

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

**PATRICIA MARCHAK in collaboration with WILLIAM MARCHAK, *God's Assassins: State Terrorism in Argentina in the 1970s*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press. 1999, xi + 393 p., Index, \$29.95 (Can.) paper.**

Despite its recent economic downturn, Argentina, like the infamous cases of Chile, El Salvador, or Guatemala, is now believed to have left behind its violent military past in favour of a fledgling democracy. The military violence and the conditions that made civil strife possible in the 1970s and 1980s are commonly believed to have faded with the end of the cold war. What, then, can be gained by looking back now at Latin America's often gruesome military past?

Patricia Marchak's reconstruction of state-sponsored terrorism in the 1970s suggests that many of conditions that gave rise to Argentina's violent past can be located beyond geopolitics and within the social and cultural fabric of the country. Thoroughly researched through in-depth interviews and supporting archival analysis, *God's Assassins* provides a chillingly complex picture of the social context and consequences of state-sponsored violence.

*God's Assassins* remembers Argentina's El Proceso, a military social reorganization plan with strong anti-insurgent overtones, through the voices of actors on all sides of the conflict. Marchak's use of extensive interview excerpts allows the reader to catch a glimpse of the intricacies of engaging in violent and non-violent resistance within a military regime, as well as, rare insight into the mindset of apologists and perpetrators of state-sponsored violence. Yet, unlike many testimonial-heavy accounts of Latin America's violent pasts, *God's Assassins* provides the reader with enough historical context within which to locate the varied and often competing perspectives of El Proceso.

Though Marchak begins with an analysis of the effects of state-sponsored terrorism, one does not begin to get a sense of the breadth, spread, and impact of the violence until she presents the accounts of those who lived through the "Dirty War" and El Proceso. It is here that we read story after story of naive youths who begin by merely experimenting with an engagement in revolutionary politics and are quickly and ruthlessly, almost unexplainably, targeted by military intelligence as patricidal subversives.

Marchak's deconstruction of the roles played by Catholic Church and the Argentine Military in the development and maintenance of politically motivated violence is perhaps her most captivating section. Through interviews with active and retired church and military officials a disturbing image of the collusion between the Church hierarchy and the military establishment begins to emerge. Showing the systemic and often callous abuse of the apparatus of the church and state, Marchak contradicts her earlier representation of haphazard revolutionaries who became targets of violence more as a matter of chance than as a result of political commitment. Putting together the voices of unrepentant military and church personnel with their revisionist colleagues allows for an understanding of the systemic creation and subsequent destruction of an anti-national enemy by state and church officials.

In addition to providing an accessible yet intricate depiction of Argentina's violent past, *God's Assassins* provides its reader with a cultural history of the road to and from violence. Marchak asks her reader to think about the uncomfortable question of whether Argentinean culture had a role to play in the development and sustenance of its violent past.

Marchak's work speaks to a growing literature on the nature of contemporary violence by looking at how individuals live with the threat of violence on an every day basis, the logics behind the design of violent regimes, and the ways that pasts with violence can be remembered. Marchak's choice of extensive interview excerpts, as the vehicle through which societal complexity at a time of crisis is expressed, raises the question of how authors can position their voice in relation to those of their informants.

*God's Assassins* does not only raise important questions for theorists of violence and memory, or social scientists interested in the construction of multi-vocal texts. *God's Assassins* can also be read as multifaceted yet approachable introduction to Argentinean society and history.

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