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Guerrillas And Generals: The Dirty War In Argentina



Synopsis

In this comprehensive, balanced examination of Argentina's Dirty War, Lewis analyzes the causes, describes the ideologies that motivated both sides, and explores the consequences of all-or-nothing politics. The military and guerrillas may seem marginal today, but Lewis questions whether the Dirty War is really over. Lewis traces the Dirty War's origins back to military interventions in the 1930s and 1940s, and the rise of General Juan Peron's populist regime, which resulted in the polarization of Argentine society. Peron's overthrow by the military in 1955 only heightened social conflict by producing a resistance movement out of which several guerrilla organizations would soon emerge. The ideologies, terrorist tactics, and internal dynamics of those underground groups are examined in detail, as well as their links to other movements in Argentina and abroad. The guerrillas reached the height of their influence when the military withdrew from power in 1973 and turned over the government to Peron's puppet president, Hector Campora. They quickly found themselves in opposition again after Peron returned from exile, and as Peronism dissolved into factions after Peron's death, the military prepared to take power again, inspired by a new National Security Doctrine. The origins of this ideology in U.S. Cold War doctrine and in French revolutionary war doctrine are fully explored because the Argentine military's Dirty War strategy and tactics grew directly out of these ideas. The arrests, the treatment of prisoners, and the mindset of the interrogators are treated in detail. Special attention is given to the anti-guerrilla war in Tucuman's jungles, the strange history of David Graiver (the guerrillas' banker) and the Timerman case. In the concluding section of the book, Lewis describes the intrigues that undermined the military regime, its retreat from power, and the human rights trials that were held under the new democratic government. Those trials eventually were stopped by military revolts. Presidential pardons followed and have left Argentina divided once more. This is an important survey for scholars and students of Latin American politics, contemporary history, and civil-military relations.

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Customer Reviews

Guerrillas and Generals is probably one of the best English language descriptions of chaos that engulfed Argentina in the last half of the 20th century. Many of the descriptions of Argentina's dirty war under the military junta that lasted from 1976 to 1983 tend to focus those years alone and give scant attention to what took place before or after. The first half of this book deals with the years leading up to the junta's ascension to power. Thanks to the class cleavages exacerbated by populist President Juan Peron and the influences of the cold war and leftist nationalism that swept through Latin America in the post-WWII period, Argentina was facing a serious terrorist revolutionary movement. The 1960s and 1970s experienced an explosion of college attendance in Argentina and campuses became hot beds of radicalism. By itself, that isn't shocking since it was true in many other countries but this occurred under authoritarian governments that, for whatever reason, made little or no effort reign in the faculty and administration that not only tolerated revolutionary radicalism but encouraged it. The revolutionary groups, the Montoneros and ERP were not just idealistic young people fighting for the rights of the poor; they were committed leftists with a strong predilection for violence that a series of military and civilian governments had failed to quell. The hard ball tactics to crush the rebels did not begin with the military coup of March 24, 1976 that overthrew erratic President Isabel Peron (who assumed the Presidency when husband Juan died in 1974). Peron's government had given the military orders to "annihilate" the rebel groups, however, the harshness of tactics and the scope of those targeted greatly expanded after the coup.

In most journalistic accounts of Argentina's "Dirty War", there is a clear tendency to villify the Argentine Military and whitewash their adversaries, portraying them as youthful idealists, subversive but essentially harmless. This approach is highly misleading. One cannot understand "the Generals" without understanding "the Guerrillas". The great merit of Paul Lewis's book is that it promotes an objective understanding of both sides. In Lewis's evenhanded account we learn that the Montoneros, the ERP, the FAR, the FAP and others - were not innocuous hippies or armchair radicals, but rather violent and utterly ruthless revolutionaries who would stop at nothing to impose a communist

dictatorship on Argentina. As the title suggests, Lewis doesn't take sides, but allows the facts speak for themselves. He describes the brutality on both sides of the conflict with unflinching candor, in a narrative that is thoroughly engrossing and delivered with verve and style. Who, then, were the revolutionaries who were defeated by the Military during Argentina's "Dirty War"? - Groups of urban guerillas and armed terrorists were organized by the Peronist Youth during Juan Peron's exile. Peron's eventual return to Argentina in 1973 owed much to their efforts. - The largest of the guerilla bands were the ERP and the Montoneros. Both fought for a communist state similar to Cuba's. The Montoneros believed, mistakenly, that Peron agreed with their goals. After Peron's election as President in 1973, when it became clear to him that the urban guerillas would not obey his orders or cooperate with his movement, he turned decisively against them.

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