

The Political and Social Context of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*

1930: President of Argentina Hipólito Yrigoyen is deposed by a military dictatorship.

1943: Colonel Juan Peron takes charge of the Ministry of Labor as part of the military dictatorship.

1946: General elections are restored and Peron wins the presidency with 56% of the vote. He names his wife Eva (“Evita”) vice-president.

1955: Another military coup removes Peron from office and he is exiled.

1973: Peron returns from exile.

1974: Peron dies and his second wife, Isabel Martinez de Peron assumes power but, in the machismo Argentine culture, is deemed to be a weak leader.

1976: In another coup, the Argentine armed forces overthrow the government and Peron is taken into “protective custody.” A three man military junta, headed by General Jorge Rafael Videla, takes charge and begins a ruthless campaign against the counterculture—liberals, political activists, union members, journalists, writers and students—in what becomes known as “The Dirty War.”

The legendary Argentine left wing guerrilla leader Che Guevara inspired the “counterculture.” He argued that only violence would ever bring social equality to Latin America. Young men, like Valentin, began to dress and grow beards like Guevara. Peron’s supporters encouraged the movement and soon a subgroup of political terrorists emerged. They called themselves the “Montoneros” and combined the populist workers rights slogans of Peron with the Marxist teachings of Karl Marx and the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and Sigmund Freud. Anyone suspected of supporting these groups and their ideas were subject to arbitrary arrest; people were kidnapped in the streets and never seen or heard of again. Prisons, such as Villa Devoto, overflowed with political prisoners like Valentin and torture was routine.

1982: In the intervening six years, an estimated 11,000 Argentines disappear. They become known as *los desaparecidos*, the disappeared. More than 30,000 people die during the period, many in Argentine concentration camps modeled on the Nazi camps. By now, the government is facing increasing opposition to its human rights record, both nationally and internationally. To try and allay criticism at home, the regime launches a campaign to regain the Falkland Islands from British rule. The campaign fails, and 72 days after the invasion of the islands, the British military win the war, capturing 9,800 Argentine prisoners of war. This defeat initiates the demise of the Argentine regime which, in order to survive, is compelled to restore basic civil liberties and retract its ban on political parties. General Bignone assumes the presidency and begins negotiations with civilian leaders to orchestrate the end of the dictatorship.

1983: The Dirty War ends when Raul Alfonsin’s civilian government takes control of the country on December 10, 1983.

1985: Leading military figures who ruled during the Dirty War, including President Videla, are sentenced to life imprisonment for homicide, illegal detention and other human rights violations.

1991: Argentina’s President Carlos Saul Menem, conscious that four army uprisings have taken place since 1983, seeks to calm the discontent still rife amongst the military by issuing pardons to imprisoned military personnel, including Videla, which results in massive public protest and outrage.

2007: Isabelita Peron is arrested for the disappearance of people in Argentina during her presidency.