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Remembering Young Idealists

by Anthony Daniels

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An article in *The New York Times*, reprinted in *The International Herald Tribune* for June 20, reported that the newly elected President of Argentina, Nestor Kirchner, wants to re-open the question of the military's legal responsibility for the dirty war in which 30,000 Argentine citizens were abducted and killed.

Kirchner himself was a young man during the dirty war. The *Times* quoted the writer and human rights campaigner, Horacio Verbitsky, as saying that Kirchner came from "not just any generation. . . It is one that wanted to change the country, rebelled against everything that was rotten, made mistakes, paid dearly for them and after all that still wants to govern on an ethical basis."

The article made no comment on this, except to add that "the devastation inflicted on that generation . . . is hard to overstate" and that "a large proportion of the 30,000 who 'disappeared' were bright and idealistic young people who were often singled out because they were leaders."

The phrase "bright and idealistic young people" should be quite sufficient to alert any sensible person to the likelihood that an important aspect of the story is being omitted for ideological reasons (or rather, purposes).

In pursuit of their ideals, the mistakes that some of those bright young people made included armed robbery, widespread kidnap, assassination and random murder. By the time the army carried out its coup in 1976, over 3,000 people had been killed in the political violence unleashed by the young idealists. The dirty war, terrible and unforgivable as it was, did not arise by spontaneous generation.

It is quite right that the dirty war should be remembered. But the part played by the bright young idealists should also not be forgotten, though it almost always is: for otherwise, precisely the wrong lessons will be learned. Total amnesia would be preferable, in fact, to blatantly ideological

selective memory.

Anthony Daniels is a contributing editor of *City Journal*. He is the author of, among others, *Buried But Not Quite Dead: Forgotten Writers of Père Lachaise*, forthcoming from Criterion Books.