

Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo

"First we will kill all the subversives; then, their collaborators; later, those who sympathize with them; afterward, those who remain indifferent; and finally, the undecided. " -General Ibérico Saint Jean, governor of Buenos Aires Province.

The most disturbing legacy of military rule in Argentina is the massive campaign of state terrorism experienced between 1976 and 1983. According to the Federation of the Families of the Detained/Disappeared, 30 000 Argentines vanished during the *Proceso*.

On a Thursday in April 1977 at five o'clock in the afternoon, fourteen women, between 40 and 70 years of age, defied the ban on public gatherings promulgated by the all-powerful military junta and marched into the Plaza de Mayo to make known their pain and their resolve not to accept having their questions go unanswered. They created Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, an organization committed to the search for their missing children.

Initially, the group was not a formal organization but a small gathering of women who decided to protest together. A formal structure did not develop until 1979. Primarily, the women were of working- or middle-class origins, the sectors most affected by the repression. Each Thursday afternoon the mothers appeared wearing white kerchiefs, embroidered with the names of their missing relatives and the dates of their disappearances. In a tight circle, the group would orbit a monument at the centre of the Plaza de Mayo in absolute silence.

In addition to the weekly protests, Las Madres pursued other techniques "to rescue the disappeared from obliteration in the public memory." The group consistently attempted to flood society with information on the plight of the disappeared. In 1977, they paid for a newspaper advertisement saying, "All we want is the truth."

Besides having achieved international recognition for their work, they now run a cafe and bookstore which provides resources and meeting space for many different activist groups, including Argentina Arde. They are still a valuable symbol of struggle and inspiration in Argentina, and can be seen regularly out in the streets with the people. Because of their work, their solidarity and their spirit, memory is still alive.

-Ravi Mattu, with additional text added by Andy Stern