

//Enfoques//

**The Last Crusade:
Messianic ideology and Divine Violence in the Argentinean
Dictatorship (1976-1983)**

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Abstract

Catholic-Nationalism is one of the defining, and also exclusive, characteristics of the Military Junta that ruled Argentina between 1976 and 1983. Such patriotic messianic ideology strongly influenced the armed forces' *weltanschauung* and justified, according to them, their actions. But this messianic ideology has its origins at the beginning of the 20th century and the coming of the first military regime in 1930. In order to properly describe the catholic-nationalist aspect of the Junta's dictatorship it is imperative to explore its origins; evaluate the Junta's discourse and its ideology in power; examine the role of the Argentinean Catholic Church and finally to see how the crusade transformed into actual divine violence among the repressive methods chosen by the military.

Introduction

Religious fundamentalism is maybe one of the last qualities that would characterize the military dictatorship that governed Argentina between 1976 and 1983. Nevertheless, it is the catholic-nationalist ideology that gave the Junta its most distinctive feature. The armed forces were convinced that they had the holy mission to fight a crusade against the enemies of the catholic foundations of the nation. Argentina, for them, was founded with "the sword and the cross" and together both of them protected the national identity from alien ideas. In the case of the military Junta, the foreign ideology that threatened the country's traditions was communism. The latter was particularly dangerous because it was an atheist creed. God was an integral part of the history of Argentina; attacking him meant attacking the foundations of the country: the Church and the military.

To understand how the messianic trope played a pivotal role in the Junta's regime it is essential to: first, explore the historical origins of the catholic-nationalist ideology in Argentina and how they defined the nation and its internal enemies; second, to describe how the Junta incorporated that ideology into its politics and how it perceived that it was fighting a holy crusade against communism; third, to portray the legitimizing role of the Argentinean Catholic Church of the Junta and its repressive methods, particularly noting how the clerics identified themselves with the armed forces' holy mission and how they saw them as the natural protector of the national religion; and fourth, to depict how the repressive mechanisms chosen by the Junta to suppress foreign

ideologies and reorganize society around Christian values contained certain elements and symbols that would categorize them as forms of divine violence.

The Origins

The idea of Argentina being governed by a political regime based on “the sword and the cross” was not created on March the 24th 1976. Catholic and authoritarian Argentina was conceived in the late 1920s early 1930s; although it could also be traced into the 1890s (1). The catholic-nationalist movement that sprung between those years was the combination of two different political currents: the clerical and the nationalistic. The former was born from the catholic struggle against liberalism and laicism. The clericals were against several State policies, which they regarded as anti-Catholic, like the establishment of a public, mandatory and secular education and the creation of civil marriage among others. Juan Manuel Estrada was one of the intellectual architects behind clericalism and the figure that would lead a catholic insurrection against the liberal government of Juarez Celman in July 1890 (2). The clericals viewed liberalism and the secular State in Argentina as a negation of the natural- *ergo*, Christian -order and opposing to the historical messianic mission of the Republic that dated since colonial times. Interestingly, the catholic movement opposed the nationalist and fascist factions of the 1920s because both did not, yet, recognize Argentina’s Christian identity.

The nationalists, on the other hand, were a product of the backlash against immigration; particularly against non-white immigrants and Europeans of anarchist, socialist and communist ideologies. Massive immigration and its social repercussions was, according to the nationalists, threatening to radically change Argentina’s national identity. The latter was defined, by the nationalist intellectual Ricardo Rojas, by taking into account Argentina’s anti-European colonial legacy. Argentina was conceived as a Republic, but not as a democratic one. Democracy was an alien –European- element being introduced by immigrants, just like Judaism and Communism also were. The nationalists blamed the liberal governments for the open migratory policy that was undermining the traditions and identity of the country. If nationalists were anti-liberal, antidemocratic, anticommunist and anti-Semite they still did not recognize Catholicism as the pivotal ingredient of being Argentine. It took the work of an ex-anarchist and ex-socialist to make that fusion possible.

Leopoldo Lugones was Argentina’s main intellectual between the 1910s and the 1920s. He was also responsible of defining argentine nationalism in fascist, dictatorial, militarist, and finally, catholic terms. Lugones considered that the fatherland (*la patria*) had been created by the sword (*la espada*). The military were the true fathers of the nation. Therefore, he viewed the armed forces as a sacred cast superior to the people. The military was in charge of assuring the order of the Republic. Such order had been challenged by democracy and, consequently, socialism. Both

ideologies were not part of the national tradition and their supporters were regarded as foreign internal enemies. The armed forces, then, had the sacred duty to violently reinstall the traditional republican order. This violence -the effective use of the sword– was not only legitimate and necessary, but more importantly, it was sacred (3). This sacrosanct mission to defend the fatherland was thought to be a continuation from the Spanish imperial rule. Accordingly, the Argentine military had also the holy mission to defend the foundational Christian identity of the nation. Violence was more than sacred; it was holy.

The further development of Catholic-nationalism would have to wait until the end of the first military authoritarian regime. Uriburu's dictatorship inaugurated a long term period of modern military dictatorships, with more or less democratic regimes in-between, which would last until 1983. General Uriburu was a strong nationalist that sympathized with Lugones and that had participated in the Catholic insurrection of 1890 (4). He believed in Argentina's republican origins but he regarded democracy as an alien ideology that was undermining the foundations of the nation. Torture, political prisoners and executions were the rule during the two years dictatorship (1930-32). The *picana* was used for the first time in those years, but it did not have the same divine symbolism that would have in the last Argentinean military regime. Uriburu's despise for democracy prompted him to fundamentally restructure the State's institutions by trying to establish a pseudo-fascist corporative regime. This nationalist revolution did not succeed and Uriburu had to eventually let civic authorities take control of the government (5).

Uriburu's dictatorship embodied the prototype of a nationalist authoritarian regime with close ties to the catholic tradition (6). Nationalist clerics, like Gustavo Franceschi and Julio Meinvielle, were the main thinkers behind the maturity of the catholic-nationalist ideology, during the 1930s, by describing the pivotal role that the Argentinean Catholic Church should have in legitimizing the armed forces' divine mission to protect the religious-national foundations of the country. The nationalist clerics saw themselves as God's political representatives and it was their mission to sanctify the crusade against the liberal, and democratic, regime. From then on, Argentina, for the catholic-nationalists, was conceived to be founded in the cross (the Catholic Church) and the sword (the Armed Forces).

The nationalist movement of the 1930s in Argentina has to be regarded in a broad international context and cannot be detached from Europe's experience with fascism and other extreme nationalisms of the time (7). Argentine nationalists were deeply influenced by Italian fascism and would actually see themselves as fascists but with a religious twist. The political leader of the movement was not an earthly figure. It was Christ himself. Only he could have a truly totalitarian *weltanschauung*. The military and the clergy were his vicars in Argentina. The Nazis had their *volksgemeinschaft*; the Italian fascists their *civiltá*; and the Argentine nationalist their *cristiandad*. According to each case, those were their respective nation's pillars. In the two first cases, the content is

sacred, but pagan. In the last one, the content is holy and religious. Finally, the Spanish Civil War played a pivotal role in the Argentina nationalists' imaginarium. They witnessed how the most Catholic nation of all, the one that for centuries had defended the cross with the sword and that had even brought Christianity to Argentina's shores, was now battling an internal crusade against an atheist, and therefore foreign, ideology. The experience of the Spanish Republic and the subsequent Civil War would last in the Argentinean nationalist military's and clergy's memories.

Even if the catholic-nationalist movement was popular, from the late 30s on, among the armed forces, the clergy and some middle class and elite sectors, it would not have the expected influence in the following military regimes from 1943 until 1966 included. Everything changed with the coup of 1976.

(1) See Rock, David; *La Argentina autoritaria. Los nacionalistas, su historia y su influencia en la vida pública*; Ariel; Buenos Aires; 1993; pp. 45-71.

(2) See *Ibid*; pp. 52

(3) See Finchelstein, Federico; *La Argentina fascista. Los orígenes ideológicos de la dictadura*; Sudamericana; Buenos Aires; 2010; pp. 33; and Finchelstein, Federico; *Transatlantic Fascism. Ideology, Violence, and the Sacred in Argentina and Italy, 1919-1945*; Duke University Press; 2010; pp.62-78.

(4) See Rock, David; *La Argentina autoritaria. Los nacionalistas, su historia y su influencia en la vida pública*; Ariel; Buenos Aires; 1993; pp. 104.

(5) Uriburu was not able to change the State's structure; however he sponsored the creation of fascist paramilitary groups like la Legión Cívica.

See Finchelstein, Federico; *La Argentina fascista. Los orígenes ideológicos de la dictadura*; Sudamericana; Buenos Aires; 2010; pp. 41; Rock, David; *La Argentina autoritaria. Los nacionalistas, su historia y su influencia en la vida pública*; Ariel; Buenos Aires; 1993; pp. 109-115.

(6) Uriburu's farewell speech clearly shows the catholic-nationalist ideology to which his regime belonged to. See Rock, David; *La Argentina autoritaria. Los nacionalistas, su historia y su influencia en la vida pública*; Ariel; Buenos Aires; 1993; pp. 109.

(7) See Finchelstein, Federico; *Transatlantic Fascism. Ideology, Violence, and the Sacred in Argentina and Italy, 1919-1945*; Duke University Press; 2010.

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