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Chapter 1: "The World Cup of Peace"

"The day that 25 million Argentines aim for the same goal, Argentina will be a winner not once, but a thousand times over"[\[1\]](#)

- José Alfredo Martínez de Hoz, Argentine Minister of Economy during the 1978 World Cup

I: Preparing the Victory

Argentina's "World Cup of Peace" started and ended triumphantly, at least for those in charge. The three week long tournament culminated on June 25th, 1978, when the hosts defeated Holland three to one to bring the World Cup trophy to Argentina for the first time in the nation's history. The triumph prompted massive celebrations across the country, as a nation loudly, if not collectively, rejoiced in *La Albiceleste's* triumph on the biggest stage in world soccer. It also brought questions with few immediate answers. As mothers and relatives searched in vain for their "disappeared" relatives, international news sources and opinions openly doubted the validity of Argentina's on field triumphs and wondered what truly lay beyond the propaganda curtain drawn over the nation by its military rulers during June 1978. Thirty years after the tournament, Argentines still define and discuss *El Mundial* in myriad ways. This chapter

examines the paradoxes of the 1978 World Cup, and seeks to establish the historical foundation needed to critically analyze the manner in which players, coaches, and fans remember Argentina's first world title.

In 1966, FIFA selected Argentina to host the 1978 World Cup, the 11th edition of the quadrennial tournament (Smith, 69). One decade later, a military coup replaced Isabel Perón's government with a military *Junta*, in the process changing not only the political direction of the nation but also its blueprint for hosting a successful tournament in 1978 (Mason, 71). The military quickly realized the importance of the World Cup. Athletically, it served as yet another opportunity for a soccer-mad Argentina to win the most prestigious, and to that time elusive, international title on the planet (Arbena, 120-122). Away from the field, hosting the World Cup emerged as a means of demonstrating the military regime's progress in transforming Argentina from its dark days under the Peron's to a peaceful, modern nation (Ibid.). On a local level, the World Cup also became Argentina's answer to Mexico, a nation that by 1978 had successfully hosted both a Summer Olympics in 1968 and a World Cup in 1970 (Ibid.).

In order to ensure that the World Cup elevated Argentina's international reputation on and off the field, the military government accelerated plans for the tournament and declared the event a "national priority" (Archetti, 136). The previous regime of Isabel Peron had done little to prepare the country to host one of the largest sporting spectacles in the world, and General Jorge Videla's *Junta* quickly organized and revamped the *Ente Autarquico Mundial '78*, or EAM, to oversee the construction of facilities and overhaul, with the help of an American based consulting group, the nation's image (Kuper, 213, Mason, 71). Although estimates of government spending differ, it is likely that the Argentinean *Junta* spent close to seven hundred

million dollars on the World Cup, a number that dwarfed Spain's costs for the 1982 World Cup by around 300% and represented a tenth of the nation's entire spending for 1978 (Kuper, 211, Mason, 71). As spending on the World Cup reached unprecedented levels, Argentines joked that the World Cup's motto was in fact "Twenty-five million Argentines will pay for the World Cup" instead of "Twenty-five million Argentines will play in the World Cup" (Mason, 71, Kuper, 211). During the two years leading up to June 1978, the *Junta* built stadiums in Cordoba, Mar de Plata, and Mendoza, and renovated grounds in Buenos Aires and Rosario, including *El Monumental*, the site of the opening ceremonies and final. Per FIFA regulations, Argentine authorities installed color television capabilities for broadcasts of the matches (Mason, 71). The host nation treated journalists to a newly minted press center, and completely renovated Buenos Aires' international airport ("World Cup has Political Tint," *The Washington Post*, 5/9/1978). To further assist the 50,000 expected international fans, authorities also provided bilingual hostesses outside stadiums (Mason, 71, Smith, 76).

Out of the public eye, another set of more sinister plans was also under way. Despite intense government repression, guerilla groups such as the *Montoneros* still posed a threat to the "stability" the *Junta* sought to establish in the country. On the eve of the tournament, security forces initiated "*El Barrido*," a security "[o]peration" that sought to further cleanse the nation of subversives who might stage attacks during games and events, or even have the audacity to speak out against the military regime (Kuper, 213). A declaration by the Montoneros themselves promising an end to attacks during the World Cup did little to prevent government action ("Guerillas Vow Not to Halt World Soccer," *The Washington Post*, 3/26/1977). "Subversives" were not the only targets. Presenting a modern Argentina to the world meant denying the poverty that racked areas of the country. To prevent foreigners from viewing the *villas miserias*,

or shantytowns, on the road to Rosario, the military government constructed a wall depicting middle class residences. (Kuper, 213).

Without control of the press, modern facilities and denials of inequality would have fallen short of ensuring the positive depiction of Argentina that the military *Junta* sought and needed (Smith, 69). General Videla's government was not the first Argentine regime to restrict freedom of the press, but its efforts to control journalists and mass media dwarfed the restrictions imposed by prior administrations (Ibid., 70-71). The *Junta* quickly imposed censorship regulations after the coup. On April 22nd, 1976, the *Junta* declared, "it is forbidden to inform, comment or make reference to...subversive incidents, the appearance of bodies and the death of subversive elements...includ[ing] victims of kidnappings and missing persons" (Ibid., 71). As the World Cup drew neared, censorship extended from discussions of "disappeared" persons to commentary on *La Selección*, coach César Luis Menotti, and depictions of Argentina in foreign news sources (Ibid., 72-73). Defying censorship codes brought a heavy price. During the *Junta's* seven years in power, around seventy journalists "disappeared" (Ibid., 71). Tellingly, in 1977 the *Junta* disappeared twenty-one journalists, roughly twice the yearly average (Ibid.). It is certainly possible that the number of press members who "vanished" is higher in 1977 due to the efforts of the military government to consolidate control after the coup, but it seems just as likely that the press crackdown had roots in the *Junta's* desire to control domestic popular opinion leading up to the World Cup (Arbena, 123).

Controlling domestic mass media outlets was only half the battle, and Videla's *Junta* also quickly, and effectively, targeted foreign press sources. Leading up to the World Cup, both Amnesty International and several European organizations recognized the human rights

violations present in Argentina. While Amnesty promoted an information campaign aimed at educating the foreign press, groups in France, Holland, and Sweden openly campaigned for their national sides and other teams around the world to boycott the tournament (Smith, 72, "La Otra Final"). Comité de Boycott du Mondial de Football en Argentine, or COBA, led the charge, publishing literature that visually depicted the 1978 World Cup's official seal, two hands holding a soccer ball, surrounded by barbed wire fences reminiscent of Nazi detention centers and concentration camps ("La Otra Final").

Argentina newspapers responded to foreign pressure by publishing scathing attacks on the "campaign[s] of lies" perpetrated outside the nation ("El Gráfico," quoted in Mason, 72) and trumpeting the pre-destined victory that awaited the national team on June 25th, 1978. *La Prensa's* World Cup preview named Argentina one of the "cultural center[s] of unquestionable world focus" that "could not escape the responsibility to host an international soccer encounter, no matter...its magnitude" (*La Prensa*, quoted in Smith, 75). Other articles simply stated, "Argentina has already won the World Cup" (El Grafico, quoted in Mason, 72). Responding to foreign allegations was not enough, however, and although the *Junta* awarded close to 7,000 press credentials to foreign and domestic journalists, the Argentine government closely monitored who arrived in Argentina and what they subsequently wrote and said (Smith, 75). Videla's regime briefly jailed a "leftist" French journalist, and other members of the foreign press corps found themselves similarly threatened. In one instance, Argentine journalists even attacked a foreign reporter who wrote about gunshots heard close to *El Monumental* (Kuper, 214). The combination of domestic censorship and foreign intimidation certainly did not quell all criticism of Argentina's World Cup, but it did manage to quiet some of the most damaging

attacks (Smith, 76). With preparations winding down, the focus of the *Junta*, the nation, and the world turned to the opening ceremonies.

II: The Price of Glory

Argentina started its run to World Cup glory on June 2nd, 1978, with a two to one victory over Hungary. The opening ceremony that preceded the game previewed the triumph that ensued, as General Videla declared that the 1978 World Cup would be the "World Cup of Peace" (Videla, quoted in Mason, 72). Off the field, government repression had already turned this statement into a lie. Soon enough, events in Rosario would question the good will of the players and the intentions of Argentina's government on the field as well.

After defeating France two to one and falling to Italy one to zero, Argentina advanced into the second round of the tournament. The four group winners and runners up from the first round made up the elimination round, as teams competed in round robin play in two groups of four to determine who would play for the World Cup title on June 25th in Buenos Aires. The winners of each group advanced to play one another in *El Monumental*, while the runners up in each group would play for third place. Following the first round, Argentina faced a mostly South American gauntlet of Poland, Peru, and traditional nemesis Brazil. After defeating Poland and drawing with Brazil, Argentina closed group play against Peru. A win would leave Argentina level on points with their northern rivals, but *La Albiceleste* needed to beat Peru by at least four goals to overcome Brazil's lead in goal differential and secure a place in the final. In short, a Herculean task (Kuper, 211).

On June 21st, 1978, Argentina decisively, and controversially, won a place in the final. *La Albiceleste's* six to zero demolition of their Peruvian counterparts speaks to the military *Junta's* efforts, perceived or real, to control the World Cup and guarantee Argentina a victory. According to multiple sources, Argentine officials bribed Peru to throw the game, enticing collaboration with an offer of over thirty thousands tons of grain and \$50 million dollars (Kuper, 211-212). Neither side has ever admitted fixing the game, although Rodolfo Manzo, Peru's backup goalie, is rumored to have discussed such an arrangement (Kuper, 212, Bayer, 130). Further, the fact that Peru's starting goalie, Ramón Quiroga, was born in Argentina has raised additional doubts about the ability of the *Junta* to fix the match (Kuper, 212).

The official FIFA report on the World Cup noted that Argentina "magically gained a place in the final" and further commented that the Peru match " was the most sensational result of the tournament," but did not directly mention allegations of foul play (Courte, 82, 115). For his part, Quiroga denied throwing the game, stating "the allegations [of bribery] have hit us hard and I know that they will worsen when we arrive [home] in Lima...we did what we could...we played against Argentina with the same desire as we did against Scotland" (Quiroga, quoted in Gilbert and Vitagliano, 206). Argentine newspapers responded to public outcry in Peru and Brazil, including a headline in Rio de Janeiro's *O Globo* that labeled Argentina's win "a shameful day for soccer," by declaring that Argentina deserved the victory with their superior play (Ibid.).

In addition to charges of bribery, allegations of doping among key Argentine players before both the game against Peru and the final against Holland have also surfaced (Kuper, 219). Although rumors of drug use are even less grounded in fact than allegations of bribery – the official FIFA report mentions, "Argentina...seemed fresher and stronger in extra time [of the

game against Peru]," and author Simon Kuper quotes an unnamed source as asserting that one of the Argentine player's urine-based drug tests yielded positive results for pregnancy – their mere presence tarnishes the World Cup's credibility (Courte, 119, Kuper, 219). Whether or not allegations of bribery and doping are true, the controversy produced by the result demonstrates the negative perceptions shared by those abroad, as well as within Argentina, of the Military Junta's intentions in staging the tournament. Public outcry did nothing to change the result, however, and Argentina advanced to the final against Holland.

Whereas Argentina's de-facto semifinal match against Peru provided controversy, the 1978 World Cup final provided drama, and, for Argentina's military *Junta*, victory. On June 25th, 1978, extra time goals from tournament stars Mario Kempes and Daniel Bertoni spurred *La Albiceleste* to a three to one victory over the defending world cup champions. As the scoreboard on the northern side of *El Monumental* proclaimed "Argentina, World Champions!" fans and players alike celebrated on the field and across the country (Gilbert and Vitagliano, 227). According to one eyewitness, "there was an explosion of ecstasy and hysteria [in Buenos Aires]...[a]ll the country was on the streets" (Kuper, 209). The Washington Post compared the party to similar scenes that had played out after Argentine wins throughout the tournament ("First Title Ignites Wild Celebration," The Washington Post, 6/26/1978). The celebrations continued through the night into the following day, when thousands of Argentines gathered in the heart of Buenos Aires at the Plaza de Mayo to commemorate the victory with songs and patriotic chants (Mason, 72-73, "First Title Ignites Wild Celebration"). Three and a half weeks after the start of the tournament, and two years after the military coup, the *Junta* had their victory, and Argentina had the World Cup ("First Title Ignites Wild Celebration,").

The rollercoaster events on and off the field before, during, and immediately following the conclusion of the 1978 World Cup have shaped the way Argentines remember the tournament. The day after the World Cup final, an article in the Washington Post declared, "The celebrating may never stop" (Ibid.). The celebrations did stop, however, and, although they started once again in 1986 after Diego Maradona led a new wave of national stars to the World Cup title in Mexico, Argentines now view the 1978 World Cup with degrees of confusion and anger. The return of democracy in 1983 has made many details of the 1978 World Cup more accessible to the general public, who in turn have increasingly spoken out for and against the "athletic" victory of their team. The next two chapters investigate the memories first of the central actors on the field and second of those in the stands, and compare the process of athletic memory in Argentina to similar cases, such as the 1936, 1968, and 1972 Summer Olympics in Berlin, Mexico, and Munich, respectively.

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