean sect Colonia Dignidad. Jörg Kastl, the German ambassador in Buenos Aires at the time, sent dispatches back to the German Foreign Ministry on unfolding events. His assessments show the extent to which authoritarian ideologies were still rife in that ministry after the Second World War. The diplomat wrote that the military “intervention” offers “the only workable way out of the impasse” in Argentina, which he described as a “cornerstone in the expanded transatlantic security framework, a market and source of raw materials, home of many German settlers and German assets, and ever a true friend to our *Volk*.” The German newspaper FAZ and other media praised the military government because it was encouraging the influx of capital. The president of the German Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Otto Wolff von Amerongen, saw the junta's economics minister as worthy of admiration, praise and emulation.

A lot has changed in Argentina since the end of the dictatorship. However one might feel about the leftwing Peronist governments of recent decades under Nestor and Cristina Kirchner, Argentine society and its government have made unparalleled progress when it comes to dealing with human rights violations of the past. Not only have hundreds of former military, police and secret service officials been brought before the courts and convicted since 2005; a significant part of society has addressed the brutal history of the 1970s in literature, visual arts, cinema and theatre. Academics, artists and activists use testimonies from torture survivors, relatives of the “disappeared” and other witnesses to inform their work; court proceedings are documented and appraised. True, more could have been done, more resources could have been allocated, but overall the process has had tangible results.

It is not yet clear whether the new Argentine president Mauricio Macri will safeguard legal proceedings for cases of torture and enforced disappearance. Judges and prosecutors are clearly prepared to act. The process is threatened, though, by interferences from the rightwing ideologue sphere. It would be too obvious an attack on the rule of law and the rhetoric of human rights protection if Macri's government intervened directly. What's discouraging, however, are the many job cuts in the human rights sector, affecting the people who have

been key to societal efforts to address the dictatorship crimes. I'm interested to see the response to these developments from the human rights movement and progressive groups at the many events and demonstrations over the coming weeks in Buenos Aires and the provinces.