

The Truth Behind Jorge Mario Bergoglio, Pope Francis: Breaking the Silence, the Catholic Church in Argentina and the 'Dirty War'

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Originally published in 2005. Image. Pope Francis with Leader of military junta General Jorge Videla

Argentina between 1976 and 1983 was wracked by a "[dirty war](#)" in which successive military regimes hunted down, tortured and "disappeared" tens of thousands of citizens. The process had begun when Argentina's already febrile politics started to split open in the mid-1970s. The military seized power in a coup from [Isabelita Peron's](#) government, in the wake of an armed insurgency by Montoneros guerrillas.

The dictatorship that followed consigned thousands of Argentineans into military detention. Most were tortured; a few were released, many were eventually murdered. These "disappeared" numbered in all around 30,000.

In 1979, the [Inter-American Human Rights Commission](#) visited Argentina and inspected the most notorious detention centre, the Navy Mechanical School in Buenos Aires. They found no prisoners. As Horacio Verbitsky reveals in this extract from his extraordinary book, the prisoners had been dispersed, some of them to El Silencio, an island property that had belonged to an official of the Catholic archbishop of Buenos Aires.

The Catholic church's complicity in torture and murder in Argentina should be no surprise; it had, after all, long precedents in extreme doctrines that came to Argentina (and elsewhere in Latin America) from the far right in France. But many details of Horacio Verbitsky's account are revelatory, and his researches are a vital contribution to continuing efforts in Argentina to reach a full historical, legal and moral accounting for the violations of the "[dirty war](#)" years.

The River

"Transfer" was a word the prisoners feared, a word they all wanted to banish from their thoughts.

There were three weeks to the end of winter. The nights were still cold, but the sunshine brought a feeling of warmth returning, a good sign after all the hard months. They had been told they would be away until the end of the month. Some of them had told their families they would not be able to call or see them for several weeks. They had never been outside the Navy Mechanical School as a group before, and this novelty was disturbing. In the attic and basement of the officers' mess that they were leaving, they had had enough time to get close. The links between them were recent but intense, cemented by the extreme situation

they had shared, the outcome of which was still unclear.

Horacio Verbitsky's new book "The Silence" has been longlisted for the 2005 [Ulysses](#) award for literary reportage

This time they were not called out by name and they were not lined up in the white-tiled corridor leading to the sickroom where they had been vaccinated. When the last of them climbed on board the bus, the officers' mess was left empty to make room for a refurbishment. The aim was to deceive the members of the Inter-American Human Rights Commission, who were arriving with makeshift but accurate drawings of the installations.

The bathroom was to be completely altered, a marble worktop, stainless-steel sinks and a wall-to-wall mirror were to be fitted to make the place look less forbidding. Partitions were to be knocked down, and the metal rings in the floor removed. The staircase between the basement and the attic was to be closed off.

The bus headed north, parallel to the River Plate. With their casual clothes and sports bags they might have seemed like so many similar groups of light-hearted young men and women out on an excursion. They were well aware of the deceit and disguise.

They cannot have taken more than half an hour to reach the landing-stage. The guards identified the vehicle and let them through. Other prisoners were brought to the same spot by car, blindfolded.

They were put on board a coastguard launch, made of wood like the boats that carry passengers between all the islands, but with the seats removed. They were made to lie on the floor in the midst of bags, crates of food, radio equipment and weapons. The launch headed up the River Tuyú-Paré towards the Chaña-Miní.

Some of the prisoners estimate the journey took little more than half an hour; others, more accurately, say an hour and a half. In the 19th century, the liberal bourgeoisie in Argentina had called this area the *Tigre*, in honour of the Tigris region in Mesopotamia. Only the people who live on the islands of the delta can distinguish all the 350 rivers, streams and channels into which they are divided. A century and a half ago, [Domingo Faustino Sarmiento](#) described the shape of these islands as "the most capricious imaginable", an area where "the surface is an illusion: not everything is land that appears to be so, and there is no way of knowing beforehand what is of any use."

There was nothing out of the ordinary about the dock they tied up at; nor about the house, which they walked towards across worn wooden planks and a muddy path. The building must have been around eighty years old. It was the same as many others in the Paraná delta, with a pitched corrugated iron roof, floors, walls and partitions made of wood, and raised on stilts to protect it from the frequent floods. The eight large rooms must have covered an area of a little less than 200 square metres. Radio equipment was set up in one of the rooms. There was an electric generator and lots of tools. A gas water-heater supplied the bathroom and the kitchen, and there were four water tanks for drinking water.

A stand of poplars, another of willows, and a third of birches filled the cultivated part of the island. The rest needed clearing. A dense screen of thorn bushes grew wild everywhere, making it impossible to penetrate more than 500 metres inland from the river.

Another, smaller group made the same journey in the cold of early morning. They were

frightened rather than excited. Handcuffed and blindfolded, some of them were taken in a large van, others were put into a lorry with a thick green canvas awning. When they reached the landing-stage, they heard the barking of dogs and the rattle of weapons. They were put into an open launch and covered with a canvas. If any of them moved they were beaten.

These prisoners were put into a second building, smaller and rougher than the first. Its external walls were made of corrugated iron, and the gap between them and the wooden stilts had been filled in to accommodate them. Each night one or two of them were taken to the big house for a bath, along dark earthen paths, their way lit by torches. Despite the primitiveness of the conditions, these prisoners were happy that they were left on their own in this house, where the guards refused to sleep. This was the first time they were able to talk freely to each other, and thanks to this, they discovered that one of them was missing.

The last prisoner to arrive was “The Old Lady”, so called because she was 52 years old. Unlike the others, she was brought on her own. When she reached the island she read on the wooden sign that it was called *El Silencio*.

This was where the last men and women kidnapped by the Navy Mechanics School Task Force spent a month in September 1979.

The Catholic City

Cardinal [Antonio Caggiano](#) and his secretary Bishop Emilio Grasselli worked together in the two decades when Argentina’s defining tragedy was prepared. The cardinal played an important role in those preparations.

Elements of the Catholic church elsewhere had long taken an interest in “counter-terrorism”. In 1958, an advance party of *La Cité Catholique* arrived in Argentina. This was an offshoot of the French Catholic monarchist movement known as *L’Action Française*, created by in 1889 by [Charles Maurras](#), the brilliant French philosopher and later apologist for Fascism. *La Cité Catholique* brought a doctrine of counter-revolutionary warfare and torture, justified as part of Thomist dogmatism.

Jean Ousset, Maurras’s private secretary, established *La Cité Catholique* in 1946. The idea originated in the French armed forces. In his book *Le Marxisme-leninisme*, Ousset states that this enemy can only be successfully combated by a “profound faith, an unlimited obedience to the Holy Father, and a thorough knowledge of the Church’s doctrines”.

Charles Lacheroy, a member of *La Cité Catholique*, was the first person to reflect on the ideological and technical reasons behind the defeat of the French colonial army in Indochina in 1954. Another member, [Roger Trinquier](#), theorised on the use of torture in *Modern Warfare*, a bible for its followers.

Another of Ousset’s recruits was the chief French expert in psychological warfare – Colonel Jean Gardes. Between them they developed a new concept, that of *subversion*. This conceived a protean, quintessential enemy who, rather than being defined by his actions, was seen as a force trying to subvert Christian order, natural law, or the Creator’s plan. For this reason, Ousset states that “the revolutionary apparatus is ideological before it is political, and political before it is military”. This explains the wide range of enemies he sought to define.

When the torture that French paratroopers used in Algeria during the bloody war of 1954-62

aroused protests and debate, French military chaplains calmed the officers' troubled consciences. One of them, Louis Delarue, wrote a text that was distributed to all units:

"If, in the general interest, the law allows a murderer to be killed, why should it be seen as monstrous to submit a delinquent who has been recognised as such and is therefore liable to be put to death, to an interrogation which might be painful, but whose only object is, thanks to the revelations he may make about his accomplices and leaders, to protect the innocent? Exceptional circumstances call for exceptional measures".

As success in the [Algerian war](#) gradually slipped away from the crusaders, Ousset decided to create branches of *La Cité Catholique* in other parts of the world. The first of these was in Buenos Aires in 1958. Its members had been part of the clandestine Organisation of a Secret Army (OAS), which brought terror to Paris itself and attempted to assassinate General [Charles de Gaulle](#), whom they accused of treason for withdrawing French forces from Algeria and thus facilitating its independence from French rule.

Charles de Gaulle succeeded in destroying the OAS and had several of his former military colleagues shot. The OAS chaplain, Georges Grasset, organised the flight of many members of the organisation along a route which led from Paris to Madrid and finally to Buenos Aires. Grasset himself arrived in 1962 to take charge of the Argentine branch.

Horacio Verbitsky is a leading Argentinean [investigative journalist](#). He was given an International Press Freedom Award by the Committee to Protect Journalists in 2001. Among his books are *The Flight: Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior* (New Press, [2005](#)) and *The Silence: from Paulo VI to Bergoglio, the secret links between the Church and the Navy Mechanics School* (Buenos Aires, Editorial Sudamericana, [2005](#)), which uncovers the assistance and protection that the Catholic Church gave to Argentina's brutal military dictatorship.

Another founder of the OAS describes Grasset as "a true soldier-monk, a virulent anti-communist, who became the spiritual guide of the OAS. Thanks to him and the *Cité Catholique* network, of which he was one of the mainstays, several of the OAS leaders managed to find refuge abroad, particularly in Argentina".

Jean Gardes reached Argentina in 1963. Forty years later, his daughter Florence showed the French journalist Marie-Monique Robin the notes her father had made. They show that, in March 1963, a naval lieutenant commander called Roussillon offered Gardes a deal: he would arrange Argentine government protection so that Gardes could settle in Neuquén; in exchange, he would deliver a series of lectures in the Navy Mechanics School on the counter-subversive techniques developed in France's colonial wars.

Gardes, who soon established a small factory making *paté de foie* in Neuquén, did not ask to be paid or to have a fixed post, but only wanted to be an adviser. Gardes' notes, as conserved by his daughter, coincide with those of the file on naval officer Federico Lucas Roussillon.

In 1955, the then Lieutenant Roussillon took part in the Catholic nationalist movement led by [Eduardo Lonardi](#), which overthrew President [Juan Domingo Perón](#). One of Lonardi's general staff was Major Juan Francisco Guevara, who proposed that the password the conspirators should use should be: "God is Just". By 1963 Roussillon was a member of the

Naval Intelligence Service; he retired with the rank of captain in 1979, as Cardinal Caggiano was approaching the end of his life.

Soon after Gardes met Roussillon, the cadets at the Navy Mechanics School were also introduced to the world of counter-revolutionary warfare. In one of their courses they were shown the film [The Battle of Algiers](#), an Italian-Algerian co-production made by the communist director [Gillo Pontecorvo](#) with the intention of exposing the methods used in Algeria by the French colonial army.

The film was subsequently used in counter-insurgency classes in Argentina and the United States to teach those same methods. The naval chaplain introduced the film and added a commentary from the religious point of view. Thirty-five years later, two of the cadets described the experience to Marie-Monique Robin:

Did the chaplain justify the methods used in *The Battle of Algiers*?

Anibal Acosta: Absolutely.

Including torture?

Julio César Urien: Yes. Torture was seen not as a moral problem but as a weapon.

Anibal Acosta: Part of the Catholic hierarchy supported this kind of practice. They showed us that film to prepare us for a kind of war very different from the regular war we had entered the Navy School for. They were preparing us for police missions against the civilian population, who became our new enemy.

The first edition of *Le Marxisme-leninisme* to be published outside France appeared in Buenos Aires on 6 February 1961, translated and annotated by Juan Francisco Guevara (now a colonel) and with a prologue written by Cardinal Caggiano, who thanks the “men of *La ciudad catolica* of Argentina” for publishing Ousset’s book.

Marxism, continues Caggiano, is born of the negation of Christ and his Church, “put into practice by the Revolution”. He affirms that Ousset’s book is a training tool for the “fight to the death” to which “all the peoples of the western world, America and those in Asia who are still resisting, are in grave, imminent danger of falling victim”.

According to Caggiano, it is necessary to “prepare for the decisive battle” even though the enemies have not yet “taken up arms”. As often happens in a continent that imports ideas, the doctrine of annihilation preceded that of the revolutionary uprising. In order to reinforce his idea of a holy war, Caggiano compared this vigil to the one that preceded the 1571 battle of Lepanto “to save Europe from domination by the Turk”. The book includes a list of the papal bulls condemning communism; they were the cross which kept Satan at bay.

In October 1961, Caggiano and the then president of Argentina, [Arturo Frondizi](#) inaugurated the first course on counter-revolutionary warfare in the Higher Military College. One of the tasks set in the course was to explain this quotation from the bishop of Verden, Dietrick von Nieken in 1411:

“When the existence of the Church is threatened, it is no longer bound by the commandments of morality. When unity is the aim, all means are justified: deceit, treachery, violence, usury, prison and death. Because order serves the

good of the community, and the individual has to be sacrificed for the common good.”

Among the advisers for this course were the French colonels Robert Bentesque and Jean Nougues; among its instructors were priests such as Victorio Bonamín, whom Caggiano had chosen as his associate in the military vicariate general. At the start of the course, the director of the Higher Military College explained that it would be dealing with a new kind of warfare “which we could call ‘internal warfare’”, to be fought “without concern for the means, or scruples, or ethical principles”.

This warfare knew no boundaries. Among the enemies were demagoguery, immorality, vices of all kinds, and low passions, all of which were employed “through the dialectic of communist action” in order to create “confusion and contradictions”. Caggiano, who attended the ceremony at Frondizi’s right hand, gave his blessing and invoked God’s aid so that the military might “discover the true path to defend the peace of our nations”. As usual, Grasselli was at his side. A few months later, Frondizi was overthrown, accused of being too tolerant towards communism.

The Island

When the photographer Marcelo Camilo Hernández, who had been forced to work as a laboratory technician in the Navy Mechanics School, went to the federal police to renew his passport, the navy task force kept his enrolment papers. They used the number and all his personal details to fake a new national identity document. Hernández left Argentina in mid-January 1979.

A fortnight later, the navy task force used his fake identity document to purchase *El Silencio*, an island a few metres from the mouth of the Chaná Miní river, where a huge coastguard detachment is based. The signature on the deed of sale is not that of the real Hernandez and there appears to have been no attempt even to make it look similar. This was how the navy got possession of the place it needed to hide the prisoners while the Inter-American Human Rights Commission was visiting Argentina.

According to the deed of transfer, the vendor of *El Silencio* was Emilio Teodoro Grasselli, secretary to the Military Vicar-General, who was well aware of what went on in the dictatorship’s clandestine concentration camps.

Grasselli had bought the island from Antonio Arbelaiz, a long-serving official of the curia (the papal civil service) who had been appointed diocesan administrator in 1966. It was said of Arbelaiz’s service in the curia: “Bishops come and go, but Arbelaiz remains”.

Every year, he would invite the priests and seminarians of the archdiocese to *El Silencio* for a classic barbecue. In his will, drawn up shortly after his appointment as diocesan administrator, he bequeathed everything to the archbishopric of the city of Buenos Aires, including the proceeds from the sale of the island.

Grasselli admitted that Arbelaiz had sold the island “to some friends of mine”. He claimed that they were motor-boat builders who needed a place to test, and that he himself had merely acted as an intermediary because he had worked with Arbelaiz in the curia. But the documentary evidence shows he was part of the group that bought it.

The deal was signed on 26 September 1975. Title deed Number 205 shows that Arbelaiz sold the island to Grasselli and his associates at a price equivalent to \$21,350. The purchasers paid half the total amount, and guaranteed payment of the rest by mortgaging the island. Arbelaiz died in June 1976. Under the terms of his will, the curia was owed the other half of the agreed price, but on 28 November 1978 the curia asked for the mortgage to be cancelled and the land registry to be informed that “the entire sum has now been paid”. Did they already know of the transaction that was to take place two months later?

Jorge Alfredo Regenjo, one of the longest-standing residents of the Tigre, had worked as caretaker at *El Silencio*. He recalls that in 1979 the place became the property of someone called Señor Ríos. He saw coastguard launches arriving carrying 40-50 people. Some of the local inhabitants thought that Ríos was a colonel who worked in the presidential residence.

A boat contractor described how Archbishop Aramburu used to contract one of his launches to take people to the island. The cardinal would arrive in the morning, have a barbecue on *El Silencio*, then return to the city or to his residence in Olivos.

When questioned by the judicial authorities about the island and the concentration camp there, Grasselli said he had never met Marcelo Camilo Hernández. And perhaps he had not: whilst Hernández was out of Argentina, his father went to see a magistrate and declared that his son had never either bought or sold the island. Others did so by falsely assuming his identity.

In 1980, Hernández’s identity document was used yet again, this time to sell the island to Mario Pablo Verone, a member of Lande Ltd, an import-export company, who is the current owner. He paid \$35,000 for it. A curious detail: there is no record of a deposit having changed hands, and the vendor declared that he had been paid before the contract was signed. A comparison with Hernández’s handwriting on a power of attorney he left for his father before leaving Argentina confirms that his signature was forged.

The deed states that the vendors and the purchaser signed the document in the presence of the notary Rubens N Larumbe Sepic. Both transactions, 1979 and 1980, were carried out in his office. But the notary says he has no recollection of any of the persons involved, and refers everything to what appears on the public documents he signed. Both Grasselli and his associates maintain that a “Señor Ríos” carried out the operation on behalf of Hernández. In other words, it was performed by Jorge Radice, the person responsible for all the real-estate business in which the Navy School was involved.

Christmas 1979

At the end of August, a guard told Basterra, a prisoner at the Navy Mechanical School, that he was going to be taken somewhere else. He was transferred, wearing handcuffs, shackles and a hood, in the middle of the night (of either 4 or 5 September), on board a *Swat* vehicle containing bunks for the periods of waiting prior to the kidnapping and torture of any new victim.

Basterra thought they were going to kill him. Beneath the hood, he tried to decipher the meaning of every sound he heard. As dogs barked, they took him to open ground by the river. He heard the guards’ weapons, their jokes about firing at a house where they saw light, the blows on the canvas of a boat onto which he was being carried. “I was stuck up against a piece of metal which dug into my shoulder. Each time I moved because of the

pain, I was beaten with a rifle butt”.

He was never able to identify the spot where he spent the next month. “They put us in a very damp room, the water tasted bad, there was a rotten smell, and all of us fell ill”. The guards used walkie-talkies to speak to each other, and a radio to communicate with the Navy School. Among the prisoners detained with him were Brodsky; Lepiscopo; Enrique Ardeti; Villaflor’s wife, sister and brother-in-law; and Norma Cozzi and her partner.

“They put us in the lower half of a house built on stilts that had been bricked in to make a room. It was an enclosed space with no ventilation, and several prisoners fainted from the heat. Then they opened the door. There was a tremendous stampede because a neighbour went by and saw us. We never found out what had happened to that neighbour, but we heard shouts and several shots.”

The guards were in the upper half of the house. One night after they had drunk too much they terrified the prisoners down below by stamping loudly on the wooden floor of their room, which was the prisoners’ ceiling.

Despite all the testimonies, Grasselli denied that there were ever any people kept prisoner on the island. “I don’t see how it could have been possible, because they were raised wooden floors. The house was small and very uncomfortable, so how could they keep people there, anybody could have escaped”. In addition, “there is no proper security there, how could they guard them? And besides, the passenger launch passes by in front of the house, it’s very visible”. This sounds like the judgment of a jailer rather than a priest.

Norma Cozzi met Josefina Villaflor, and, in this miserable hovel on the island, became friendly with her mother-in-law, *La gallega* Martínez. “She was a very intelligent girl, but she looked very ill. She had no idea what had happened to her husband”.

On the island, Norma Cozzi was able to talk to her aunt without any witnesses. During a stroll in the sun, Thelma Jara de Cabezas told her that they had killed Raimundo Villaflor in the Navy School. When she returned to the bricked-off room, Norma could not bring herself to tell this to *La Gallega* because she was worried that she might lose control and be killed by the guards. But she did tell Enrique Ardeti, another leading member of the Popular Armed Forces (Fap), known as *Fatty Ramón*. “For two days, he couldn’t speak. All he did was sleep. On the third day, he talked to Villaflor’s wife and sister. *La Gallega* took it very badly. She asked for tranquillisers, and spent the first days after hearing the news in a stupor”.

They learnt from their guards that there was another group of prisoners on the island who were not kept with hoods or shackles. These were prisoners who had been kept a long time and had adapted. These were the ones who had been brought in a navy bus like students on an outing. They later met one of them when he was brought to their house as a punishment for insulting a member of the task force. Because of the foul smell, their guards used to shackle them and then go off and leave them, so they were able to talk to each other. To lift their spirits, Basterra told them stories. This was how they spent their month on the island.

One of those in this larger group was Carlos Muñoz, who had been captured by the Navy School task force in November 1978. His process of recuperation had started three months later. He was obliged to forge identity documents in the navy workshops in order to save his life and to recover increasing amounts of freedom.

At first he was allowed to see his family again, in very occasional visits and always accompanied by navy personnel. Afterwards the visits became more frequent, and he was allowed to come and go on his own, and to sleep outside the Navy School at weekends. On Monday mornings, he had to present himself at a bar opposite the Navy School, and telephone from there using a code so that a car could pick him up and bring him back to the workshop. Muñoz also states that in the house on the island where he stayed, those prisoners who had got furthest in this “recuperation process” lived in normal conditions, without shackles or hoods.

Another member of this group was Enrique Fuckman, known as *Cachito*. The police had killed his 17-year-old younger brother in 1977, after he had been chased in the street and finished off when he fell to the ground injured. Both of them were *Montoneros* activists. Fuckman was kidnapped in November 1978 at the age of 22, and went through the whole cycle of the Navy School. When the prisoners were transferred to the island, he was working in the archive. He was among the first group of prisoners taken to *El Silencio*.

The prisoners in the larger house had a daily routine. They got up at 7am, had breakfast, and then were put to work. The men were given machetes to clear the land. The guards cut down poplars and willow trees with a chainsaw. The prisoners stripped the trunks and carried them to the water’s edge, where a launch came to pick up the timber. They also gathered leaves to make rope with. The navy personnel sold all this production.

The head of the task force, Captain Horacio Estrada, once said jokingly that the man who bought the timber saw the prisoners and thought they were workmen. He asked how they were paid, and when Estrada told him they got an hourly rate, he replied: “They’re taking the piss, boss. They should produce much more”.

While the men were dealing with the timber, the women did the house-cleaning and prepared food. They used water that had been made drinkable thanks to the use of four fibro-cement tanks suspended in a metal tower. As the water passed through narrow tubes between the four tanks, it became purified. An architect had designed the filter, using sand; he had been freed in 1978, and been recalled after the task force bought the island.

There was also time for leisure. One day a guard called Giba blew on his whistle and ordered: “4 o’clock: game of volleyball, insurgents versus lawfals”.

“We got together and agreed – we have to lose this game without them realising it”, says *Cachito*. They carried out their plan without too much trouble. But when the game finished, Giba shouted again: “Now for the return match”. The umpire was *Cachito*. “You should have seen us. We were barefoot or in rubber boots. They had on their Fred Perry or Lacoste T-shirts, and were wearing Adidas running shoes”. Each team had their supporters to cheer them on: on one side the guards, known as the Greens because of the colour of their uniforms, on the other the prisoners who weren’t in the team.

This time something went wrong, and the result was the opposite. “We didn’t win it, they lost it”, according to a prisoner called Lorkipanidse. A guard called Peyón then ordered them to play the decider, and all their plans went out of the window. “Our blood was up, and we killed ourselves trying to beat them. Peyón was furious. He snatched the whistle from *Cachito* and took over as judge. He cheated, but they still lost. When the game was over, we took it out on them. We sang *We are the Champions* to the music of the Peronist march”.

Reprisals were harsh, but not as bad as they had been expecting. One of the prisoners was sent to the punishment hole under the floor of the smaller house for insulting a guard during the game. “The next day they made us get up at five o’clock, gave us no breakfast, and sent us off to haul logs with snakes all around us”.

“We were given machetes to do the work with, but they had rifles. One day the neighbour from across the channel opened the door to the downstairs of the small house. The guards rushed out with all their hardware”. The shots heard that day were fired by the marine known as *Fatty Tomás*, who was shooting ducks with his Ithaca rifle.

What did the neighbours, whose life was going on as normal, know about this group; what did people for whom time had not stopped hear and see of the prisoners?

Their comments reached the socialist leader Fernando Barberini, who had a daughter among the disappeared. When the dictatorship was over, Barberini passed them on to the Radical congressman Alberto Firpo. The two men began an investigation which ended in a lawsuit.

A sergeant in the Buenos Aires police lived opposite *El Silencio*. His wife’s curiosity was aroused by the large sacks she saw on the coastguard launches, the way helicopters flew low overhead without ever landing, and the sound of gunshots she heard from time to time. What she found most curious was the difference between the number of people arriving and those leaving.

Yet, when the investigating magistrate asked her to testify, she denied all knowledge of any large bundles being shifted. She agreed there had been a helicopter, and said that a coastguard launch had brought about 50 people to the island, some of them women. Some of the people worked, others sunbathed. The gunshots were target practice. Nothing in particular caught her attention.

The owner of the general store in Paraná Miní and Tuyú Paré saw the inhabitants of *El Silencio* arrive in groups. There was always someone in charge, although it was not always the same person. They played cards, drank, and talked a lot, until their chief shut them up. They bought lots of foodstuffs, always the best, and did not mind how much it cost. He never saw anyone in uniform, but coastguard launches did berth at the island’s landing-stage.

The coastguard station had a football pitch. A team from the coastguards and some locals used to play against another from *El Silencio*. The Chaná Miní hospital is opposite the station. The policeman’s wife told the doctor on duty there that she had seen 59 moving bundles. Then someone from *El Silencio* warned her that if she carried on talking, they would chop her head off and feed it to the catfish. Perhaps that is why, as a general rule, nobody knew anything.

On 2-3 October 1979, the prisoners were taken back to the Navy Mechanics School. The [Inter-American Human Rights Commission](#) had finished its inspection, without finding anything it was looking for.

*Horacio Verbitsky is a leading Argentinean [investigative journalist](#). He was given an International Press Freedom Award by the Committee to Protect Journalists in 2001. Among his books is *The Silence: from Paulo VI to Bergoglio, the secret links between the Church and the Navy Mechanics School* (2005) and *The Flight: Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior**

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