



Above—and on our cover this month—the real Evita Perón, shown with her husband, Argentine President Juan Perón. Although the legend of this remarkable duo—a proverbial “power couple” long before the notion was in vogue—has been told on stage and screen, their true story is, if anything, more fascinating. The front cover illustration is taken from a Time magazine of the period.

The Peróns: Argentina's Populist Power Couple

Juan Perón and his wife Evita have been lionized by some, while they have been accused of many evil things by others. Were the Peróns really so bad? Or have they merely been smeared because the populist Perón was not unfriendly to the Third Reich?

BY ROBERT K. LOGAN



Understandably, the mainstream media have chosen to ignore the first results of the much-ballyhooed “CEANA” investigations into Argentina’s alleged Nazi past. CEANA is the Argentine “Commission of Inquiry into the Activities of Nazism in Argentina” (Comisión Para el Esclarecimiento de las Actividades del Nazismo en la Argentina).

After more than three years of investigations, CEANA effectively exonerates the Argentine government of incessant malicious charges, accusations and insinuations—generated by the media—of having deliberately harbored countless Nazi war criminals, and ill-gotten art treasures and gold, confiscated from Jewish victims of World War II. Aside from the unfounded media reports, sensational books of fiction like Frederick Forsyth’s *The Odessa File* and Jorge Camarasa’s *Odessa al Sur* suggested that a vast network had been established, with the complicity of the Vatican and Juan Perón’s administration, to funnel former SS men and Nazi gold into Argentina. A veritable hysteria, fed by the media, over the alleged presence of Nazis in Argentina has prevailed since World War II. These falsehoods are now being exposed.

On November 11, 1999, CEANA, an official board of inquiry, issued preliminary findings after a comprehensive and exhaustive investigation. Established by Argentine Foreign Minister Guido Di Tella in 1997 to determine the truth about the extent of Nazi infiltration and stolen gold hoards allegedly brought to Argentina by German submarines during the closing days of the war, CEANA was staffed by a team of international scholars, chosen for a belief in their integrity, who, to further ensure their findings would be accepted by the world, were monitored by Jewish academic and media shepherds. The CEANA commission was granted full access to the state archives of the nations of Argentina, the United States, Great Britain, Switzerland, Ger-

many, Italy, France, Belgium and Portugal.

The researchers, with the concurrence of the Jewish members, found that in fact very few Nazis and Nazi collaborators had entered Argentina. For example, respected historian Carlota Jakisch estimated that some 65 alleged war criminals, including the much-publicized Adolf Eichmann and Josef Mengele, had succeeded in entering Argentina and thereby escaping Allied “justice,” i.e., the hangman. German historian Holger Meding was able to find that only 45 Nazi war criminals had escaped the victors’ justice by slipping into Argentina. The researchers also verified that 36 French and Belgian and 52 Croatian collaborators had also managed to escape justice in Argentina. Thus, a grand total of fewer than 200 Nazis and Nazi collaborators, of whom only a few could be considered dangerous war criminals, was determined to have entered Argentina.

Admittedly, Austrian Bishop Alois Hudal and other priests were found to have aided several wanted individuals in their time of need, just as they helped Jews earlier, when they were threatened. Some gold and valuables belonging to dubious individuals may have been transferred from Europe to Argentina, the land of silver, but certainly not large quantities. Concerning gold transfers, CEANA reports unequivocally that “Nazi gold never entered the country physically . . . and that any complicity of Argentina Central Bank in transactions related to Nazi gold was, in any case, very marginal.” Further, no official records involving the Perón administration on the matter of gold transfers or looted art have been revealed.

Quite naturally, many Germans, who saw no future in Germany in 1945, chose to emigrate to Argentina. Moreover, Argentina, as a Catholic country, has a long tradition, shared with other Latin countries, of permitting its churches to grant sanctuary to individuals in need and of granting defeated military per-

sonnel the privilege of seeking safety in exile.

The continued animosity of the Anglo-American Establishment directed against the persons of Juan Domingo Perón and his wife, Eva Duarte de Perón (known as “Evita”), which borders on the pathological, deserves special attention. This enduring animus would be incomprehensible without understanding the history of British imperialism in Argentina and the sociopolitical revolutions of the first half of the 20th century.

The underlying cause of the continuing UK/U.S. hostility toward Argentina stems from the Peróns’ success in freeing the country, albeit temporarily, from its traditional economic dependence on foreign markets and capital, initially British but later American. British and U.S. companies eventually held a virtual monopoly over the Argentine meat-packing, railroad, electric power, pharmaceutical and other industries. In 1933, the controversial Roca-Runciman Treaty seemed to seal the special Argentine-British relationship. It would also have kept Argentina in a quasi-colonial status as agricultural supplier to Britain.

“Juan and Evita were a perfect team: he the strong, macho military leader fighting against communism and imperialism for an independent Argentina; she, childless, frail in appearance, in failing health, the wife and main supporter of her revered husband.”

Several unforeseen events upset this special relationship. First, the onset of World War II cut Argentina off from its traditional markets and investment sources and forced the country to become more self-sufficient by developing its own industrial and financial base. With modernization and industrialization, the labor unions grew ever more powerful. The long-reigning Argentine oligarchy, with which the British had always dealt, began to lose its privileged position. The very word “autarky” (i.e., national self-sufficiency) is, of course, anathema to international money-lenders.

In 1943 a military coup overthrew the corrupt Castillo government. A young, charismatic colonel, Juan Perón, assumed control of the Ministry of Labor and Welfare of the economically foundering nation. With the indispensable assistance of a fellow colonel, Domingo Alfredo Mercante, who assumed control of the vital Buenos Aires province, Perón’s organizational and leadership qualities won him the support of the working class that became his main political base.

The bulk of the population in Argentina is of Italian and Spanish extraction. It was quite natural in the Great Depression of the 1930s, when American and British capitalism was on the rocks, which the military and the common people in Argentina turned to Mussolini’s Fascist Italy and National Socialist Germany as models. Moreover, like Italy, Argentina was a

Catholic country with mores and a spirit quite different from those of “Perfidious Albion.”

As Perón’s power increased (he became vice president and minister of war in 1940), the oligarchs and others whose status was now being threatened staged a coup in early October 1945 that ousted Perón from the government. However, the insurgents miscalculated badly, and within a few days Perón’s followers were able to regroup and fight back. Under the leadership of the labor leaders in Buenos Aires and Perón’s loyal friend, Col. Mercante, whom Evita was later to call “the heart of Perón,” massive street demonstrations were staged.

With World War II concluded and Britain an economic basket case, Perón pushed ahead with his domestic industrialization program, including nationalizing foreign-owned businesses. Joining and reinforcing Perón in this major restructuring of the Argentine economy was Evita, whom he married. A woman fiercely dedicated to her husband and his program, Evita proved a tremendous asset to Perón, who, by 1946, had become president of Argentina. Contrary to American public opinion, Juan Perón’s power did not derive from Evita, but Evita’s from Juan’s.

Perón himself was referred to as the leader and standard bearer of the *descamisados* (“the shirtless ones,” i.e., the workers). Perón’s political doctrine was *justicialismo* (“social justice”) and “the Third Position,” which was opposed to the oligarchs, the communists and the imperialists. Evita Perón, who had a successful career in radio, movies and theater before her marriage to Perón, soon won the affection of the Argentine people. Evita was an extremely effective public speaker, arguing emotionally and dramatically on behalf of Perón’s policies.

Evita almost single-handedly took over all welfare in Argentina, opening hospitals, schools, housing projects, orphanages, libraries, homes for the elderly, shelters for the indigent and social security programs—all under the auspices of her Social Aid Foundation. In doing so, she in effect replaced charity with a government aid program. Equally important and long lasting were her support of women’s rights and her championing of the law that gave Argentine women the right to vote.

To have accomplished so much in Argentinian society attests to Evita’s unusual appeal and tact. In her speeches she always presented herself modestly as Perón’s “bridge to the people,” never ceasing to defer to and praise her husband, *El Presidente*. For his part Perón could only be most thankful for his wife’s loyalty and support. Evita’s activities further incurred the wrath of the oligarchs, especially the wealthy Ladies of Beneficence, who had traditionally managed charitable operations in Argentina.

Juan and Evita were a perfect team: he, the strong, macho military leader fighting against communism and imperialism for an independent Argentina; she, childless, frail in appearance, in failing health, the wife and main supporter of her revered husband. Upon her death on July 26, 1952, the government announced: “It is our sad duty to inform the people of the republic that Eva, the spiritual leader of the nation, died at 8:25 p.m.”

Perón’s fortunes began to decline following his wife’s death. Europe recovered from World War II, and its industries were again working overtime—supplying South American countries.



In 1946 Evita, President Juan Perón's newlywed wife, became the owner of the newspaper Democracia, essentially making it the Argentine government's official organ. Since she did not have the money to buy it, the National Bank, which had just been nationalized, lent her the funds. She used her new power to take revenge on a government minister who had offended her: Atilio Bramuglia, the minister of foreign affairs, became an unperson in the pages of her newspaper. After the fall of the regime, it would be Evita's image that was wiped out, and her name that was banned by journalists. In this picture, Evita and Juan look at the newspaper. Man at right is unidentified.

The United States was now not only helping the British reestablish their pre-Perón privileges but also intervening in Argentine affairs. (The total diplomatic and logistical support the U.S. government gave Britain during the Falkland Islands War in 1982 demonstrated clearly the commonality of U.S-UK policy *vis-a-vis* Argentina, whose claims to the islands are at least as valid as Britain's.) Perón's hopes to establish home industries eventually foundered. Economic distress was soon followed by political action against Perónism.

In 1955 Perón was ousted in a military coup. The new regime, backed by the oligarchy and other enemies of the Peróns, undertook to dismantle as many of Evita's innovations and institutions (shelters, schools, hospitals) as it could, especially those

bearing her name. Even her body was disinterred and transported out of the country. Perón himself went into exile in Spain.

To discredit Perónism, a campaign of calumny and slander concerning the private lives and character of both Juan and Evita was started, and it continues to this day. He was accused of living with teenage girls and of being a Nazi sympathizer. Evita was maliciously denounced as a common prostitute who stole money from the Eva Duarte Foundation. But the campaign of hate and vilification against the Peróns failed completely in Argentina and most of the Latin world, though the allegations continue to titillate British and American scandalmongers.

Juan Perón was returned to power in 1974, and Evita's body was finally laid to rest in her native land. The Perónist Party

continues to exist, but, without an effective leader, it has become very fragmented. While Evita never quite became “Santa Evita,” she is nonetheless fondly remembered by many in present-day Argentina.

After the war many immigrants from Europe arrived in Argentina seeking to start new lives, as they did in the United States. For historical, ethnic and religious reasons the Argentine government chose not to seek out, pursue, arrest or indict “suspect” Germans who arrived as immigrants after World War II. Was this so terrible? For their own reasons, the United States, Britain and France have themselves elected not to seek out, pursue, arrest, indict or deport Russians, Ukrainians or Jews who were involved in communist crimes, not even those associated with the infamous Gulag system, even though communist crimes lasted over a much longer period, involved millions more victims and were of much more recent origin.

During the war the United States was an active belligerent, allied with the Soviet Union, while Argentina, remained neutral as long as possible with obvious sympathies for the Italian and German people. Not until March 27, 1944, under great pressure from the United States, did Argentina finally declare war against Germany. None other than Juan Domingo Perón, then minister of war, signed the declaration of war. Moreover, most Argentine exports of raw materials during World War II went to the United States and Britain, not to Germany and Italy.

The international CEANA commission has proved extremely useful in demystifying and dispelling many misconceptions about the extent of Nazi influence in Argentina. The selection of honest, independent and unbiased researchers, with the participation of open-minded Jews, combined with the cooperation of involved states, seems the perfect vehicle for resolving lingering doubts about other controversial events of World War II. It is to be hoped that a similar international commission is established to define—once and for all—the exact parameters of Jewish losses in the holocaust.

Postscript

Half a century after Eva and Juan Perón established the populist Perónist movement, Perónistas, admittedly of varying convictions and authenticity, continue to control the Argentine Congress and most of Argentina’s provinces. But in his day and awash himself in party power struggles, Juan Perón liked to compare the various warring Perónist factions to cats having sex. “It may seem like they are fighting,” Perón would say, “but they are really just reproducing. In the end, Perónism survives and expands.”¹ ❖

FOOTNOTE:

¹Faiola, Anthony, “Squabbling Perónists Can’t Get It Together,” *The International Herald Tribune*, Sept. 6, 2002, 2.

Robert K. Logan is a library technician and part-time writer. He is a avid cross-country skier and snowmobiler. Mr. Logan resides in Saskatchewan.



Evita makes her movie debut in La cabalgata del circo (“The Circus Rider”), starring Libertad Lamarque and Hugo del Carril. Although Evita’s critics were often given to referring to her as a “former ‘actress”” implying that the populist icon had actually been a prostitute, the truth is that Evita had been an actress.