

Milei shuts down museums memorializing victims of Argentina's military dictatorship

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On December 27, 2024 and January 2, 2025, hundreds of public employees belonging to the Government Workers Association union (*Asociación de Trabajadores del Estado, ATE*), were joined by the mothers of victims disappeared under state terror of 1972-1981 (*Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*) and other human rights and left organizations in marches and rallies at various memorial museums in Argentina, demanding that they not be shut down, in the name of “Memory, Truth, and Justice.”

When the government of President Javier Milei and Vice President Victoria Villarruel took power in December 2023, it began the process of dismantling the Human Rights Secretariat and shutting down dozens of museum sites in former clandestine torture centers across Argentina, with the intention of erasing the record of the torture, disappearances and murder of tens of thousands of militant workers and youth in the 1970s and 80s. They also began ending ongoing trials against those involved in the reign of state terror.

In a warning to workers internationally, since the fascist Milei's government has been glorified as a model by the ruling elites internationally, the dismantling of memory sites is now accelerating in a transparent effort to lay the groundwork for repeating the crimes of the dictatorship against mounting opposition from below to his far-right policies.

The last wave of state terror began with the return of Juan Domingo Perón for his second presidency in 1972, and became more serious under his widow Isabel Perón following his death in 1974 and her overthrow by the military in 1976. Between 1974 and the end of the military dictatorship, precipitated by the debacle of the Malvinas War in 1982, leftists and working class opponents of the regime were “disappeared” in military centers across the country, first at the hands of the

Triple A (Argentine Anticommunist Alliance)—an alliance of fascist Peronists, the trade union apparatus and the military. It was modeled on the fascist corporatist *Somatén Armado* created in 1945 by Spanish Dictator Francisco Franco to supplement his *Guardia Civil* (Civil Guard).

Following the 1976 military coup, the armed forces and police, backed by the CIA and US imperialism, launched an all-out “dirty-war” of torture and mass murder against leftists, in the the so-called *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (Process of National Reorganization). Two hundred detention and torture centers were established across the nation, mostly in military installations and police stations.

Between 2000 and 2017, under mass popular pressure around the “Memory, Truth and Justice” movement and the mothers of the disappeared prisoners (*Madres de Plaza de Mayo*), 35 of these torture centers were transformed into Sites of Memory, in honor of the 30,000 victims of state terror who had been disappeared, never to be seen again (see map). Many of these victims, innocent of any crime, were thrown out of airplanes in twice-daily flights over the Plata River and the Atlantic Ocean. In addition, monuments and plaques in memory of the victims of state terror exist across the country.

When it came to power in December 2023, the Milei government began shutting down these sites and firing the workers, including the establishments operating in the former Mechanical Navy School (ESMA), and the Virrey Cevallos (Air Force) extermination and torture centers, as well as the Olimpo (Federal Police) concentration camp, in Greater Buenos Aires, and the Navy Light House (*El Faro*) detention center in the city of Mar del Plata. These memorial museums have received thousands of visitors since they were

established, from schools and other institutions from across the world, including the United States.

The Human Rights Secretariat is a branch of the National Ministry of Justice and Human Rights. It was established in December 2003 under the presidency of Néstor Kirchner (Peronist). It was set up in the ESMA school, which was transformed into a Memory, Truth, and Justice site (The Harold Conti Cultural Center) that, in addition to museum exhibits, includes an archival collection of documents available to the public and to researchers and public television programs: the latter have been exhibited in sites and across the country. The ESMA, the largest of all the detention, torture and disappearance centers during the dictatorship, was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

Most recently, 600 workers were summarily dismissed from the Human Rights Secretariat, which administers the memorial museums, virtually dismantling it.

On January 2 sacked ESMA and Human Rights workers and their supporters surrounded the ESMA building, chanting, “Without memory there is no future,” and “Do not mess with Memory.”

The Virrey Ceballos Site of Memory is now a shade of its former self, emptied of exhibits. Its only two remaining employees will be laid off soon. Ricardo del Valle, one of the laid-off Virrey Ceballos workers told the Buenos Aires daily *Página 12*: “What the government wants is that we stop reporting on what happened during those years; but we will not give in ... we intend to keep this site open to continue transmitting what happened during the dictatorship and also to reveal the reality that we face as workers in all the Sites of Memory, not just in Cevallos. ... Following the pandemic we received visits from many elementary and high schools, and also from universities, from here and other countries. For example, from [the state of] Georgia, in the United States ... It is not a simple job for us to tell students and other people about what took place during the dictatorship but we wish to be there to transmit our memory.”

The Virrey Ceballos torture center, nominally in the hands of the Air Force, was also used by the Army and Federal Police. It was shut down following the escape of Osvaldo Lopez, one of its prisoners, after a week of torture. Scores of workers and youth were imprisoned

there.

Like the other, larger, Sites of Memory, Virrey Ceballos was a center of community, educational and fund-raising activities, in part to support the sacked employees.

President Milei, Vice President Villarruel, and their party, Libertad Avanza, insist that, while there were “excesses” in the Armed Forces’ treatment of dissenters, the country was “at war” with the Peronist left, the *Montoneros* and clandestine workers organizations. In the eyes of Milei, Villarruel, and the Peronist right wing, the military “saved the nation” from terrorism and communism.

Milei and Villarruel, whose career had been as a defender of military officials accused of state terror, have repeatedly declared that the Sites of Memory have concocted lies prepared by the “left.” Both have repeatedly denied that the Videla dictatorship disappeared 30,000 workers. Milei’s number, picked out of thin air, is 8,753. Milei and Villarruel refer to their narrative as the “Complete Truth.”

Like ESMA and Virrey Ceballos, the Olimpo concentration camp was also hit by a wave of layoffs. Among the services shut down were education, community links, maintenance, and research and development at the memorial museum’s archives and library. It received over 25,000 visitors in 2023, and more in 2024.

The Faro lighthouse torture center in the port city of Mar Del Plata was also the scene of protests on January 2. In 2014, it was established as a memorial museum with hundreds of experienced employees, from Olimpo and other museums, charged with teaching, organizing debates and distributing information. Most of these employees have now been sacked.



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