



TEXT

Madres de Plaza de Mayo

This article from Teaching Tolerance profiles a group of matriarchs called the Madres who marched to bring attention to Argentinean youth who were taken by the government and never returned.

By Teaching Tolerance Staff

Tier 2 terms: demonstrate, challenge, symbolized, defiance, abroad, circulate, petition, release, establishment, radical, precede, reform, dissident, presence, resisting, subversive, claim, crusade, distinguished, limit

Tier 3 terms: military barrack, prostitute, Argentina, dictatorship, head scarp, United Nations, Amnesty International, Pope, constitution, democracy, pardon, immunity law, genetic matching, concentration camp

Web Version: <https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/texts/madres-de-plaza-de-mayo>

The women met while sitting quietly, fearfully, in visits to police stations and military barracks, trying to find out something in their search for missing relatives. Most of the women were housewives; few worked outside the home.

Slowly the mothers discovered that they were not alone. They began to tell each other their stories. Most had young adult sons and daughters who had been swiftly and suddenly pulled from their homes, work or classes. Few had been seen again. One mother said, “It’s very difficult to explain how you feel when they take a child from you and you don’t know what’s happened to the child. It’s like a terrible emptiness, like something’s been wrenched away from inside of you and there’s nothing you can do about it. No one would help us.”

The authorities, often laughing and calling them “mothers of terrorists,” lied to them: “Your daughters disappeared because they have become prostitutes or ran off with some man. Your sons have left the country to run away from army service.” One woman answered, “My son is a young person who thinks and acts politically. I don’t care what party he belongs to because I am not defending a political party. I am looking for my son who has the right to think.”

Courageously, the mothers began to demonstrate every Thursday in silent marches in the large Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, the site of Argentina’s government. They were the first to publicly challenge Argentina’s brutal military dictatorship and its “Dirty War.” To identify each other, the women began wearing a white head scarf. They said that it represented a diaper and also symbolized the white dove of peace, which “can unite all women.” They began to use a simple and

very effective chant. “We want our children and we want them to tell us where they are.” Some carried pictures of the missing children. “No matter what our children think, they should not be tortured, should have charges brought before them. We should be able to see them, visit them.”

The simple repeating of the truth, and the expression of their sorrow as mothers, came at a time when most Argentines either ignored the brutality of the regime or were afraid to speak out. The women’s pleas for help fell on the deaf ears of the Church, most labor union leaders, the business community and the press. They were criticized, called “Las Locas” (Crazy Women). Neighbors, even friends, avoided them. Many had families who worried for their safety and told them not to get involved. One woman responded, “What can be worse than their taking my child?”

The women’s defiance of the military put their own lives at risk. Leading members of the original group were “disappeared.” But others kept returning to the plaza, often having to try and outwit the police who came to break up their demonstrations. They met in different places, demonstrated on different days, learned to deal with attack dogs and tear gas. If one got arrested, they all went in a group. “In the plaza we felt strong,” they later said. “We decided to return to the plaza as it gave us a good feeling ... the Plaza made us feel close to our children.”

Slowly the outside world began to hear of the Madres. Human rights groups brought them to conferences abroad. The women had to educate themselves about the United Nations, Amnesty International and the skills of public speaking. In their travels they met with political leaders, challenged the U.N.’s acceptance of the Argentine military regime, and boldly said they would meet with the pope. At home, with help from a Dutch women’s group, they opened an office and published their own newspaper. They took out full-page ads in newspapers and circulated petitions demanding the release of those in illegal detention. Exploding the image of elderly women as powerless, the Madres had transformed themselves from an informal group of mainly housewives into an internationally known organization. Their courageous struggle became a symbol for every human rights movement.

With the fall of the military and the establishment of constitutional democracy in 1983, the mothers remained a major force in the struggle for reform. Yet there was a split between the members. One group followed a less radical style of politics. They felt that they needed to treat the democratic government differently from the dictatorship that preceded it. They tried to work for reforms within the system.

Others chose to expand their political activities, supporting the efforts of other dissidents who push for social and economic justice. This group has refused to negotiate with the government, which they believe has protected their children's murderers. They have demanded the list of people who ordered and carried out the death of their children. Given the chance to have the bodies of the children returned to them, they refused. They reasoned that if their children were not going to be returned to them alive, it was the government's responsibility to explain what had happened to them and to prosecute those responsible.

The pardons and immunity laws (see time line) have had a devastating effect. The group states that, "What remains in the end is a deep longing for justice. ... We're still fighting for those murderers to go to jail. We want you all to remember what happened to our children so that it never happens again."

Some of the Madres are bringing up grandchildren of the "disappeared" or are searching for grandchildren born in prison and never returned to their birth families. Relying on the courts and on modern genetic matching, they have had a few successes. Some continue to endure the disapproval of family members who are uncomfortable with their political activities.

Still, every Thursday the Madres march around the plaza, a white scarf on their heads. Their very presence is powerful. "We don't forget. We don't forgive. We are still resisting," they say.

Time Line: Argentina

1930s Armed forces have overthrown five elected governments in Argentina.

1976 Claiming it needs to re-establish order after the chaos of Isabel Perón's rule, the army takes control of government. Start of the Dirty War against those people the army claims are subversives, and people who "are trying to destroy the Christian and Western values of society." Tens of thousands are abducted, tortured and disappeared in their "holy" crusade to "save the country." Torture centers and concentration camps are created for anyone they accused of being a guerrilla, knowing a guerrilla or harboring subversive thoughts.

1977 Organization of Mothers of the Disappeared is formed. First public protest against military rule.

1983 The Argentine military starts a war with Britain for ownership of the Falklands Islands (off the Argentine coast). Argentina suffers a crushing defeat, and the military loses internal power. Democratic elections are held. President

Raúl Alfonsín appoints a distinguished panel of citizens to investigate the disappearances, the National Commission on the Disappeared. Little has come from their efforts.

1985 First-ever trial of a military regime by an elected civilian government. Five of the nine members of the first three military juntas are sent to prison.

1986 The National Commission on the Disappeared uncovers 340 secret torture centers. Human rights organizations say 30,000 people “disappeared” under military rule. Parliament passes the Law of Punto Final, which places a 60-day time limit on new prosecutions of military officers.

1987 Law of Due Obedience passed, freeing the immense majority of those accused of human rights violations and those already in prison.

1989 An amnesty decree signed by newly elected President Carlos Menem pardons many officers charged with human rights violations.

1990 A military rebellion is crushed. Members of the military juntas are freed in the second wave of amnesties.

TEXT DEPENDENT QUESTIONS

Question: What could the Madres do collectively that an individual in Argentina could not?

Question: What was the significance of the white head scarves the Madres wore? What was the purpose in wearing it?

Question: The last line of the main text says, “We are still resisting.” What are the Madres still resisting?