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A historiographical examination of the life and myths of Eva Perón

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A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL EXAMINATION OF THE
LIFE AND MYTHS OF EVA PERÓN

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Jill Bryant Meyers

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ABSTRACT

A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL EXAMINATION OF THE LIFE AND MYTHS OF EVA PERÓN

by Jill Bryant Meyers

Eva Perón, wife of Argentine dictator Juan Domingo Perón, endeared herself to the poor of Argentina through her avid support of the working class. However, her hard-line politicking and self-serving agenda caused many affluent Argentines to despise her. Eva Perón's untimely death at age thirty-three, coupled with the strong emotions people felt for her, led to considerable interest in her life. Since her death in 1952 she has become the subject of numerous scholarly studies and fictional accounts. This paper reviews those works which were published in English from the time of Eva Perón's death to the present decade. By examining this literature it is evident that myths and false imagery have developed on her life. Her life has become so saturated with misconceptions that it has been difficult to uncover the real Eva Perón. At the same time these misconceptions have contributed to her becoming the most prominent woman of twentieth-century Latin American history.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: EVA PERÓN	1
CHAPTER ONE: MYTHS OF THE POLITICAL EVITA	14
CHAPTER TWO: THE MYTHS AND PERCEPTIONS OF A WOMAN	38
CHAPTER THREE: AN IMAGE BUILDER—THE EVA PERÓN FOUNDATION	60
CHAPTER FOUR: THE FEMINIST EVA PERÓN	79
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION	107
BIBLIOGRAPHY	122

INTRODUCTION:

EVA PERÓN

Eva Perón, first lady of Argentina from 1946 to 1952, stands out in history as a dynamic, intriguing character. Known as "Evita" by her supporters, she has been remembered for her jewels, her furs, and her hair, and depending on whose viewpoint, her kindness or ruthlessness. A young, attractive, energetic woman, Evita has often been referred to as the woman of the "Cinderella Story." Evita was born of humble origins and rose to great wealth and power after marrying Juan Domingo Perón, twice president of Argentina. Her poor background helped her identify with the people, encouraging her to go out of her way to offend the upper class who had snubbed her. Forty-five years after her death she is still of interest as can be seen through the recent release of the film Evita, Tomás Eloy Martínez's novel Santa Evita, Alicia Dujovne Ortiz's biography Eva Perón, and the reissue of several other biographies and anthologies of her writings. This study is an examination of the mythology, imagery and perceptions of Eva Perón found in English literature since her death in 1952.

María Eva Duarte de Perón was born in Los Toldos, a small town in the Pampas in the Province of Buenos Aires, on May 7, 1919.¹ The details of her

¹ Eva Perón's birth name was Eva María but was changed to María Eva when her birth certificate was altered to cover her illegitimacy.

childhood and early adulthood are foggy, primarily due to the censorship she exercised at the height of her power. Biographer Fleur Cowles wrote of her, “the miracle is that any woman in our time could rise to such unheard of power and have the record so garbled.”² What is known is that Evita grew up poor and inconsequential to the world. Her mother, Juana Ibarguren, and father, Juan Duarte, were not married as her father had a legitimate family in the nearby town of Chivilcoy. When Eva Perón was six years old, her father died, leaving her mother alone to support a family of four daughters and one son. The family moved to Junín, another small town twenty miles away, in 1930.

At age fifteen, with high ambitions of becoming an actress, Evita moved to the big city, Buenos Aires. She spent several years appearing in bit parts in various theater companies. She finally became somewhat successful in 1939 when she landed a part as an actress, and subsequently worked for several radio stations including Radio Argentina and Radio El Mundo. Eva Perón became popular for portraying famous women in soap opera radio programs. She was even hired for a few small parts in films before she met Juan Perón in 1944. After meeting Perón, she not only became one of the best paid soap opera actresses in Buenos Aires but starred in two films. In all, she

² Fleur Cowles, Bloody Precedent (New York: Random House, 1952), 150.

appeared in five movies, twenty plays, and at least twenty-six radio soap operas.³

At the time that Evita met Perón, he was vice president, secretary of labor and welfare, and minister of war in a military regime which had come to power in 1943. Their paths crossed at a benefit to assist those displaced and injured in the San Juan earthquake that killed thousands. Romance sparked between the two, and their liaison drew criticism when Perón began openly living with Evita, a serious affront to the puritanical façade of the Argentine ruling class.

Perón met Evita eighteen months before he became president of Argentina. Robert J. Alexander described him as an “early middle-aged army officer of no great distinction.”⁴ Robert D. Crassweller expanded, “Until Perón was forty-eight, there was no indication whatever that he would even have a political career, let alone that he would be elected president when he was fifty.”⁵ Perón, like Evita, grew up poor and illegitimate. He was born Juan Domingo Perón on October 8, 1895, in Lobos, located in the Province of Buenos Aires. In 1899 his family migrated to Patagonia. Perón grew up

³ Nicholas Fraser and Marysa Navarro, Eva Perón (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1980), 48.

⁴ Robert J. Alexander, Juan Domingo Perón: A History (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979), 27.

⁵ Robert D. Crassweller, Perón and the Enigmas of Argentina (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987), 11.

working on his father's farm, until at age nine he left home to attend school in Buenos Aires. In 1911 he enrolled in *Colegio Militar de la Nación* and graduated in 1913 as a second lieutenant.

Perón advanced gradually in his military career. Over thirty years he was promoted from second lieutenant to colonel. From 1920 to 1926, he taught in a military capacity at the *Escuela de Suboficiales*. He then became a student at *Escuela Superior de Guerra* in 1926, graduating in 1929. In that same year he married his first wife, school teacher Aurelia "Potota" Tizón, who died nine years later. Perón became a military attaché in Chile in 1936. In 1939 he was sent to Italy to observe an Alpine unit. While in Italy he traveled to Rome, where he later professed to meeting Benito Mussolini—a doubtful occurrence. In 1941 Perón became a colonel as well as the chief of a mountain unit in Mendoza. He returned to Buenos Aires the next year and began promoting the *Grupo de Oficiales Unidos* (G.O.U.), which was founded in March 1943. A revolution occurred several months later, on June 4, 1943, which led to Perón's placement as secretary of labor and welfare the following November. In February 1944, Perón was named minister of war, and then on July 7, 1944, he was appointed vice president.

Crassweller wrote that, "with these three positions his dominance of the government was unquestionable."⁶ A few military men were not happy with Perón's evident power because of his strong pro-labor position. His opponents in the military, members of the group *Campo de Mayo*, pressured then President Edelmiro J. Farrell into demanding Perón's resignation on October 9, 1945. Perón was jailed on October 13 and released after a mass demonstration in the *Plazo de Mayo* on October 17.⁷ These demonstrators came primarily from the working class.

Following the October 1945 crisis, Perón ran for and was elected president of Argentina. Once Perón became president, he and Evita became the most powerful couple in the country. "At the start of his Presidency, he had given her (Evita) a desk and few chores to do at the Ministry of Labour. Within two years she was virtually running the country," wrote biographer John Barnes.⁸ Although Barnes' statement is an exaggeration, Eva unofficially headed the ministry of labor, working closely with trade unions. She also founded and headed the Eva Perón Foundation, a private welfare agency. In addition, she created the Peronist Women's Party, a huge body of organized Peronist supporters. She was a powerful woman, loved by her

⁶ Ibid., 122.

⁷ October 17 crisis is covered in greater length in chapter one.

⁸ John Barnes, *Evita First Lady: A Biography of Eva Perón* (New York: Grove Press, 1978), 111.

descamisados but detested by the oligarchy.⁹ During the height of Evita's power, she received considerable attention from the international press, especially during her celebrated 1947 Rainbow tour, a good will trip to Europe where Evita met with several dignitaries including Francisco Franco and Pope Pius XII. In addition, Evita received extensive publicity in her own country. This was largely due to Perón's censorship of the media and Evita's ownership of the newspapers Democracia and El Mundo.

Evita was passionately dedicated to her husband and Peronism. All of Evita's work was in the name of Peronism and its doctrine Justicialism. Justicialism has often been referred to as the third position—a position between capitalism and communism. Jean Claude García-Zamor, political scientist and historian, defined Justicialism as a mixture of social justice and economic independence.¹⁰ He stated that it contained German, French, Brazilian, positivist and idealist influences with an Argentine twist.

Many did not view Justicialism quite as benignly. According to biographer Mary Main, Peronism encouraged communism because it restrained any opposition. Cowles did not view Peronism as the working class party professed by Evita and Perón. "Perón never was surrounded by the

⁹*Descamisados* literally means shirtless or shabby, but the term was used by the Perons as an endearing term for their supporters who labored in blue collar jobs and did not wear a tie and jacket.

¹⁰ Jean-Claude García-Zamor, Public Administration & Social Changes in Argentina: 1943-1955 (Rio de Janeiro: Pan American Copyright Convention: 1968), 14.

working proletariat he proudly claims his own; most of the time his ragged followers were a worthless, workless class, people of the streets without cause or conscience."¹¹

Regardless of these views, Perón portrayed himself as a man of the people, and he supported the working class and labor unions. He ran for re-election in 1951 under this platform and won. But the victory was not as sweet as it had been in 1946; Evita was dying.

The golden years for Peronism ended when Evita died of cancer on July 26, 1952. She was thirty-three years old. As she lay dying, two women were writing biographies about her. They published their works in English in 1952, the year of her death. These biographical sketches were The Woman with the Whip by Mary Main, who wrote under the pseudonym María Flores, and Bloody Precedent by Fleur Cowles. These two works, like the majority of works appearing in English in the 1950s, were anti-Peronist because of the strong anti-Peronist feelings in the United States and Great Britain.

Main began writing her story during the height of Perón's regime. The author was born and raised in Buenos Aires and had an anti-Communist, upper-class viewpoint. Cowles, a North American journalist and editor, was married to publisher Gardner Cowles. She met Eva in July 1950 at the *Casa Rosada* with a group of visiting editors and publishers consisting of thirty-two

¹¹ Cowles, 144.

men and three women.¹² Their hours together were brief, and the author said she wished she had known Evita better. Both Cowles' and Main's works were filled with unflattering descriptions of Evita and perpetuated many of the myths that are still embraced presently.

Perón fell from power three years after Evita's death and was exiled, eventually ending up in Spain with his third wife María Estela (Isabel) Martínez. After his ouster from the presidency, fascination in Evita waned in the United States while interest in Perón and Peronism flourished. Some of the biographies on Perón incorporated in this study are: George I. Blanksten's, Perón's Argentina, 1967; Robert J. Alexander's, Juan Domingo Perón: A History, 1979; Joseph A. Page's, Perón. A Biography, 1983; and Robert D. Crassweller's, Perón and the Enigmas of Argentina, 1987. Blanksten, Alexander, and Crassweller all had a background in governmental work. Between 1942 and 1946, Blanksten was affiliated with two agencies of the U.S. government: Inter-American Affairs and Department of State. Alexander, professor of economics and political science at Rutgers University, received his Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1950. Alexander was involved in the initiation of the Alliance for Progress as well as a consultant to U.S. AID. Crassweller, born in 1915, received his LL.B. in 1941 from Harvard and worked as a lawyer in the 1940s and 1950s as well as for the Department of

¹² *Casa Rosada* (Pink House) was where the president of Argentina resided; in other words it was Argentina's White House.

State. Page, born in 1934, received his LL.B. and LL.M. from Harvard. Page was a professor of law at the University of Denver from 1964 to 1968 and then went to Georgetown University.

Biographies of Juan Perón are interesting because they often contain several chapters on Evita, but they were written from the viewpoint of the President Perón and his wife. General histories, like the biographies of Perón, also placed Evita in a secondary position. These histories include George Pendle's Argentina, 1961; Arthur P. Whitaker's Argentina, 1964; David Rock's Argentina 1516-1982: From Spanish Colonization to the Falklands War, 1985; and Donald C. Hodges' Argentina, 1943-1976: The National Revolution and Resistance, 1988.

In the late 1970s interest in Evita resurfaced with the publication of several biographical works. This resurgence followed Perón's return to power on October 12, 1973. He served as president until his death on July 1, 1974. Since the late 1970s, biographies have not had the anti-Peronist view of Main and Cowles. Instead, these works developed in two different directions. Some maintained the myths of Evita, while others attempted to be more objective and dispel those myths. Popular works perpetuated the mythology of Evita and consisted of prevalent biographies and fiction.

Popular biographies include John Barnes' Evita First Lady: A Biography of Eva Perón, 1978; Paul L. Montgomery's Eva, Evita: The Life and Death of

Eva Perón, 1979; and W.A. Harbinson's Evita: Saint or Sinner?, 1996. These three authors come from nonacademic backgrounds. Barnes was editor of the Buenos Aires Herald in 1955, during the fall of Perón. He has also worked for the Los Angeles Times, Newsweek and (London) Sunday Times.

Montgomery worked as a correspondent in Latin America, reporting for The New York Times. Harbinson wrote fictional works as well as other biographies of famous individuals including Elvis Presley. Fictional works implemented in this study include two novels by Tomás Eloy Martínez: Santa Evita, 1996, and The Perón Novel, 1988; the 1981 television movie Evita Perón starring Faye Dunaway; and the musical and major feature film Evita written by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice. Fiction provides an enlightening look at Evita because, unconcerned with sticking strictly to the facts, it is free to interpret and convey the many myths surrounding Evita.

The more impartial works are Nicholas Fraser and Marysa Navarro's, Eva Perón, 1980, (second edition 1996) and Alicia Dujovne Ortiz's Eva Perón: A Biography, 1996. Navarro, born in Spain in 1934, received her Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1964 and became a professor of history at Dartmouth in 1968. Navarro has been by far the most prolific writer of Evita. Fraser and Ortiz share a journalistic background. Fraser was a writer for the London Times, Sunday Times and BBC. Ortiz worked for La Nación and La Opinión in France, and in addition, was born and raised in Buenos Aires.

This study also encompasses numerous scholarly journal articles as well as newspaper and magazine articles relating to Juan and Eva Perón and Argentina. In addition, it includes Eva Perón's own writings, My Mission in Life, 1952 and In My Own Words, 1996. An interesting anthropological work is Eva Perón: The Myths of a Woman, 1979, by J. M. Taylor. Taylor, from the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, San Diego, had an interesting perspective because she traveled to Argentina more than twenty years after Evita's death to explore the myths found in middle-class households. Her study took a unique look at the patterns of two diverging Evita myths that have accumulated over time.

This purpose is a historiographical examination of the myth and woman—Eva Perón. The paper analyses only works written in English from the 1950s to the present decade. The focus is on works in English in order to evaluate how Evita has been perceived in the United States. Biographies of Eva Perón provide the richest accounts of her life and person. However, biographies of Juan Perón, Eva Perón's own writings and fictional accounts are extremely insightful as they demonstrate how differently Evita has been portrayed.

In analyzing the diverse works concerning Evita, it is evident that Eva Perón was a strong, determined woman with enough charm and beauty to fulfill her ambitions of wealth and power. Once on top, she used her power to help improve the lives of the working poor. To these people, she was a

savior. To the oligarchy, who received her wrath for perpetuating an inequitable society, she was ruthless and corrupt; nothing more than a vengeful whore. Because she coexisted with these two images, her memory has continued along this dual path. Initially, literature in English focused only on the negative image in response to Juan and Eva Perón's tyranny of the upper class and their stance against the United States. As a result, Evita has been misrepresented as a beautiful yet villainous and immoral woman. This bad-girl image persisted because Evita did not capture the hearts of the masses in the United States as she did in Argentina. However, in recent years literature has started to present Evita more sympathetically. At the same time she has become more of an icon and a myth.

This paper analyzes several different issues encompassing Evita. It explores how writers have interpreted the political Evita and the woman Evita. The myths and legends that have surrounded these two facets of her are also evaluated. The thesis examines four myths of the political Evita: *the Champion of Labor*, *the Nazi*, *the Martyr* and *the Revolutionary*, and two myths of the woman Evita: *the Saint* and *the Whore*.

In addition, the paper addresses two issues she was well remembered for: her philanthropy and her feminist work. This study examines her role in the Eva Perón Foundation, an impressive welfare system that was created and headed by Evita. It also looks at the part she played as a female leader, including her role as head of the Peronist Women's Party and her short-lived

run for the vice presidency. Finally, this study places Evita in the context of female Latin American historiography.

CHAPTER ONE:

MYTHS OF THE POLITICAL EVITA

Introduction

While historians and biographers do not doubt that Evita was a powerful and charismatic woman, many of her beliefs and actions have been shrouded in mystery. Forty-five years after her death, questions still plague her memory. Authors still speculate on who Eva Perón was, what she believed in, and what she accomplished. Evita is and was a mystery. She evoked strong reactions from people, and these reactions were not often based on reality. They were based on the bending of reality. Every facet of Evita's life was surrounded by myth.

During her life, *Life* magazine called Evita "one of the most powerful and capricious, hated and beloved women in the world," and wrote that she was both "a legend and a mystery."¹ Thirty years later the idea of Evita being a mystery continued with V.S. Naipaul writing, in *The Return of Eva Perón with the Killings in Trinidad*, "The Eva Perón story has been lost; there is now only the legend."² Many of these legends were Evita's own doing. She helped create many of the fallacies, as long as these fallacies reflected well on her. As for the negative myths, her enemies created them to damage her reputation.

In this chapter, four myths are examined: *the Champion of Labor, the Nazi, the Martyr and the Revolutionary*. These myths have been joined into

¹ "Eva Perón: A First Look at the Private Life of a Controversial First Lady," *Life*, 11 December 1950, 69.

² V. S. Naipaul, *The Return of Eva Perón with the Killings in Trinidad* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 113.

one chapter because they all relate to Evita's political image and the extreme feelings people had for her. The view of Evita as the champion of labor stemmed from her part in the October 17 crisis. The question of whether she was a Nazi or fascist came from her political beliefs. In death, her politics lived on as she became a martyr and a symbol for revolutionaries. Part of Evita's historic status stemmed from her immense power. Myths about her political beliefs derived from this position of authority. She was powerful, she was hated, she was loved and she hid her own past. There was no wonder her life and work would evoke myths.

Champion of Labor, October 17, 1945

The first myth, which stemmed from the October 1945 crisis, was Evita's introduction to Peronism: her political birth. By the middle of 1944, Juan D. Perón, as vice president, secretary of labor and welfare, and minister of war, had become one of the strongest men in the Argentine government. With this strength, opposition usually follows, and Perón had his share of rivals. His opponents got the upper hand in October of 1945. They forced Perón to resign from his government posts and placed him under house arrest. A few events prompted this action. First, a group of Perón's opponents participated in what became known as the Liberty March on September 19, 1945. This march illustrated the extent of the opposition to Perón's pro-labor stance and increasing power within the government. Second, Evita helped appoint friend Oscar L. Nicolini to secretary of communications on October 5. Perón's opponents, especially those in the army, disliked Evita and objected to her growing influence over Perón. The

political appointment of Nicolini was a signal to Perón's opponents that Evita had far too much control over Perón.

General Eduardo Avalos seized Perón's power on October 9, and Perón resigned from all three posts. Subsequently, Perón was arrested on October 12. The navy took Perón to Martín García Island. While he was held captive, his supporters engineered a mass rally on his behalf. Over 250,000 supporters gathered to demonstrate on October 17, 1945. This demonstration forced Perón's release and with this upsurge in popularity, Perón easily found his way into the presidency. The myth that developed from this event was *Evita, the Champion of Labor*. The myth circling this event was that Evita organized the massive demonstration that propelled Perón to the presidency.

According to Peronism, Evita was born on October 17, 1945. This was not only convenient due to her unfavorable background, but appropriate because this was the beginning of Perón's quick route to the presidency. It was common for both pro- and anti-Peronists to support this myth. For those against Perón, it made him appear weak as he relied on a woman to rescue him in his time of need. For those supporting him, it allowed Evita to become a hero of the working people. The press played a key role in spreading this idea of *Evita, the Champion of Labor*, across to the United States and Europe. An example of this was a Time article of May 21, 1951, which referred to Evita as a key organizer of the demonstration.³

In 1980 Marysa Navarro wrote the article, "Evita and the Crisis of 17 October 1945: A Case Study Peronist and Anti-Peronist Mythology." This article was a historiographical examination of Evita's actions during Perón's

³ "Love in Power," Time, 21 May 1951, 45.

arrest. In this article, Navarro argued that both general histories on Argentina and studies of Peronism have shown that Evita engineered the workers' demonstration.⁴ Navarro wrote, "Until the mid-sixties, Evita's active and forceful participation in the October crisis was widely accepted by both Peronists and anti-Peronists."⁵ Navarro was accurate in this analysis. The literature published in the 1950s and 1960s promoted Evita as the organizer of the October 17 demonstration far more than has recent literature.

The general histories appearing in English before Evita died or shortly afterward typically depicted her as the key organizer of October 17. Leonard and Ruth Greenup, writing Revolution Before Breakfast: Argentina 1941-1946 in 1947, stated that Evita coordinated the demonstration by organizing the workers. Arthur P. Whitaker, noted Latin Americanist and author of The United States and Argentina in 1954, and Argentina in 1964, took the same view. George Pendle, in Argentina, 1961, also thought Evita organized the rally and wrote, "Working-class riots followed, and the union leaders—feverishly assisted by Eva Duarte...organized large-scale demonstrations."⁶ In 1967, George Blanksten stated in Perón's Argentina, that Evita played a major role in frustrating the coup against Perón as "she alerted his political lieutenants and the machinery for restoring the colonel to power was rushed into operation."⁷

⁴ Marysa Navarro, "Evita and the Crisis of 17 October 1945: A Case Study Peronist and Anti-Peronist Mythology," Journal of Latin America Studies 12 (1980): 128.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 128-129.

⁶ George Pendle, Argentina, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 101.

⁷ George Blanksten, Perón's Argentina (New York: Russell & Russell, 1967), 90.

Anti-Peronists did not deviate from this depiction. Mary Main, in The Woman with the Whip: Eva Perón, 1952, gave credit to Evita for her overwhelming loyalty to Perón. Main believed she demonstrated her importance to Perón by acting with strength and determination. The negative part of this anti-Peronist version was that Perón proved his weakness in character. Fleur Cowles, in Bloody Precedent, 1952, acknowledged that Evita played a critical role in the mass demonstration, but she avoided alluding to specific actions. Cowles wrote that during Perón's arrest Evita never stopped to weep as "she went to work at once, organizing her 'shirtless ones' with furious speed and dispatch, readying them to mass, to be available at her bidding."⁸

Evita herself was partly responsible for the making of this component of her own myth, while neglecting to mention any particulars. In My Mission in Life, published in 1952, Evita wrote, "I rushed into the streets looking for friends who might still be able to do something for him."⁹ Further claiming that she went knocking from door to door, she added "As I went down from the proud and rich districts to the poor and humble, doors began to open more generously with more cordiality."¹⁰

While Navarro argued in "Evita and the Crisis of 17 October 1945" that this myth was widely accepted until the mid-1960s, many writers in the 1970s were still depicting Evita as the October 17 savior. In 1979, J. M. Taylor wrote

⁸ Cowles, 160.

⁹ Eva Perón, My Mission in Life, trans. Ethel Cherry (New York: Vantage Press, 1952), 27-28.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

in Eva Perón: The Myths of a Woman, "Risking her life, she went out into the streets to attempt the impossible: engineering Perón's return to his people and to her."¹¹ John Barnes, in Evita First Lady: A Biography of Eva Perón, 1978, also continued the myth. He said that when Perón resigned from his posts, Evita began rallying for support on October 15, and "pumped full of Eva Duarte's adrenaline," she got on the phone to call Perón's supporters.¹² Evita, the political organizer, is also portrayed in the 1981 television movie Evita Perón directed by Marvin J. Chomsky and based on the biographies of John Barnes and Nicholas Fraser and Marysa Navarro. Evita Perón, which starred Faye Dunaway and James Farentino, depicted Evita rounding up labor union leaders and rousing them to demonstrate on Perón's behalf.

An interesting example of the changing perception of Evita that Navarro mentioned in the article "Evita and the Crisis of 17 October 1945" can be found in the work of Robert Alexander. In 1951, Alexander wrote in The Perón Era, that Evita helped organize the workers for the demonstration. But in 1979, Alexander argued, in Juan Domingo Perón: A History, that Evita played no significant role in the constructing of the protest. Her only significance, according to Alexander, was that she may have given Perón the will to keep fighting.

The role as emotional supporter has become prevalent in the work of more recent historians who have given her a less prominent part. Writers of the 1980s and 1990s have placed Evita into this emotionally supportive and

¹¹ J. M. Taylor, Eva Perón: The Myths of a Woman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 73.

¹² Barnes, 41.

peripheral position. Joseph A. Page, in Perón, A Biography, 1983, believed that Evita's actions during the arrest have never been established. Gary W. Wynia, in Argentine Illusions and Realities, 1986, stated that she did not participate in the demonstration. Nicholas Fraser and Marysa Navarro in Eva Perón, published first in 1980 and then in 1996, stated Evita did not have strong enough connections within the labor unions to organize a demonstration, but that she could be credited with being loyal to Perón throughout his arrest. Ortiz, in Eva Perón: A Biography, 1996, assumed the same stance as Fraser and Navarro. Robert D. Crassweller in Perón and the Enigmas of Argentina, 1987, stated that the political Evita, who developed as first lady, could have organized the demonstration, but during this time she wielded no power. Within these recent historical works one finds the conclusions that she tried to get a writ of *habeas corpus* during the arrest, and she experienced physical abuse during a taxi ride, but she could not have had the connections to organize a rally of over 250,000 people. These recent works have been able to wade through the myth and shape Evita's actions into a more believable course. None has doubted her sincere belief in Perón but rather her ability to follow through on that belief.

Evita, the Nazi

Although the October 17 myth made Evita a voice for Peronism, a second myth came into being once she assumed her power. This myth was not as flattering. She was soon characterized as *Evita, the Nazi*. This myth had become so popular that when the musical Evita debuted in New York in 1979, The New York Times depicted Eva Perón as a fascist. The newspaper

printed, "The historical Eva...was an admirer of Hitler, Mussolini and Franco."¹³ The article discussed how critics of the musical were displeased with lyricist Tim Rice and composer Andrew Lloyd Webber for deciding to feature a "dedicated fascist," even though Rice and Lloyd Webber argued that the musical was not a glorification of Evita but rather a warning.¹⁴

The New York Times article added to the prevalent myth that Evita was a fascist, a supporter of the Nazis and a Nazi spy. Anti-Peronists like Mary Main used this myth to defame Evita. In The Woman with the Whip, Main wrote that Peronism was "in fact no more than Fascism elasticized to suit the circumstances and temperament of South American peoples."¹⁵ To call Peronism a fascist institution was especially hurtful to Evita's image when used in the United States and Europe where fascism was directly connected to the atrocities of World War II. While Main equated Peronism to fascism, she also claimed that "It was Eva, not Perón, who had the fanaticism of Hitler."¹⁶

It is easy to understand why the myth of *Evita, the Nazi* became so prevalent. The idea that she was a Nazi or a fascist sprang primarily from Perón's political leanings. During the early years of World War II, in 1939 and 1940, Perón spent time in Europe observing Italian troops and visiting Germany. He boasted afterward, though doubted by most historians, to have

¹³ Michael Owen, "A London Hit Arrives with a Controversial Heroine," The New York Times, 23 September 1979, III:1.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ María Flores (Mary Main), The Woman with the Whip: Eva Perón (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1952), 70.

¹⁶ Ibid., 241.

actually met with Mussolini. In addition, he admired German military techniques. This was not unusual as many in the Argentine military admired and followed German training methods. Like many of his military colleagues, Perón had been a supporter of the Axis powers during World War II. Argentina stood isolated with Chile as the only two countries in the Americas not to support the United States following the attack on Pearl Harbor. Argentina finally succumbed to pressure (in order to play an active role in the United Nations) and declared war against Germany and Japan in the final stages on March 27, 1945. Adding to the controversy of Argentina's questionable alliance with the Allies, two German submarines landed in Argentina in 1945 to "surrender."

What further labeled Perón as Nazi or fascist was Argentina's alliance with Spain's Francisco Franco. Following the second World War, Argentina supported Franco and provided economic aid to his country. Perón's relationship with Franco led to the notion that Perón's "Justicialism" was actually Latin Americanized fascism. After Perón became president, Spain extended an official invitation for him to visit. Realizing the political risk of this move, Perón sent Evita as the representative of Argentina and this trip developed into the Rainbow tour.

Perón was also viewed as a fascist because he was opposed to the United States. Perón had alienated himself from the U.S. government and media before he even became president. On April 24, 1944, Time magazine published the following:

Last week, as usual, U.S. policy in Latin America was up against an obstacle: Argentina, which refused to be a Good Neighbor. Foremost, though not the loudest leader of this

recalcitrance was Colonel Juan Domingo Perón at present serving slightly behind the scenes as Acting Minister of War.¹⁷

Even though the Time article expressed concern regarding Perón, the magazine believed that he was not a practitioner of European style fascism. "Reports of Nazi-like terror and systematic anti-Semitism have not stood up...Nazi money, Nazi influence operate in Argentina. But Perón is a home-grown Argentine authoritarian, not a Nazi stooge."¹⁸

Regardless of Time magazine's viewpoint that Perón and his politics were not controlled by Nazis, the U.S. government attacked him for his connections to the Nazis. On February 11, 1946, the U.S. State Department issued "Consultation Among the American Republics to the Argentine Situation." Spruille Braden spearheaded this document. Perón had experienced a rocky relationship with Braden when he was U.S. ambassador to Argentina in 1945. Braden was against Perón because, based on his contact with the oligarchy and other anti-Peronists, he believed Perón did not represent what the people of Argentina wanted.

The document issued by the State Department became known as the Blue Book and appeared conveniently while Perón was campaigning for president. The 131-page Blue Book linked Perón to the Nazis, and was filled with previously published charges of Nazi operations. In his memoirs, Spruille Braden defended the document. He referred to it as "a thoroughly documented and convincing picture of Nazi infiltration and designs in Latin

¹⁷ "Sobered Perón," Time, 24 April 1944, 38.

¹⁸ Ibid.

America and of connivance between the Hitler government and the Argentines.”¹⁹

Fortunately for Perón, his supporters saw this as just another attempt from the United States to interfere with Argentine politics. There were some opponents to Perón that agreed with the Blue Book. For example, Fleur Cowles called it a free, unthrottled voice in Bloody Precedent.²⁰ In response to the Blue Book, Perón published his own Blue and White Book (the colors of the Argentine flag) and lambasted the Blue Book as a clear example of intervention. Despite U.S. efforts, Perón won the presidency.

The myth of Evita being a Nazi flowed logically from Perón’s political stance. It was used to further discredit her, and several authors agreed with the myth of *Evita, the Nazi*. While Main first made this claim immediately after Evita’s death, it was expanded on over twenty-five years later by Paul L. Montgomery who dealt directly with the issue of Evita being a Nazi in the popular biography Eva, Evita: The Life and Death of Eva Perón. Montgomery called Evita a creation of fascism and cited proof Evita was a fascist because she hung a bronze condor, a symbol of Argentina’s pro-fascist party, on the wall of her apartment. The interesting part of Montgomery’s claim was that this condor appeared in 1943, before she met Perón. This claim fell in line with the myth that Evita was a spy for the Nazis during World War II. Montgomery also stated Perón encouraged his followers to plunder Jewish homes. He referred to Franco as a “fellow fascist,” and he called Evita the

¹⁹ Spruille Braden, Diplomats and Demagogues: The Memoirs of Spruille Braden (New York: Arlington House, 1971), 356-357.

²⁰ Cowles, 162.

wife of Hitler's friend.²¹ This was why, according to Montgomery, the Queen of England did not want to meet Evita during the Rainbow tour.

Montgomery's version, common to his entire book, was filled with misinformation and generalizations. Perón's encouragement to ransack Jewish quarters and Evita's Nazi connections before meeting Perón were arguable, but more inaccurate was Perón's alleged connection to Hitler. Perón and Hitler were never "friends." They never even met. When Perón toured Europe for the army he was merely an observer, and Hitler killed himself in 1945, so they were never even political allies. Montgomery's statement that Perón and Hitler were friends had more shock value than historical accuracy. Furthermore, Montgomery generalized why the Queen of England did not wish to meet with Evita, which probably had more to do with the opposition from the English labor party and Evita's undesirable background.

Although Montgomery's version was filled with misinformation, others agreed with his portrayal of Evita as a fascist and Nazi sympathizer. The movie Evita Perón digressed considerably into Perón's relationship with the Nazis. It showed him accepting gold bars in exchange for providing Argentine passports to Nazis after World War II. Additionally, the film portrayed Perón as anti-Semitic. The movie did not depict Evita as anti-Semitic but rather as eager to cooperate with the Nazis and accept their money. One of the most common myths, as stated in both Evita Perón and Montgomery's book, was that the Rainbow tour to Europe in 1947 was merely a smoke screen to deposit this Nazi money into Swiss bank accounts.

²¹ Paul L. Montgomery, Eva, Evita: The Life and Death of Eva Perón (New York: Pocket Books: 1979), 78; 84.

Another part of the Rainbow tour that caused controversy was Evita's infamous wave of the hand in Spain. Barnes, who dedicated very little time to the Nazi myth, did however observe that while in Spain and Italy Evita gave the fascist salute. Barnes called the salute in Spain an impromptu gesture toward the crowd, but Main cited her falange salute as proof she was a fascist.

Recently, authors have reevaluated Evita's connection to the Nazis with more objectivity. Ortiz showed Perón's support for the Nazis, but she also explained where Perón departed from fascist ideology. Ortiz claimed that Perón gave 8,000 Argentine passports to Germany on August 8, 1944, and in return he received money in a Swiss Bank account.²² Ortiz also stated that 90,000 Nazis retired in Argentina following World War II.²³ Ortiz wrote that the Peróns displayed gifts in their home with the Star of David. She theorized that these gifts were stolen by Nazis during World War II, rather than gifts from Israel or a Jewish organization, because neither would give a Christian president a gift with a Jewish religious symbol.

In Perón's defense, Ortiz stated that he recognized the State of Israel and in general did not target hatred or violence toward Jewish immigrants. While Perón issued passports to Germans, Ortiz also pointed out that the Nazi immigration following World War II was not only to Argentina. She shifted blame from Argentina to Europe and the U.S. She wrote that the U.S., England and the U.S.S.R. received the first pick of Nazi scientists, leaving

²² Alicia Dujovne Ortiz, Eva Perón: A Biography, trans. Shawn Fields (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 98.

²³ Ibid.

Argentina with the leftovers. She also discussed the Vatican's role in helping war criminals escape Europe.

Page also presented both sides of the Nazi issue. He stated that Perón was critical of anti-Semitism and discouraged any violence against the Jewish community in Buenos Aires—a direct contrast to Montgomery's version. On the other hand, Page believed Perón did not disagree with violence against the Jewish for moral reasons but for political ones. Page argued that Perón did not feel that Hitler's attempt to annihilate the Jewish population solved any of Germany's problems.

Crassweller dismissed the Nazi or fascist connection altogether. This historian believed the Perón government was not Nazi and showed no evidence of any anti-Semitic or other racial bias. Along Crassweller's vein, Fraser and Navarro countered many of the previously published ideas on Evita's politics. They thought there were better ways to deposit money in Switzerland than by allowing the spouse to make a grand tour. In opposition to Montgomery's view, Fraser and Navarro claimed Evita knew nothing about politics before she met Perón, so therefore she had no prior experience with Nazism. Ortiz agreed with this opinion stating that any rumors she was a Nazi spy during her acting years crumbled under close examination. Greenup and Greenup were more to the point when they wrote that Evita was not pro-Nazi or pro-fascist, but pro-Perón and pro-Evita; she had a philosophy of opportunism.²⁴

²⁴ Leonard and Ruth Greenup, Revolution Before Breakfast: Argentina 1941-1946 (Chapill Hill: The University of Northern Carolina Press, 1947), 167.

The analyses of recent biographers are more accurate in stating Evita was not a Nazi because they evaluated Evita without the passionate recall of World War II. Ortiz presented the most interesting argument because she pointed out that while Perón's regime was guilty of befriending Nazis, his was not the only government to do so. Greenup and Greenup were correct in stating that Evita was more a proponent of Peronism than anything else. The difficult part of accessing the Evita myth was that so many writers coupled Evita's and Perón's beliefs together. It is difficult to determine where Evita's beliefs began and Perón's beliefs ended because he shaped her early political ideas.

Evita's death: the Martyr, & the Revolutionary

Myths plagued the living Evita, and she could not escape them in death. Evita became gravely ill and was diagnosed with uterine cancer in September 1951. For nearly a year she lay in bed dying. Masses were held for her health to no avail. After such a long illness it was not a surprise when Evita died at 8:25 p.m. on July 26, 1952. However, with the announcement of her death, Buenos Aires came to a standstill. Every flower shop in the city sold out as thousands of arrangements covered the ministry of labor building. For two weeks, Argentines spent hours waiting in line to glimpse Evita's body. Following the exhibit of her body, a splendid funeral reserved for a head of state was held for Evita.

The official time of María Eva Duarte de Perón's death was at 8:25 p.m. Historians have speculated that she died either earlier or later than this time. A lifetime shrouded in mystery suitably ended at an unconfirmed time. Even

in death myths surrounded her. Following her death two myths surfaced and have been examined by historians and biographers. These myths are: *Evita, the Martyr* and *Evita, the Revolutionary*. By dying young and beautiful Evita naturally assumed the role of a martyr. In addition, her role as an opponent to the established system and the oligarchy made it understandable why her memory would serve as a symbol for revolutionary groups. Additionally, her body was perceived as having spiritual power.

The myth of *Evita, the Martyr* stemmed from the idea that she gave her life to save the poor people of Argentina. Evita worked long hours and refused initial medical treatment that might have saved her life. The idea of her sacrificing her life for the poor went so far that many of her supporters wanted her canonized. In 1952, the Union of Workers and Employees of the Food Industry formerly addressed Pope Pius XII regarding this issue. The Vatican never seriously considered this, but it did demonstrate the level of support Evita had acquired.

These facts paved the way to Evita being perceived as a martyr of labor. Page, concerning her knowledge of her cancer, wrote that "the legend of Eva Perón the Martyr has taken a prominent spot in Peronist mythology, to the effect that Evita's love for the poor caused her to sacrifice her energy, her health, and in the end, her life."²⁵ Fraser and Navarro believed that near the end of her life Evita stopped caring about herself and began to sacrifice her health for Perón and Peronism. These responses were typical of many who wrote about the life of Evita. In general, authors explained why she was considered a martyr, but did not state that she necessarily deserved this title.

²⁵ Joseph A. Page, *Perón, A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1983), 236.

Instead of being a martyr, there were those who pictured Evita as a pawn exploited by a cold-hearted Perón. Main was one who believed Perón took advantage of Evita's cancer and used it for yet another piece of propaganda. Main also believed Evita merely strove for the role of martyr, remaining always a second-rate actress. Alexander was critical of the circus-like atmosphere that surrounded Evita's death and wrote, "No man who really cared for his wife would have used her cadaver for his own political benefit in the way that Juan Perón did."²⁶ David Rock, in Argentina 1516-1982, echoed the sentiment that Perón used Evita's death as an opportunity to enhance his political popularity. Rock viewed the martyrdom of Evita as another pre-planned idolization of her when he sarcastically remarked, "Eva Perón, the 'Lady of Hope' and the 'Spiritual Chief' in death became 'Martyr of the Descamisados.'"²⁷

Another example of Perón's lack of care was when Evita appeared at the presidential inauguration on June 4, 1952. She weighed only eighty pounds and was so weak she had to have a body cast to support her through the open car ride. While some felt Evita's appearance at the inauguration was an example of Perón's cruelty, Page believed that this view ignored Evita's determination. Tomás Eloy Martínez, an Argentine writer and journalist forced into exile by the Isabel Perón government in 1975, also believed Evita was determined to attend the inauguration. In Santa Evita, Eloy Martínez showed Evita as insistent on accompanying Perón to the inauguration.

²⁶ Alexander, 89.

²⁷ David Rock, Argentina 1516-1982: From Spanish Colonization to the Falklands War (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 307. .

Perón's response to her was, "It's always the same with you, Chinita. You always end up doing whatever you please."²⁸

Another source of Perón's cruel treatment was not only in making Evita appear places but in staying away from her. Ortiz, Fraser and Navarro, and Montgomery argued Perón was afraid to go near Evita as she was dying. Barnes, in contrast, believed Perón stayed at her bedside during her illness.

The idea that Perón used Evita was not uncommon among historians. Perón's regime began to crumble during her illness, leaving the country in a politically torn and economically troubled state. Perón needed someone like Evita to maintain the era of good feelings, but unfortunately for him, she died. Despite the creation of *Evita, the Martyr*, it seemed to help Perón little in his struggle for power. Many writers believed that Perón was lost without Evita beside him. Barnes wrote that Perón "must have known as he looked down at her that he was parting with her share of his power."²⁹ With her death, Montgomery wrote, "The delicate balance of power in Peronism was destroyed."³⁰ Alexander, Page, Whitaker and Hodges all believed that with Evita's death, Perón lost an important and charismatic person in his government.

Most writers pictured her death as a point of departure for Perón, leading to moral and emotional degradation. One example was the alleged suicide of Evita's brother Juan Duarte, which was actually a murder planned

²⁸ Tomás Martínez Eloy, *Santa Evita*, trans. Helen Lane (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 28.

²⁹ Barnes, 166.

³⁰ Montgomery, 136.

with Perón's knowledge. The most notorious moral collapse, however, was Perón's fixation on teenage girls. Ortiz stated that Perón brought young girls to their home after Evita's death. Montgomery repeatedly referred to Perón's sexual relationships with teenage girls and the decline of his moral base.

Barnes cited that Perón's descent included an affair with a thirteen year-old girl:

Without her [Evita], he became in no time at all an old fashioned run-of-the-mill Latin American military dictator, relying on the violence of his followers to curb his enemies while he indulged in the pastimes he had been forced to abandon from the day he met Evita.³¹

Although Evita's death may have signified Perón's decline, he held on to power for three years. During that time Dr. Pedro Ara, a Spanish anatomy professor, embalmed Evita's body. The body was under his care until November 24, 1955, when following the overthrow of Perón, Evita's body became an issue of controversy. No one in power wanted it, or knew what to do with it. The new government feared her body would become a shrine for Peronists. Furthermore, disposal was complicated by the fact that Evita had to have a Christian burial; her corpse could not be destroyed. Therefore, her body was placed under the care of Lieutenant Colonel Carlos Eugenio Moori Koenig and disappeared from public. It did not reappear until 1971, when it was unearthed from the grave of a María Maggi de Magistris in Milan, Italy.³²

The missing body eventually created a stir in Argentina. In 1970, a group of revolutionaries called the *Montoneros* kidnapped and killed former

³¹ Barnes, 171.

³² Although Tomás Eloy Martínez's *Santa Evita* is a work of fiction it provides an outstanding account the adventures of Evita's corpse when it "disappeared" in November 1955.

president General Pedro Aramburu. They demanded the return of Evita's body in exchange for his. This led to the rediscovery of her body and its return to Perón, still exiled in Spain. For the *Montoneros*, Evita had turned into a revolutionary icon. "If Evita Lived, She'd be a *Montonera*" was their slogan. The *Montoneros* rekidnapped Aramburu's body in 1974, and then president Isabel Perón finally returned Evita's body to Argentina.

When Peronism was allowed to resurface in 1971, the cult of Evita came above ground. Fraser and Navarro stated that several different guerrilla groups, most notably the *Montoneros*, formed in the name of Evita during this time. The *Montoneros* backed Perón, but they looked to Evita for their inspiration. One could see why these leftist guerrillas would look to Evita as an inspiration. Evita became more impassioned and extreme before her death. This can be seen in her work "My Message" which was written near the end of her life but not published until 1986 as In My Own Words. It was more desperate and straightforward than My Mission in Life, and she wrote passionately against the army and the church. She announced, "I do not understand middle ground or moderation."³³ Evita showed much anger and called upon the workers to protect and support Perón. There has been a debate on whether "My Message" was really written by Evita, and it had not been available to serve as inspiration to the *Montoneros* in the 1970s; however, this passion was seen in her last speeches. For example, Crassweller wrote that during one of her last speeches, on May Day, she spoke "with an intensity in which love and hate and frenzy and religious adoration were

³³ Eva Perón, In My Own Words, trans. Laura Dail (New York: New Press, 1996), 66.

compressed into the most intense light."³⁴ Navarro stated that revolutionaries identified with Evita because over the years her speeches became increasingly violent "explosions of passion and fury, veritable harangues calculated to arouse an emotional response from the audience."³⁵

Most authors agreed that she was seen as a revolutionary inspiration. They only differed as to why the group claimed her as their source of inspiration. Taylor noted that the *Montoneros* looked to Evita's image for support because "Eva Perón as a person acted in a way that no one else dared act. She disregarded rules, disobeyed protocol, broke traditions with an impurity no one else was permitted."³⁶

Barnes questioned their call to Evita's memory:

It was hard to believe that she would have shown any sympathy for the youthful middle-class university-educated revolutionaries (the *Montoneros* in Argentina, the *Tupermaros* [sic] in Uruguay, and the *MIR* in Chile) whose mindless violence provoked the overthrow of democracies and the vicious repression of workers by military regimes in all three countries.³⁷

Ortiz, who called the revolutionary myth the red myth, questioned the *Montoneros'* regard for Evita because she was a builder and the *Montoneros* were destroyers. However, Ortiz saw their connection to Evita over Perón

³⁴ Crassweller, 245.

³⁵ Marysa Navarro, "Evita's Charismatic Leadership," in Latin American Populism in Comparative Perspective, ed. Michael Conniff (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 58.

³⁶ Taylor, 128.

³⁷ Barnes, 179.

because she had a fanaticism and energy that Perón, at that point an old man, lacked.

By reading James Scobie one can gain valuable insight as to why the *Montoneros* backed Evita. He wrote:

Evita had been the principal champion of the *descamisado*, and after her death in July 1952 Perón gradually turned away from labor. He took a firm line against strikes and further wage increases....He even attempted to organize white-collar employees as a counterbalance to the industrial unions."³⁸

Donald C. Hodges agreed that labor unions fared poorly after Evita's death. He wrote, "Since nobody was capable of filling her shoes, the nation's system of social welfare failed to move forward without her. Evita's death boded a decline in the fortunes of organized labor."³⁹ It was apparent that shortly after Evita's death, Perón began to alienate the group that had brought him to power.

With death, Evita became not only a revolutionary icon but a spiritual being with mystic power. A book that most strongly expounded and examined the spiritual strength of Evita was Santa Evita by Tomás Eloy Martínez. Eloy Martínez's fictional account of the journey of Evita's corpse is, appropriately, a combination of fantasy and fact. The story alleged that there was a curse associated with Evita's corpse, and those involved in moving her body came to ruin. Eloy Martínez wrote, "Everybody who had anything to do

³⁸ James R. Scobie, Argentina: A City and a Nation (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 235.

³⁹ Donald C. Hodges, Argentina, 1943-1976: The National Revolution and Resistance, Revised ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 32.

with the corpse came to a bad end.”⁴⁰ And his book was a discussion of all that happened to those who disturbed Evita’s rest. For instance, Lieutenant Colonel Carlos Eugenio Moori Koenig, in charge of her body after Perón’s ouster, led a life of alcoholism and necrophilism. Others who came to ruin included an officer who shot and killed his pregnant wife, and numerous soldiers who died in car accidents while moving the corpse.

Eloy Martínez’s work was also a story of the author’s own journey as he, in search of the body of Evita, interviewed witnesses who spoke of their memories of Evita. The book was an excellent account of the events that followed Evita’s death. It was a passionate and gripping story, and by using fiction it was freer to capture the sentiments for Evita as well as to dramatize the myths of her.

Eloy Martínez also wrote a fictional book on Perón, titled The Perón Novel. Again, it was fiction based on reality. Eloy Martínez recounted Perón’s life in Spain as an exile and his return to Argentina to become president. The author tried to recapture Perón’s thinking during those final days; he portrayed Perón as becoming senile. Evita, or her corpse, was only a minor character, but in this book, as in Santa Evita, Eloy Martínez gave her body a spiritual strength.

Conclusion

These myths, *the Champion of Labor*, *the Nazi*, *the Martyr* and *the Revolutionary*, are all very different, yet they co-exist in literature spanning

⁴⁰ Eloy Martínez, 48.

over forty years. These distinct myths were grouped together because they all represented the political power Evita wielded and the reaction to this power. Evita drew love and admiration. Evita drew fear and hatred. Did she save Perón during his weakest hour? Did she funnel Nazi blood-money into Swiss bank accounts? Or did she sacrifice her life for the masses? These questions have repeatedly been examined by historians of Peronism and Evita.

The myths discussed in this chapter have been dispelled by recent biographers and historians. But even in the writings of contemporary authors, they question whether there indeed was some fact behind the legends. A key reason these legends have survived so long was, as Taylor in Eva Perón: The Myths of a Woman argued, Evita's power touched the people spiritually rather than politically. Because her power affected people spiritually, fact became less important than image. This image was built upon until it replaced reality.

CHAPTER TWO:

THE MYTHS AND PERCEPTIONS OF A WOMAN

Introduction

Unlike the myths of the political Evita, this chapter examines the myths and perceptions of the woman Evita. Evaluations of Evita were often based on the fact that she was a woman who was young and beautiful, with little education and no class standing. She was all the things a typical first lady was not. The myths and perceptions discussed in this chapter address not the political Evita, but the wife of a president, a “lady of society.”

Because she was the wife of a president, many of the works on Eva Perón described her as either a power-hungry whore (the Black myth) or a motherly saint whose purpose was to make life better for the poor (Lady of Hope). While versions vary, most are as follows. *Evita, the Saint*, the Lady of Hope, emerged from poverty and an artistic background to become the shining diamond of Argentina. She was kind, generous and motherly. She cared so much for the poor that she was willing to alienate herself from the wealthy Argentines to champion human rights. She was an advocate for the working class and sacrificed her life to make theirs better. *Evita, the Whore*, the Black myth, was an illegitimate child who grew up in a brothel. She left home early, in the arms of a tango singer, to become an actress. Instead, to survive, she became a prostitute. When she met Perón she wrapped him into her web of deceit, and he blindly married her. She was mean and brutal

to all people who did not bend to her will, and she would crush anyone who stood in her way.

When presenting these two myths, works about Evita also addressed her personality and motivations. Several words have been used repeatedly to describe her: temperamental, stubborn, bent on revenge, uncompromising, glittering, dazzling, oversexed, ambitious and materialistic. These characterizations have helped shaped the imagery found in the two contrasting myths of Evita: the virgin and whore. The anti-Peronist works, which followed her death, portrayed Evita as ruthless, cruel and full of vengeance. These early works appeared in English because the censorship in Argentina prevented them from being published there. The view of Evita has changed since that time, and the literature that has been published in English during the last fifteen years has attempted to be more objective. This literature has looked at Evita's positive and negative contributions to Argentina during that time. These works have also glamorized and idolized her more. First, this chapter will explore these key perceptions of Evita and then will discuss the virgin/whore myths.

Glittering Eva

Something that made Evita stand apart from society women was her glamour which emerged not only through her youth and beauty but through her designer clothes, her stylish hair and her glittering jewelry. Many writers

commented on the glamorous Evita. It was part of who Evita was, and it so marked her that the December 11, 1950, issue of Life magazine featured Evita's extensive wardrobe: her gowns, hats, furs, jewels and fragrances. She was perceived half way around the world as a woman who loved fine clothes and jewels. George Blanksten, in Perón's Argentina, presented the common view of her as an Argentine princess, pointing to the immense scale of her wardrobe. She "acquired 'the furs of a czarina, the jewels of a maharani,'" wrote Blanksten.¹

There was also the concept that Evita dressed extravagantly for the poor; she wanted to give them something for which to aspire. In 1970, Richard Bourne expressed this sentiment in Political Leaders of Latin America. He wrote:

As the glamorous wife of the President, dressed in the most expensive Paris dresses and with costly jewelry, she also offered ordinary people a colorful fantasy for their own escapist dreams which reinforced the image of the Compañera Evita.²

This glamorous image was also interpreted as immoral. For example, Evita created a stir when she dressed in an off-the-shoulder gown and sat next to a cardinal during Perón's inauguration ball. Fleur Cowles, writer of Bloody Precedent, dismissed this perception of being immoral. When meeting Evita

¹ Blanksten, 92.

² Richard Bourne, Political Leaders of Latin America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 283.

she believed, "She was not at all the allegedly over-dressed hussy; not at all the flashy companion old news accounts prepared you for; and not at all nervous."³

Current literature has attempted to find more meaning in Evita's clothing and hair. A common interpretation was to show how Evita's fashion transitions matched her change in agenda. For instance, there was a dramatic change in wardrobe following Evita's return from the Rainbow tour. She toned down her hair and clothes and made herself appear more conservative. At the same time Evita began to concentrate on the Social Aid Foundation and labor unions. Alicia Dujovne Ortiz in Eva Perón: A Biography, who centered on Evita's hair and clothing throughout the entire book, noted a huge shift in hairstyle and clothing following her trip to Europe. She believed these changes paralleled changes in Evita's power and goals. When she returned from Europe everything changed about her except her words, Ortiz believed.⁴ J.M. Taylor, in Eva Perón: The Myths of a Woman, also noted that after Evita returned from Europe her hair style changed and was "increasingly complemented by a sober and elegant Eva clad in tailored suits."⁵ In a different twist of interpreting Evita's clothing,

³ Cowles, 170-171.

⁴ Ortiz, 203.

⁵ Taylor, 46.

Nicholas Fraser and Marysa Navarro, in Eva Perón, believed she used her clothes to cover her true self. "Having been an actress, Evita treated her clothes as disguises, not as an expression of her personality," wrote Fraser and Navarro.⁶

Ambitious

Besides being glamorous, Evita was a very ambitious woman. In a traditional patriarchal society this characteristic drew criticism. While those who despised Evita could accept her glamour, her ambition rubbed many the wrong way as she was not only poor and uneducated, but she was a woman who wielded power. Her ambition was criticized for being an aggressive, unwomanly characteristic. In the article "La Señora: Perón Collaborator," The National Investigations Committee of the Argentine Nation called her impetuous and domineering writing, "She was a fiery little thing—indomitable, aggressive, spontaneous, at times barely feminine."⁷ Journalist Virginia Lee Warren also commented on Evita's loss of femininity in The New York Times Magazine. Warren wrote, "But as she has grown in

⁶ Fraser, 81.

⁷ Joseph Barager, ed., Why Perón Came to Power in Argentina (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), 231.

ambition and authority she seems to have lost correspondingly in femininity.”⁸

Historians have viewed this aggressive attribute as counterproductive. In Perón, A Biography, Joseph A. Page described her behavior in public as uninhibited and crude as she strove for social success.⁹ Tad Szulc, in Twilight of the Tyrants, argued that this behavior worked against Evita. He wrote that Evita’s ambition “antagonized and alienated many of their (the Perón’s) supporters.”¹⁰ James Bruce, U.S. ambassador to Argentina in 1947, brought a visual image to the ineffectiveness of her overambitious nature in Those Perplexing Argentines. He wrote, “Her ambition was like a motor without a governor, reaching incredible speed before racking itself to bits.”¹¹

Other writers coupled Evita’s ambition with ruthlessness. Leonard and Ruth Greenup wrote in Revolution Before Breakfast: Argentina 1941-1946, that Evita was “just as audacious, just as ruthless and ambitious and courageous as Perón.”¹² Robert J. Alexander, in Juan Domingo Perón: A History, wrote, “Her principal assets were sharp native intelligence, great

⁸ Virginia Lee Warren, “Evita for President of Argentina?” The New York Times Magazine, 3 June 1951, 28.

⁹ Page, 85.

¹⁰ Tad Szulc, Twilight of the Tyrants (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1959), 101.

¹¹ James Bruce, Those Perplexing Argentines (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1954), 281.

¹² Greenup, 164.

determination to get ahead, considerable ruthlessness, and undoubted physical beauty."¹³

These negative descriptions conformed with the views found in the Black myth. There were, however, a few who saw Evita's ambition as a positive characteristic. Jeane Kirkpatrick, in Leader and Vanguard in Mass Society: A Study of Peronist Argentina, was one who depicted Evita's ambition in a positive light. Kirkpatrick wrote that Evita was dynamic, ambitious, beautiful and talented.¹⁴

The Vendetta Mentality

Worse than her ambition was Evita's reputation for getting even. This perception has followed her relentlessly. Some writers excused her behavior, while others abhorred it. Additionally, she was unfairly depicted because she was a woman. While Perón was pictured as a dictator, a tyrant and an authoritarian, Evita was portrayed as vicious, cruel, and full of vengeance. Her attributes were more emotionally rooted than Perón's.

Mary Main, in The Woman with the Whip: Eva Perón, was one of the first to characterize Evita's vengeful personality. Main went into great detail explaining Evita's vindictiveness which she believed resulted from Evita's

¹³ Alexander, 76.

¹⁴ Jeane Kirkpatrick, Leader and Vanguard in Mass Society: A Study of Peronist Argentina (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 30-31.

insecurities. Evita focused most of her revenge on the women of the oligarchy. Main characterized Evita's feelings for the upper class, stating "They waited for her to go down on her knees for their favors, and she faced them with a whip in her hand."¹⁵ Main felt there were two reasons for her anger; she was born poor in a wealthy country and born a woman in a country dominated by men.¹⁶ Had the elite accepted Evita, "it is certain that she would have used her position to humiliate them, for her resentment had its roots in the humiliation of her own youth, as the pattern of her revenge has since made clear."¹⁷ Main felt Evita created fear in everyone, even those who adored and revered her. "But Eva had no affection to give anyone; she could pretend to love or passion or friendliness but perhaps the only real emotion she could feel was hate."¹⁸

In Evita First Lady: A Biography of Eva Perón, popular biographer John Barnes elaborated on Main's view of Evita as a woman full of loathing and revenge. Barnes conveyed that her enemies believed she was motivated by jealousy and hatred for the upper class. Barnes explained that there was no political philosophy except, "love for the poor, hatred for the rich."¹⁹ Barnes

¹⁵ Flores, 101.

¹⁶ Ibid., 39.

¹⁷ Ibid., 100.

¹⁸ Ibid., 36.

¹⁹ Barnes, 76.

argued that Evita did not allow insults against her to go unpunished as she was unable to forget or forgive. She focused on destroying her political enemies. Barnes thought she could be both loving and vengeful. He wrote, "However, she wielded a hatchet with the same dexterity that she waved her angel's wand."²⁰

Some authors attributed Evita's behavior to class bias just as Main and Barnes did, but in a less cruel manner. In the article "Women: The Forgotten Half of Argentine History," Nancy Caro Hollander attributed Evita's need for revenge to being poor and female. "Eva Perón had the dynamic energy and anger that came from being lower class and a woman in Argentine society," wrote Hollander.²¹ Marifran Carlson, in Feminismo! The Woman's Movement in Argentina from its Beginnings to Eva Perón, wrote that "Eva Perón devoted much of her short political life to a vendetta against the Argentine elites."²² Bourne believed her childhood experience of class inequities haunted her and continually reminded her she was an interloper

²⁰ Ibid., 74.

²¹ Nancy Caro Hollander, "Women: The Forgotten Half of Argentine History," in Female and Male in Latin America Essays, ed. Ann Pescatello (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973), 155.

²² Marifran Carlson, Feminismo! The Woman's Movement in Argentina from its Beginnings to Eva Perón (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1988), 192.

in Argentine society. Humorless and bearing grudges, her power was "as far reaching as it was ill defined," said Bourne.²³

Many general comments painted Evita as hateful. Blanksten mentioned her beauty but stated that she harbored vicious grudges. Bruce wrote she was a diminutive, blonde, with a "vivacious nature which covered a cool and calculating personality."²⁴ Greenup and Greenup believed she was spiteful and compiled a black list.²⁵ Paul L. Montgomery, in Eva, Evita: The Life and Death of Eva Perón, wrote "She was moved only by hatred and scorn."²⁶ Comments such as these were repeated at length in histories and biographies.

Some authors downplayed Evita's bad nature. Fraser and Navarro wrote, "As for the ruthlessness with which Evita has so often been credited, it was certainly there, but it was primarily directed towards herself."²⁷ In Argentina, George Pendle referred to her as a glamorous, energetic,

²³ Bourne, 284.

²⁴ Bruce, 280.

²⁵ Greenup, 167.

²⁶ Montgomery, 14.

²⁷ Fraser, 137.

resourceful and warmhearted young woman, not void of feminine vindictiveness toward her enemies in the oligarchy and elsewhere.²⁸

The virgin/whore myth

Evita's beauty, ambition and taste for revenge all danced around the primary myth of *Evita: the Whore*. This myth stemmed from her childhood and her years as an actress. She attempted to cover up both portions of her life once Perón became president. While Evita downplayed her background, her opponents fed off it to further degrade her.

The story of the Black myth originated from Evita's childhood and early adulthood. Historians and biographers recounted that Eva Perón was an illegitimate child, the youngest in a family of five children. Because of her illegitimacy, she experienced poverty and social ostracism. Her opponents used this issue of illegitimacy to defame her. This situation caused many half and false truths to develop about her.

Anthropologist J.M. Taylor, in Eva Perón: The Myths of a Woman, who studied the myths of Evita in Argentine society, analyzed this dichotomy and argued that both anti- and pro-Peronist myths were founded on the same basic characteristics: Evita's sexuality, femininity, taste and education, and

²⁸ Pendle, 122.

rapport with the masses.²⁹ According to Taylor these myths were composed of both the positive and negative view of the same feminine ideal.

In regard to the area of sexuality, Taylor wrote that the Black myth was based on her mother owning a brothel and Evita using acting as a disguise for prostitution.³⁰ The Lady of Hope myth, in contrast, showed Evita as a wife and a mother to the poor. With extreme purity, chastity, beauty and femininity, as defined by Peronism, she radiated love and peace.³¹ Evita also evoked the image of a saint and a Madonna.

Taylor discovered unique characteristics of this myth. For one, Taylor argued the Lady of Hope/Saint myth came from the middle class, not working class Argentines. Taylor also saw the contrasting views of Evita as parallel to the opposing forces of civilization and barbarism as presented in D. F. Sarmiento's Life in the Argentine Republic in the Days of the Tyrants; or Civilization and Barbarism. Unsurprisingly, the Lady of Hope myth was not promoted in English literature. Evita had never attained widespread adoration in the United States as she did in Argentina. Therefore, works in English either recounted elements of the Black myth or dispelled these elements but did not support the saint image.

²⁹ Taylor, 86.

³⁰ Ibid., 78.

³¹ Ibid., 87.

Historians and biographers began the Black myth with a description of Evita's childhood. Writers on Evita focused on the early death of her father in 1926 as a symbol of her harsh life. When her father died she was six years old. The story goes that the Ibarguren family was not allowed into the memorial service until, after creating a scene, Juan Duarte's brother-in-law let them enter. The children were allowed to follow the coffin, but only at the end rather than at the front with the legitimate family. The event has led authors to speculate that this scene haunted Evita her entire life. Barnes, Crassweller, Ortiz, Fraser and Navarro, and Page all endorsed this portrayal. Crassweller wrote, "Evita, like her siblings, was blighted by the issue of her illegitimacy, so dramatically highlighted by the cruelty of her family's rejection in the hour of death."³² This event has also been exaggerated by Alan Parker who, in directing the film Evita, made this a dramatic moment with young Eva breaking through the line of arguing adults to see her father lying in his coffin.

Following the death of Evita's father, the family moved to Junín in 1930. Since Evita grew up without a father, her opponents speculated that her childhood was less than appropriate. They portrayed her mother as indecent. Some authors rumored that her mother owned a brothel. Main commented in her book that Evita's mother was adept at pleasing men, and neglected to provide young Evita with proper discipline. Barnes stated that her mother

³² Crassweller, 130.

easily found a new man to take care of her. "There was a sexuality, a ripeness about her [Eva's mother], an alluring excitement in her flashing, dark eyes," wrote Barnes.³³ Other authors have disagreed with this premise. Recent historians Crassweller, Fraser and Navarro, and Ortiz believed her mother served meals, and that it was a decent, legitimate occupation.

The next myth surrounding Evita's sexuality had to do with her leaving Junín for Buenos Aires as a teenager. The common anti-Peronist story purported that at age fifteen Evita left home with famous tango singer Agustín Magaldi. Main was one of the first to spread this story of elopement with Magaldi. Barnes claimed Evita sneaked into a side door while Magaldi performed and waited for him. The next day they departed together for Buenos Aires. In Roberto Aizcorbe's version, found in Argentina: The Peronist Myth, Evita ran away with Magaldi who supported her in Buenos Aires. W.A. Harbinson, in Evita: Saint or Sinner?, declared what other authors merely alluded to—that Magaldi and Evita had sexual relations. He wrote:

it is possible that her subsequent liaison with him [Magaldi], at the tender age of fifteen, was her first sexual experience. It is, however, likely that she had already dipped her toe into these dangerous waters in Junin [sic] itself...³⁴

³³ Barnes, 14.

³⁴ W. A. Harbinson, Evita: Saint or Sinner? (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 25-26.

According to Montgomery, she left with a different tango singer, José Armani. Nonetheless, it was the same story of Evita running off to Buenos Aires. Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice placed these versions into fictional dimensions with Evita sleeping with Magaldi and then following him to Buenos Aires to find him married and uninterested in helping her.

Sharon A. Hollenbeck Akridge, who wrote her dissertation on Evita at the University of California at Santa Barbara in 1976, believed Evita came under the spell of a Robert [sic] Magaldi who “promised this small town girl fame, fortune, and adventure if only she would accompany him to Buenos Aires.”³⁵ The television film Evita Perón starring Faye Dunaway also presented Evita as naively becoming enamored with Agustín Magaldi’s fame. Furthermore, the movie portrayed Evita as the reluctant recipient of Magaldi’s sexual advances.

There were authors who dispelled the tango singer myth altogether. Ortiz related the many versions of Evita’s departure but endorsed the idea that she took the train to Buenos Aires, with Magaldi’s address in hand. Upon arrival, her brother Juancito picked her up and watched out for her. Fraser and Navarro tore apart the Magaldi myth as there was no record of Magaldi going to Junín the year Evita left home. These authors believed

³⁵ Sharon A. Hollenbeck Akridge, “Cinderella from the Pampas: María Eva Duarte de Perón, Argentine First Lady, 1919-1952” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1976), 10.

Evita's mother accompanied her to Buenos Aires. Crassweller found Magaldi to be content in his married life, and in addition, he was not in Junín in the year Evita left.

Complicating the issue further was Evita's own vagueness in discussing the terms with which she left Junín. In My Mission in Life she wrote, "Very early in life I left my home and my town and since then I have always been free."³⁶ She never became more specific.

As Evita already had a questionable childhood, becoming an actress, a traditionally disreputable career, only increased the rumors of her immorality. One piece of evidence for her promiscuous lifestyle was the glamour poses she made in magazines. They were not indecent, but for the oligarchy it was a bit much to accept from a First Lady. Her opponents, labeling her *putita*, purported that she became a prostitute and that acting was merely a disguise for her indecent life.³⁷

Her actress years stirred very smarting dialogue in the 1960s and 1970s concerning her sexuality. For instance, numerous works from Spruille Braden's Diplomats and Demagogues to the musical Evita, recounted the famous joke about Evita's sexuality. The joke went that, after being called a whore, an admiral told Evita not to worry; he was still called an admiral even though he had not been at sea for a long while. While her actress years

³⁶ Perón, My Mission in Life, 167-168.

³⁷ *Putita* is Spanish for little whore.

instigated witticisms such as this, recent biographers and historians have argued that despite the fact that she engaged in relationships with men to help her career she was not promiscuous. She was merely trying to survive in a competitive field with no money and little talent.

In 1952 Main skillfully conveyed portions of the Black myth. She argued that Evita was not a prostitute, but she was definitely an opportunist who used men to advance socially and economically. According to Main, in her younger days Evita kept discreet company with officers, seeking men who could advance her acting career. In 1979 Barnes continued many aspects of this characterization. Barnes did not openly say she was a prostitute, but he did state she moonlighted for extra money. "Just how she earned that extra money is one of the many mysteries surrounding Eva Duarte's actress years," Barnes wrote.³⁸ He cited a rumor that many actresses made extra cash as prostitutes, but stated that whether this was true for Evita, she had many lovers, "each one carefully picked to help her career."³⁹

In the movie and musical Evita, Lloyd Webber and Rice portrayed her love life as a revolving door. In the song "Goodnight and Thank You," the lyrics speak of Evita switching from man to man, discarding each one as soon as he served his part in advancing her career. Lloyd Webber and Rice

³⁸ Barnes, 20.

³⁹ Ibid.

depicted her romances as cold and calculating because Evita's objective was not love but professional advancement.

Montgomery, writing on Evita in 1979, was by far the most adept in defaming Evita. He did not skirt the issue of Evita being a prostitute and whore. When it came to discussing her sexual encounters, he wrote, "Her only talents when she started were a burning will, a pretty face, and a willingness to please men who could advance her career."⁴⁰ In another section he stated, "As a girl, she had spent some time on her knees; her striving went to reverse the roles."⁴¹

In an effort to tantalize readers into buying Montgomery's book, the editor included on the back cover:

Eva Evita: who rose from her first soiled love affair at fourteen with an obscure tango singer to marry Juan Domingo Perón, the strongman of the Argentine government!

Eva, Evita: Who tamed El Presidente with sexual skills learned on her knees in a hundred waterfront bars!⁴²

Montgomery focused unnecessarily on Evita's sex life. It seemed to be done more for selling books than evaluating Evita's life with any objectivity.

Harbinson's book, written seventeen years later, was a recreation of Montgomery's view of Evita's sexuality. He repeatedly referred to the fantasy

⁴⁰ Montgomery, 34.

⁴¹ Ibid., 69.

⁴² Ibid., back cover.

her lips represented. Harbinson wrote that “her painted lips spoke to many of the whore’s experience at fellatio.”⁴³ As for being an actress, Harbinson maintained that Evita could not have escaped the “casting couch.” “Given the casual sexual blackmail rampant along the Avenida Corrientes, very few were the women who rose unscathed to success.”⁴⁴ Harbinson also claimed Evita spent time in nightclubs offering sex for money. While Harbinson showed sympathy for Evita because she worked in a rough business and was forced to scratch her way to the top, he also presented her in extremely vulgar terms. He wrote, “She dyed her dark hair blonde and moved closer to what she wanted to be: a wet dream for the masses.”⁴⁵ While Evita may have dyed her hair to be beautiful and desirable, Harbinson described her intention in tasteless, crude terms.

V. S. Naipaul, the prominent East Indian author from Trinidad, published an essay in 1980 entitled The Return of Eva Perón. This work discussed the Argentine mentality and self-image during Perón’s two eras of dictatorship. Naipaul’s portrayal of Evita’s sexuality was also less than flattering. He wrote, “She was the macho’s ideal victim-woman—don’t those red lips still speak to the Argentine macho of her reputed skill in fellatio?”⁴⁶

⁴³ Harbinson, 37.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 30.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 34.

⁴⁶ Naipaul, 107.

Instead of presenting Evita as a whore, some authors characterized Evita as a sexless creature. Surprisingly, anti-Peronist Cowles was one to do this as she retreated from centering on Evita's shady background. Cowles felt that the Peróns' relationship was one of love. She also believed sex was unimportant to the couple because they were more preoccupied by power. Crassweller also asserted that neither Perón was sexual as each was driven by power—not love; he wrote, she was “a saint-to-be for many, or a beautiful emanation of pure spirit, sexless and serene, or a driven woman at the beck of duties and visions unglimped by others.”⁴⁷

Other historians did not portray Evita as asexual, but pointed out that Evita was driven and poor during those struggling years. They avoided promoting the rumors of Evita's promiscuity. These writers did not depict Evita as a saint, but they did break down the Black myth. Page wrote that after leaving her home town, she was often hungry and ill. Page argued that the portrayal of Evita as engaging only in relationships to help her career was nothing more than a vicious rumor. He claimed, “While she undoubtedly gave up her virginity during these years, she did not sleep her way to success.”⁴⁸

Ortiz also said Evita slept with directors in order to keep her jobs. Ortiz described this behavior as one where Evita had no other choice if she wanted

⁴⁷ Crassweller, 213.

⁴⁸ Page, 83.

to survive. She also explained that Evita chose her relationships with men based on who could either give her a part or help her survive until she found a part. This same perspective was pictured in the movie Evita Perón.

Fraser and Navarro agreed with the possibility that Evita slept with men to get jobs. However, they believed the label of her being a whore stemmed from the time she lived with Perón. According to Fraser and Navarro, this view reflected the stereotypes of the time and the fear of powerful women and the power Evita held over Perón. The authors explained, "Because they [prostitutes] were not emotionally engaged in their sexual activities, they were supposed to be able to enthrall their victims and hold them powerless."⁴⁹

Because of Evita's questionable background, she was characterized as a whore by many of her opponents. Her supporters, however, glorified and sanctified her. This sanctification was never revealed in English publications. Those who undressed the Black myth did not support the other myth. Rather, those authors attempted to recreate what actually happened.

Conclusion

In My Mission in Life, Evita described herself as having two images. The first was **Evita**, the political person heading the Peronist Women's Party and the Eva Perón Foundation as well as practically serving as minister of

⁴⁹ Fraser, 46.

labor. The second was **Eva Perón**, the wife of the president. Literature has divided Evita into these same two roles. This chapter has explored the image of the president's wife. It examined the myths and perceptions that addressed Evita as a first lady and a woman of society. Her slightly scandalous background might have been overlooked had Evita stepped back from the limelight and played a docile role. But Evita was far from docile. The active role Evita played endeared her to the masses of Argentina. They in turn created the myth: the Lady of Hope.

The Black myth was created because Evita's power threatened the oligarchy. She was a woman from the lower class in a patriarchal society who possessed inner strength as well as overwhelming political power. Therefore, many of Evita's actions were perceived as unladylike, vulgar and incorrigibly ruthless. Since Evita's death, the Black myth has found its way to Broadway, Hollywood and North American publishing companies. Within the United States the Black myth has endured because it satisfied the public's interest in scandal and intrigue.

CHAPTER THREE:

AN IMAGE BUILDER—THE EVA PERÓN FOUNDATION

Introduction

With numerous myths encircling Evita, she sought to shape them to reflect a positive image. The María Eva Duarte de Perón Foundation provides an excellent example of Evita's attempt to manipulate her image. Through this organization Evita not only built hospitals, schools and hostels but helped improve the living conditions of the poor, particularly the children. The funds from the organization supported a variety of projects from nurses' training programs to children's soccer tournaments. The María Eva Duarte de Perón Foundation was also a propaganda machine. Newspaper articles and film clips showed Evita spending long days listening to the stories of the poor, then kissing them and sending them on their way with promissory slips and 50 pesos. Through her work at the foundation Evita became the Lady of Hope. She became a kind, gentle, giving person. She transformed herself into the Madonna.

But Evita's image building was not fully under her control. Critics used the Eva Perón Foundation to help in the shaping of the Black myth. The Eva Perón Foundation keep no official records of where Evita spent the money, contributing to the idea she was corrupt. Her critics viewed her foundation as a tool for harassing the oligarchy into making "voluntary

contributions” and then funneling money into personal Swiss bank accounts. Her critics also argued that what money she did spend on the lower class was misspent and thus failed to provide the poor with what they needed. Chapter three explores how the Eva Perón Foundation reinforced the two contrasting myths of Evita: *the Saint* and *the Whore*. The chapter will examine how histories and biographies have viewed Evita’s charity, but first one must understand the charitable situation Evita inherited in 1946.

Charity in Argentina before Perón

Philanthropy was a small endeavor in Argentina during the nineteenth century. The most prevalent charitable organization of the period was *La Sociedad de Beneficencia* (Society of Beneficence). Founded January 2, 1823, by President Bernardino Rivadavia, it was created to provide well-to-do, respectable ladies with an occupation—helping the poor. “The names of the women on the society’s board were a roll call of the nation’s oldest and richest families.”¹ The Society of Beneficence followed a similar pattern as that in the United States of providing upper class women with a role outside the home; one difference, however was that the women’s charitable organizations in the U.S. tended to be more politically based.

While there were other benevolent organizations in Argentina, including the Catholic Church, the Beneficence ran nearly all charitable

¹ Robert Neville, “How Evita Helps Run Argentina,” *Life*, 11 December 1950, 79.

institutions for Buenos Aires. The Beneficence oversaw the functioning of Buenos Aires' hospitals, orphanages and schools for girls. The government funded the Beneficence, but it operated independently.

The Beneficence was in place, after surviving some reorganization, when Eva Perón became the first lady of Argentina in 1946. At this time Argentina had the highest standard of living in Latin America. Economically, the Argentines sat in a favorable position following World War II as they were able to export meat and grains desperately needed in Europe. With profits from exports, Argentina made a strong move to encourage industrialization. Immigration from the Pampas to Buenos Aires increased in large numbers; for "the first time in history foreign immigrants were outnumbered in Buenos Aires by Argentina's own migrants from the back country."² Before 1935 only 8,000 people a year migrated from the interior to Buenos Aires, but during the war years it increased to 100,000 a year, and from 1947 to 1951 it bulged to 200,000 a year.³ According to James Scobie, in Argentina: A City and a Nation, even with the increased emphasis on industry, Buenos Aires' economy was not able to provide employment for

² Arthur P. Whitaker, Argentina (Englewood cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1964), 106.

³ Scobie, 226.

all the unskilled workers who massed into the city; as a result they were forced into low paying service jobs.⁴

With large numbers entering Buenos Aires, but finding only work with low wages, Evita felt the people needed an extensive welfare program. Her desire to revamp the welfare system in Argentina was also stimulated by the Beneficence's failure to invite her to become president of the organization, an act defying the tradition of appointing the first lady to the post. Members of the organization believed Evita was an inappropriate choice and therefore told her she was too young to serve in this position. As a response, Evita told them that her mother—who gave birth to five illegitimate children—could serve as president, a ghastly proposition to these matrons of Argentine society.

Most historians recounted that the Beneficence's unwillingness to appoint Evita president represented the death of the organization. In an act of retribution, the government absorbed the Beneficence on September 6, 1946. It was replaced by Evita's own charitable works which officially became the María Eva Duarte de Perón Foundation (shortened later to the Eva Perón Foundation) on July 8, 1948.

Marysa Navarro argued in the article "The Case of Eva Perón," that Evita's hatred of the charity women was not her only motive for dissolving the Beneficence. Navarro cited poor working conditions for its employees

⁴ Ibid.

and low salaries as reasons for the government take over.⁵ Navarro stands alone in her assessment as most authors spent ample text attempting to prove Evita's hatred for this group of eighty-seven elderly ladies.

Eva's Foundation

The Eva Perón Foundation reigned as Argentina's main welfare organization until the fall of Perón's regime in 1955. According to a Time magazine article published in 1951, Evita started her foundation with \$2,092 of her own money, and by 1951 it had grown to become the country's single largest company, generating an excess of \$100 million a year.⁶ Robert D. Crassweller wrote in Perón and the Enigmas of Argentina that Evita was given sole authority of the organization that by 1950 consisted of 14,000 employees with assets of more than \$200 million.⁷

Evita was insistent on calling her work social justice rather than charity. It was justice in her view because she was returning to the poor what the rich had taken from them unfairly. In My Mission in Life, Evita disapproved of the way the Beneficence treated poor and orphaned children. With shaved heads they were put out on the street to beg for money, while

⁵ Marysa Navarro, "The Case of Eva Perón," Signs 3 (Autumn 1977): 233.

⁶ "Love in Power," 46.

⁷ Crassweller, 209.

ladies of the upper class met for tea. Her project was not charity but what she referred to as social justice. She wrote:

No. It is not philanthropy, nor is it charity, nor is it alms, nor is it social solidarity, nor is it benevolence. It is not even social welfare, although to give it a more nearly appropriate name I have called it so. To me it is strict justice.⁸

She continued by writing that "I do nothing but return to the poor what all the rest of us owe them, because we had taken it away from them unjustly."⁹

The Eva Perón Foundation was a private rather than a government organization, which meant that it was not accountable to the public. Because it was not a state agency, financial records were kept private. A mix of union donations; corporate and private donations; government funds in the shape of taxes, the lottery and casino profits; and Evita's own money supported the Eva Perón Foundation.

With donations the Eva Perón Foundation funded a variety of projects. Evita built hostels for the aged, working women and unmarried mothers. These hostels were usually only available to the poor for short periods but provided them with unimaginable luxury. Although figures vary, most historians claimed she built twelve hospitals and 1,000 schools. She also built medical clinics and health centers, convalescent centers, playgrounds and housing projects. The foundation provided a range of social services from

⁸ Perón, My Mission in Life, 125.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

grocery stores that undersold private businesses to the traditional Christmas gift of *pan dulce* and cider. It was an all-encompassing foundation. In Those Perplexing Argentines, James Bruce cited a home for single working girls, founded by Bishop de Andrea, as the only private institution not absorbed by the foundation.¹⁰

Evita's welfare program also reached out beyond Argentina's borders. She sent disaster relief packages across the world, including a package of clothing to six hundred poor children in Washington D.C. This move embarrassed the U.S. government who suspected the contribution was a veiled display of pro-Peronist propaganda.

There was also a personal side to the foundation that was unique for a welfare program. Evita invited people to come to her office and make requests for help. In 1948 the foundation was receiving 12,000 letters a day addressed to Evita, and people were lining the streets early in the morning in hopes of having an audience with her. She spent exhausting days meeting with them and listening to their entreaties. Because of this emotional impact on the Argentine populous, historians have been drawn into exploring the Eva Perón Foundation further.

¹⁰ Bruce, 183.

Propaganda or genuine care for the poor?

Many historians clearly saw Evita's endeavor as propaganda, and they viewed her motives as self-serving. Evita's self-promotion was secured by making sure everything she did had her name and Perón's on it and was acknowledged in the Argentine press. An article appearing in Newsweek in September, 1951, expressed this sentiment well. The article called the Eva Perón Foundation one of the greatest assets of Peronism. The article read, "It has taken over practically every private charity and welfare organization in the country...And the recipients of aid are never allowed to forget that it is the Peróns who are helping them."¹¹ Newsweek viewed this behavior as an attempt by Perón and Evita to earn more votes explaining that Evita was careful to always disperse money in front of flashing cameras and visiting delegations.

There was no doubt the Eva Perón Foundation was an outlet for Peronist propaganda. The propaganda attempted to mold her image into the Lady of Hope. While writers commented on the image-building attribute of the Eva Perón Foundation, they steered away from evaluating Evita's intentions toward the poor. Only a few writers delved into this important issue.

Mary Main felt Evita cared nothing for the people she helped. This anti-Peronist author believed that Evita's poor and rural background helped

¹¹ "Viva Perón! Viva Evita," Newsweek, 3 September 1951, 37.

her identify with the poor, but she lacked compassion and sympathy for them. Main wrote:

Her 'love' for the poor people of Argentina was the sick love of an over-possessive mother; she loved them only so long as they were absolutely dependent on her and obedient to her wishes, as long as they expressed their adoration and devotion to her alone.¹²

Main would not acknowledge that any of Evita's intentions were well meaning.

Alicia Dujovne Ortiz, in Eva Perón: A Biography, provided a more favorable interpretation of Evita's motives. While Ortiz acknowledged that giving was a source of power for Evita, she also stated that Evita gave above and beyond what people asked, even going so far as inviting strangers to the *Casa Rosada* to bathe. Ortiz believed that hearing stories of the poor brought Evita back to her own miserable childhood and giving to the poor allowed her to alleviate her pain. Did Evita help others "to have them love her?" asked Ortiz, "No doubt. But also to heal her soul."¹³ Ortiz poetically described Evita's concern for the poor, while realizing her need for power.

Nicholas Fraser and Marysa Navarro also believed Evita cared about the poor, even if she happened to benefit by good publicity. They believed her hardened demeanor softened in front of the poor. They wrote "She, who could be arrogant and rude with those who threatened her as rivals or

¹² Flores, 226.

¹³ Ortiz, 232.

intellectual superiors, was with these petitioners unfailingly gentle and courteous."¹⁴ In the article "Evita and Peronism," Navarro stated that Evita attributed her daily contact with human misery to what "spurred her desire to assist all those who needed her help and intensified her commitment to them."¹⁵ Fraser and Navarro portrayed Evita as becoming consumed by the desire to help the poor.

Another show of Evita's concern for the poor, recounted by many authors, was that she kissed lepers and those with syphilis with selfless disregard of her own health. One can find a similarity with Diana, Princess of Wales (1961-1997) who publicly hugged people with AIDS at a time when people still feared casual contact with AIDS sufferers. Princess Diana endeared herself to the masses by treating the poor, especially children, in a loving manner. This was a lesson learned by Evita a half century earlier. Evita personalized the act of charity. Her compassion for the poor proved to them she genuinely cared.

But as discussed by Fraser and Navarro and Ortiz, one cannot underestimate Evita's ability for self-promotion. As she had done all of her life, Evita recognized the potential for advancement. With the Eva Perón

¹⁴ Fraser, 123.

¹⁵ Marysa Navarro, "Evita and Peronism," in Juan Domingo and the Reshaping of Argentina, eds. Frederick C. Turner and Jose Enrique Miguen (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983), 24.

Foundation she saw the ability to promote a positive image and increase her power among the poor.

Was her money spent wisely?

In addition to criticizing Evita for focusing on propaganda, historians chastised her for being extravagant and wasteful. Her foundation received considerable attention by the U.S. media, who recounted the lavish stories of Evita helping the poor but doubted the effectiveness of her programs. A Life article of December 11, 1950, for example, told of six hundred boys who spent their holiday at Mar del Plata enjoying a fine hotel, good food and excellent entertainment. Once the trip was over, the article explained, they returned to their hovels, implying Evita's dream vacations had no lasting impact on the condition of their lives.

Time magazine of May, 1951, also commented on the wastefulness of the system. "On the theory that nothing is too good for the poor, she has built wastefully expensive homes for the aged, for working girls, for indigent mothers."¹⁶ Time magazine also reported on the condition of the Children's Village, a miniature city designed to house two hundred children ages two to five, besides accommodating eight hundred day visitors. The article stated the village did not appear to be lived in. "In fact, after almost two years, the

¹⁶ "Love in Power," 46.

place still has the air of a period room preserved in a museum,” stated the Time article.¹⁷

Anti-Peronist Fleur Cowles, in Bloody Precedent, was a leading perpetuator of Evita’s wastefulness. She had the opportunity to visit many of Evita’s projects during her trip to Buenos Aires. She claimed that the inside of the hostels appeared, as Time magazine suggested, staged and in too good a condition for people to actually be living there. In addition, Cowles felt that the people who claimed to live there were actors. After viewing the Children’s Village, Cowles wrote that “No children scampered through the toy houses, shops, library and school.”¹⁸

Main also commented on rumors that no children lived in the Children’s Village. She described the kitchen as being too clean and lacking food for two hundred children. In addition, there was no evidence of the usual wear and tear children had on homes. Although deterioration was absent, Main theorized that the Children’s Village was occupied by wealthy Peronist children. She also noted that the rooms in the “Hostel for Working Girls” were free of personal belongings such as posters and photographs and called the hospital on *Avellaneda* extravagant but useless. Another criticism of Main’s was that Evita spent a great deal money that, had it been used more frugally, would have served a greater number of the poor. Instead, Evita

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Cowles, 188.

provided the poor with the lap of luxury, but only a few benefited and only for a short time.

While Main and Cowles had the advantage of seeing these projects first hand, their credibility is doubtful. Their overwhelming anti-Peronist bias puts into question their charges. Cowles' and Main's repeated accusations were made in an effort to undermine Perón's character. Had the lodgings been messy, Main and Cowles probably would have rebuked Evita for failing to maintain high standards.

Eva Perón in her work My Mission in Life defended her opulent approach. She stated that "excessively luxurious" homes were created so as to wipe out a "century of miserable asylums."¹⁹ Many historians, especially recent ones, have agreed with Evita's statement and examined the positive aspects of her organization. Perón biographer George Blanksten found her program to be very positive, helping underprivileged children through the construction of schools and hospitals. "Her work was deeply appreciated by many Argentines and by citizens of other lands as well."²⁰ Three days a week she received the poor "and distributed impressive quantities of food, clothing, money and advice among them," wrote Blanksten.²¹

¹⁹ Perón, My Mission in Life, 144.

²⁰ Blanksten, 109.

²¹ Ibid.

Joseph A. Page also expressed a positive view of the Eva Perón Foundation in Perón, A Biography. Here he refuted Cowles' criticisms of Evita's welfare program because she only visited the sites once. Page also pointed out that Evita brought welfare to the people of Argentina's interior—something previously ignored by the Society of Beneficence. The Beneficence's concern was primarily for Buenos Aires.

Fraser and Navarro admitted that the number of buildings constructed was little to show for the large amount of money spent, but the biographers defended the foundation, stating that "it did function better than many more rational and more frugal institutions."²² In response to Main and Cowles' claim that the hostels and Children's Village were too staged to be lived in, Fraser and Navarro wrote that Evita's obsession with cleanliness "reflected her great concern with appearances."²³ They also argued that the fifty peso note, which critics deemed as superfluous, was in fact very helpful to those who visited Evita in person and did not have the carfare to return home.

Ortiz also refuted the accusations of wastefulness. Ortiz argued that those who ran the hostels and Children's Village had to be overly clean because Evita was prone to unannounced inspections. Ortiz believed Evita demanded cleanliness because of her poor background. "This excess of

²² Fraser, 131.

²³ Ibid.

cleanliness, of correction, expressed a popular taste. The more humble the origins, the more one aspires to the dark suit and tie and the white dress."²⁴

Did Evita extort or misappropriate funds?

Despite the positive results of Evita's work, authors accused her of extorting and misappropriating funds and thus perpetuated the Black myth. For example, Robert J. Alexander, in Juan Domingo Perón: A History, found that "donations" and "voluntary" contributions were handed over to Evita to pay for government favors as well as to avoid future problems with inspectors and taxes.²⁵ Arthur P. Whitaker, in Argentina, referred to donations as "protection money."²⁶ From Perón biographer Robert Crassweller to Evita sensationalist W.A. Harbinson, these sentiments were repeatedly expressed. Authors explained how groups, private individuals, and corporations would pay the foundation to assure they would not be harassed by the Perón government. Two companies who did not cooperate with Evita, Mu-Mu candy and Massone Institute, were forcibly closed down by the government following a refusal to donate money or goods to the Eva Perón Foundation.

²⁴ Ortiz, 224.

²⁵ Alexander, 83.

²⁶ Whitaker, 129.

In addition to extortion, several authors accused Evita of purposely keeping no records so that she could funnel money to Switzerland for personal use. Interestingly, not one author could substantiate accusations of misconduct. Cowles accused Evita of skimming money from the foundation. Without proof she wrote, "No one dares ask, although whispers grow louder, as to the sources of Evita's colossal investments in Switzerland."²⁷

Main, like Cowles, viewed the Eva Perón Foundation as an agent of personal revenue. Main believed Evita was stealing based on the fact she and Perón had no personal wealth before he became president. Main accused them of buying property and stashing money into accounts abroad. In addition, Main questioned how Evita could possibly afford the outlandish cost of her clothing—a reported \$40,000 per year—when Perón's salary as president earned him only 96,000 pesos (approximately \$6,900 in 1951, but closer to \$20,000 in 1949 when inflation was lower).

Barnes added to this theory of misappropriation, stating that those in opposition to the Eva Perón Foundation found it to be "the most gigantic protection racket-cum-slush fund the world had ever seen."²⁸ He also pointed out that the Peróns did not make enough money to pay for Evita's jewels and elaborate clothes. "Just how much she siphoned off for herself no

²⁷ Cowles, 187.

²⁸ Barnes, 113.

one will ever know—enough anyway to pay for her priceless collection of jewelry and to fill a number of Swiss bank accounts.”²⁹

Popular biographer Paul L. Montgomery criticized Evita for embezzling money from the foundation in his work Eva, Evita: The Life and Death of Eva Perón. He wrote that the foundation generated an income of three million dollars a week.³⁰ Montgomery produced the most outlandish claim, stating that this money was not only routed into Swiss bank accounts, but used to buy guns for her worker’s army. He claimed that the lack of record-keeping led to secret bank accounts maintained by Evita and her friends.

It was unwarranted for writers to focus exclusively on her supposed embezzlement when there was no evidence to support the claim. Barnes, Montgomery, Cowles and Main perpetuated this myth of Evita as a thief without having any evidence. Another criticism of these biographers was that while they mentioned Perón’s low salary as president, they failed to mention what Evita earned as a newspaper publisher, as head of a private welfare foundation, or as an investor.

There were authors who did not view her as an extortionist or embezzler. Defending Evita, Ortiz compared her forced donations to taxation. She wrote that “except for the cynical and authoritarian manner in which the

²⁹ Ibid., 115.

³⁰ Montgomery, 73.

requests were made, nothing distinguished this procedure from what other countries called 'a tax on large fortunes.'"³¹ Fraser and Navarro also viewed this procedure as a form of taxation. They mentioned the Mu-Mu and Massone extortion cases but intimated that these examples were not a widespread practice of Evita's. Fraser and Navarro and Ortiz, recent Evita biographers, stand out in defending Evita's practice as taxation. These authors took a fresh approach to Evita, and rather than maligning her, tried to look at the full picture of her fundraising methods.

As for embezzling, Fraser and Navarro argued that there was no fraud because the Minister of Finance kept rigorous records of everything that came in and out of the foundation. In addition, Ortiz recounted an interview with Adela Caprile, member of the Eva Perón Foundation Liquidating Commission of 1955. After extensive checking of foundation warehouses, Caprile believed Evita was not a thief. Caprile stated:

It was a waste, craziness, but not a fraud. Evita cannot be accused of having kept one peso in her pocket. I would like to be able to say as much of all the ones who collaborated with me in the dissolution of the organization.³²

³¹ Ortiz, 237.

³² Ibid., 236.

Conclusion

Evita revolutionized Argentina's welfare system. She created a massive foundation, unlike any other in Argentine history, which contained the elements of compassion and understanding. She spurred the feeling of hope in the poor because she connected with them. She also capitalized on the propaganda her foundation generated. With her picture and her name slapped everywhere possible, Evita reinforced the idea among her people that she was a saint.

But in creating this welfare system she left herself open for criticism. Anti-Peronists lambasted Evita for coercing donors and being wasteful. They accused her of stealing from the rich to build her own fortune. The anti-Peronist viewpoint, as found in works by Main and Cowles, quickly found these weaknesses in her foundation and attempted to display it as another example of her evil character. The image presented in the United States confirmed this view which held fast until recently when authors such as Fraser and Navarro and Ortiz began evaluating the Eva Perón Foundation with more impartiality. These biographers attempted to convey the positive aspects of her foundation which had not previously been seen in English literature. Even so, the image of an extortionist and embezzler have stayed with Evita.

CHAPTER FOUR:

THE FEMINIST EVA PERÓN

Introduction

When examining the myths of Evita, one fact continually resurfaces: Eva Perón was the most powerful woman in Argentina—and Latin America—during her lifetime. Although she held no official post within the government, her influence was widely felt throughout the nation. She helped deliver the vote to Argentine women by supporting a bill for suffrage and rallying public opinion. In addition, she organized and headed a political party called the Peronist Women's Party. What made this party substantial was that through its creation, Evita actualized the opportunity for women to seek well-paying careers with the potential for advancement. She also came exceptionally close to becoming Argentina's first female vice president, which would have been a first for the entire hemisphere. It is easy given this activity to argue that Evita was a strong feminist leader. However, many writers that have characterized Evita and Juan D. Perón would disagree. In addition, feminist leaders of the oligarchy did not consider her a feminist, and her behavior enraged them. Evita herself claimed that everything she did was for her husband, and she preached that women should maintain their ladylike qualities and position in the home.

Chapter four examines how writers perceived Evita's role as a female leader. This chapter begins with a historical examination of the feminist

movements within Argentina, starting in the late 1800s and ending with Perón's leadership. From this examination, the paper explores how Evita was considered a feminist in terms of her political involvement. The chapter looks at how historians interpreted her role in the women's suffrage movement, the Peronist Women's Party and her semi-quest for the vice presidency. Then the chapter analyzes the power structure between Perón and Evita and to what degree Evita was a feminist.

History of feminism in Argentina

Evita supported the right for the Argentine woman to vote and headed the Peronist Women's Party, but many women in Argentina preceded her as leading fighters for equal rights. The struggle for suffrage and other civil rights, which many historians and biographers of Evita and Perón dismissed as either inconsequential or ineffective, dated back to the 1880s.

Argentina at that time was a traditional patriarchal society which allowed women neither the right to enter into a binding contract without paternal or spousal consent nor the right to have a voice in politics. As Argentina approached the twentieth century, the country experienced a dramatic increase in both industrialization and European immigration. The industrialization of Argentina in the late nineteenth century, which occurred much later than in Europe and the United States, paved the way for women to become a significant part of the work force. Organized movements began

to flourish following an increase of working women. Because women entered the work force later than in the U.S. and Europe, Argentine women's organizations lagged behind those countries.

The participation of women in the move toward industrialization was significant according to Nancy Caro Hollander, a professor of Latin American history at California State University at Dominguez Hills, who stated that by 1887, thirty-nine percent of the paid work force in Buenos Aires was female.¹ The workers earned less than their male counterparts and had little freedom to spend their earnings as they were often forced to turn their entire salaries over to their husbands or fathers. In reaction to this situation, women organized to combat their lack of civil rights as well as extremely low wages and brutally long work hours. To assist in the fight for women's equality, the upper and middle classes formed many of these new organizations. New arrivals from Europe also mobilized women.

Although the Argentine work force was far from equal, the country did, however, have a tradition of educating women. This practice dated back to 1868 when then President D. F. Sarmiento, motivated by the belief that women should be educated so that they could participate in life outside the home, created an education program that included women. Although universities were not open to women until the turn-of-the-century, 41.5

¹ Hollander, 142.

percent of women were literate in 1895 as compared to 49.2 percent of men.² By 1910 Argentina had established an international reputation for having the best educational system for women in Latin America.³

While Argentine women of the early 1900s were better educated than their Latin American counterparts, they still had a long struggle in front of them. For this struggle most feminists attached themselves to socialism. The Argentine feminist movement could be characterized as a struggle for social and political equality that was primarily a movement comprised of European immigrants and closely allied to the socialist party.⁴ The upper-class organizers also allied with the socialist party because, in addition to being the first party in favor of suffrage, socialists “wanted legal divorce and the abolition of legalized prostitution and the white slave trade.”⁵

Even though the majority of working-class women organized in the socialist movement, anarchism also led its feminine adherents. Maxine Molyneux of the University of Essex, examined the anarchist feminism movement that emerged in Buenos Aires in the 1890s and peaked between 1900 and 1920. She explained that this rise stemmed from a growth in immigration and economics as well as the creation of the labor movement.

² Maxine Molyneux, “No God, No Boss, No Husband: Anarchist Feminism in Nineteenth-Century Argentina,” *Latin American Perspectives* 13:1 (Winter 1986): 125.

³ Carlson, 83.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

Molyneux demonstrated that the anarchist movement did not embrace the feminist cause with great passion, but rather women were attracted to it because it addressed some of the demands of the female working class. "The specifically feminist development of anarchist theory lay in its attack on marriage and upon male power over women."⁶ In addition, the anarchists criticized both Socialists and the bourgeois. Some women chose anarchism over socialism because "Although the Socialist program was directed at achieving more tangible results than the Anarchism's [sic], it lacked the fiery feminist radicalism that had been so much part of Anarchism's militancy."⁷

According to Hollander, the feminist movement that sprang out of the early twentieth century took on two issues: women's inability to control their earnings and the restriction on voting. The movement also struggled for protection of women and children factory workers. Movers and shakers of the early-twentieth century were primarily of the oligarchy and included such women as Julieta Lanteri de Renshaw who founded the National Feminist Party in 1918 and in 1920 ran as a candidate for deputy of the National Congress; she was officially ignored. Other important figures were Alicia Moreau de Justo, founder of the National Feminist Union's *Journal Nuestra Causa*, and Elvira Rawson de Dellepiane, who founded the Feminist Center in 1905 and the Women's Rights Association in 1918. There was also Cecilia

⁶ Molyneux, 132.

⁷ Ibid., 141-142.

Grierson, Argentina's first woman physician, who in 1900 chartered the National Council of Women and the Argentine branch of the International Council of Women and then two years later with Lanteri established the Argentine Association of University Women.

Many female writers also had a profound influence on the women's movement. Marta Morello-Frosch, a teacher of Latin American literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz, explored the impact of writer Alfonsina Storni who began to publish during World War I. Storni was an important figure because she "represents the emerge of a class of professional women, of recent immigrant origin, who joined with groups of workers and feminists of the era in search of solutions to the problem of marginality."⁸ Another key literary figure was oligarch Victoria Ocampo who has often been compared to Evita because, according to Janet Greenberg, who received her Ph.D. in comparative literature from the University of California, Berkeley:

When spoken of together, Ocampo and Eva Perón are usually placed at opposite ends of the Argentine feminist spectrum, yet these autobiographical texts illustrate the straddling of traditions—male/female, national/international, contemporary/historical—and the conflict between class and sex which are central to rereading the lives of and myths surrounding both.⁹

⁸ Marta Morello-Frosch, "Alfonsina Storni: The Tradition of the Feminine Subject," in Women, Culture & Politics in Latin America, ed. Emilie Bergmann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 93.

⁹ Janet Greenberg, "A Question of Blood: The Conflict of Sex & Class in the Autobiografia of Victoria Ocampo," in Women, Culture & Politics in Latin America, 137.

Although these women organized, they made little headway in regards to women's rights until the 1920s. A prod for women's groups came in 1920 when women in the United States earned universal suffrage. In 1924, Argentina's congress passed protective legislature for working women. Then in 1926 the Argentine women gained equal civil status. As Argentina moved into the 1930s the struggle for women's rights continued and the focus turned toward suffrage with the formation of the Argentine Association for Women's Suffrage.¹⁰ Marifran Carlson, from the Latin American Studies Department of the University of Chicago, explained that during World War II the women's movement slowed down in order to focus on war relief efforts.¹¹

Perón moved into the political arena in 1943, and he held more liberal views on women's role in government and labor, according to Hollander. Hollander argued that Perón's opinion stood apart from the conventional military and governmental attitudes toward women. Hollander cited examples such as Perón's officiating at the commencement of the Women's Division of Labor and Assistance in 1944, and his urging the adoption of a

¹⁰ For further information on the Argentine feminist movement refer to: Emilie Bergmann, ed., Women, Culture & Politics in Latin America; Elsa M. Chaney, Supermadre: Women in Politics in Latin America (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979); June E. Hahner, ed. Women in Latin American History: Their Lives and Views, revised ed. (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, 1980); Jane S. Jaquette, ed., The Women's Movement in Latin America: Feminism and the Transition to Democracy (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989); Asunción Lavrin, ed. Latin American Women: Historical Perspectives (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978).

¹¹ Carlson, 179.

measure allowing women the right to vote in 1945. Hollander saw Perón as playing a strong role in the Peronist feminist movement. She wrote:

While not denying the important role that Eva Perón would play in the Peronist feminist movement, it is my contention that the mobilization of women during the Perón years flowed organically from their objective situation in Argentine society and from Perón's awareness of their growing importance in the work force, as well as his desire to deflect the influence on women of traditional Marxist and feminist leadership.¹²

Another unconventional act occurred before Perón became president when he permitted Evita to accompany him on the campaign trail—a first for Argentina.

Once Perón became president, Argentine women earned universal suffrage. Evita campaigned for the measure to pass and brought the message of suffrage to the working women of Argentina. Carlson stated that feminists in favor of women's suffrage formed a group, called the National Assembly of Women, whose goal was to counter Perón's popularity with women. Another group against Perón, cited by Carlson, was the Woman's Center for Civic Culture which consisted primarily of Catholic oligarchs.

Women received the right to vote on September 23, 1947. Once suffrage had been established, Juan and Eva Perón capitalized on it with the creation of the Peronist Women's Party on July 26, 1949. Also in 1949, Perón revised the constitution and gave women legal equality in marriage. In

¹² Hollander, 152.

addition, wage and working conditions improved under Perón's new legislation and the number of women attending universities increased under Perón.¹³ Perón's decision to allow women the right to vote played in his favor as ninety percent of eligible women voters came out on ballot day in 1951, and Perón received 63.9 percent of their votes. In addition, the election of 1951 launched seven female senators and twenty-four female deputies, all Peronistas, into government. Additionally, Perón legalized divorce in 1954, but that measure did not remain in force after his fall from power.

Evita's role in Suffrage for the Argentine woman

Evita worked in partnership with Perón to better the situation of the working Argentine woman, but could she be considered a feminist by her actions? In order to evaluate whether Evita was a feminist, one has to look at her involvement in the suffrage movement, her role in politics and the source of her power. As for the right to vote, there are several contrasting views on Evita's part in the women's suffrage movement. They vary from finding Evita's role to be a key component to finding it unimportant.

The first biographers of Evita, anti-Peronists Fleur Cowles and Mary Main, did not see Evita's role in gaining the vote as important. Main believed there was no universal demand in Argentina for women's suffrage. She classified those supporting suffrage as a minority group of intellectuals

¹³ Ibid., 152-153.

and liberals who made up part of the opposition. Because this opposing group wanted suffrage, Main contended Evita had no opposition and the measure passed with ease.

Other writers agreed with Main that this was an upper-class cause, but they also believed that Evita focused on it so as to offend the oligarchy. By gaining the right to vote under Perón's rule, Evita could take credit for something that a group of upper class women worked for years to secure. In 1970, Richard Bourne wrote in Political Leaders of South America that in terms of the women's suffrage movement, "She (Evita) made it her business to get women the vote."¹⁴ Bourne argued that the suffragettes were manipulated by Evita as her rally for suffrage was both an aggressive move against the upper class as well as a move for increased labor benefits. In Eva Perón: the Myths of a Woman, J. M. Taylor also viewed Evita's push for the vote as a move against the already established suffrage movement as she wrote that Evita formed the Women's Suffrage Association and cast aside all those who tried to join her cause.

Evita biographer Alicia Dujovne Ortiz also agreed with this premise. In attempting to summarize the oligarchy's feeling toward Evita for being recognized as the champion of suffrage, Ortiz referred to Victoria Ocampo's reaction to the passing of women's suffrage, "And the writer (Ocampo) had

¹⁴ Bourne, 272.

stomped her foot: No! This was not her vote."¹⁵ Doris Meyer, in Victoria Ocampo: Against the Wind and the Tide, agreed that Ocampo opposed the suffrage bill. She explained, "No woman in Argentina wanted equal political rights for women more than she, but to be granted them by an unjust and illegal regime would be worse, she felt, than not having them at all."¹⁶ Meyer poignantly illustrated this conflict between the Peronists and the oligarchy when she wrote:

That Eva Perón and Victoria Ocampo should have become legendary figures in the same country and that Evita's name should have eclipsed Victoria's up to the present is not only an irony of history but also a vivid illustration of forces in conflict in twentieth-century Latin America.¹⁷

While Bourne, Taylor, Ortiz and Meyer adeptly perceived the power struggle between the pro- and anti-Peronists, they neglected to look at Evita from the perspective of the working class who perhaps had not been familiar with the issue until Evita introduced it to them. Ignoring the struggle between Perón and the oligarchy, John Barnes, in Evita First Lady: A Biography of Eva Perón, attributed a far greater role to Evita in the suffrage movement. Barnes wrote, "When he became President, she saw to it that woman's suffrage stood high on the list of the government's legislative

¹⁵ Ortiz, 153.

¹⁶ Doris Meyer, Victoria Ocampo: Against the Wind and the Tide (New York: George Braziller, 1979), 148.

¹⁷ Ibid., 130.

programme."¹⁸ Barnes credited Evita, not Perón, with moving suffrage through congress as he felt Perón was too macho and old-fashioned to support such a bill. The problem with Barnes' perspective was that he looked at Evita's role in the suffrage movement out of the context of Argentine history.

Nicholas Fraser and Marysa Navarro, who published Eva Perón two years after Barnes, took greater care in evaluating the suffrage movement. They suggested that Evita's importance was minor as her only contributions were a few speeches and newspaper articles that appeared in support of women's suffrage. Fraser and Navarro agreed that the suffrage bill had Perón's approval, but pointed out that it was ripe to pass as fifteen bills had been introduced in congress between 1911 and 1946. Robert D. Crassweller agreed with Fraser and Navarro. Crassweller believed Evita advocated suffrage, but that by the time the bill passed Argentina was ready for women's suffrage.

While Fraser and Navarro presented the subject fairly, Carlson, a writer of the women's movement in Argentina, delved deeper into the subject of suffrage. She noted Evita's strong connection to the working class and felt that the majority of the feminists at the time did not understand Perón's popularity with the working class. Many women believed their lives would improve through Perón's actions. Carlson argued that following

¹⁸ Barnes, 112-113.

Perón's election, Evita began campaigning aggressively for women's rights by organizing rallies and speaking on the radio. Carlson looked at the historical perspective in depth and gave a complete view on where Evita fit into the movement. The focus of Carlson's work was Argentine feminism, not Evita, and as a result she gave a fuller view of the suffrage movement than Evita biographers.

The majority of writers who cited Evita's role in suffrage did not view her as crucial to the movement. Barnes overplayed her significance, but the majority of writers focused on her antagonistic stance toward the oligarchy. Of the writers cited in this paper, Carlson covered Evita's role the most thoroughly. And if Evita did indeed deliver the message to the working class, as Carlson stated, then it would be easy to see why Evita would be given credit by authors such as Barnes for her stance.

The Peronist Women's Party

Once women gained the right to vote, regardless of who was responsible for the achievement, the Peróns placed an importance on how those newly established rights were used. They expected women's suffrage to benefit Perón. With this in mind, the Peronist Women's Party (*Partido Peronista Femenino*) was born on July 26, 1949. Evita created and headed this

political group and many anti-Peronist authors skeptically believed it had been created solely for the purpose of securing more votes for Perón.

Cowles was one of those who believed suffrage passed only to benefit Perón. She wrote in Bloody Precedent, "Evita clearly thinks she will have the power to show them for whom to vote each time the privilege is to be exercised."¹⁹ Like Cowles, Main saw this formation as a direct attempt to persuade more people to vote for Perón. While Main conceded that Peronist women earned more than the average woman, she believed that these women lacked any autonomous political thought as they were pressured into registering as Peronists. The anti-Peronist writers saw this political party as no more than a tool of manipulation; they discredited the influence it may have had on women's power in Argentina.

Rather than exploring the manipulative goals of the Peróns, several biographers focused on the type of women who joined Evita's political party. Ortiz suggested that the Peronist Women's Party consisted of fanatics and that Evita determined their level of commitment based on eye contact. Ortiz also mentioned that Evita refused membership to women who threatened her power. Fraser and Navarro agreed that Evita recruited fanatics who then became a strong group of faithful Peronist women. Fraser and Navarro also acknowledged the political weight of this party and deemed it more successful than the Peronist Party. Carlson also touched on the fanaticism. She

¹⁹ Cowles, 92.

explained that Evita asked that the members have loyalties only to Perón, and in addition, Evita wanted them to be "chic" and "feminine."²⁰ Attractive members were advantageous to Evita because they conveyed the image of traditional women who were not a threat to the establishment.

In addition to fanaticism, Carlson explored other issues of the Peronist Women's Party. She stated that women never had as large a representation in government as under Perón. Through the party Evita projected the idea that poor people, especially women, could attain the same wealth as she had. She stated that working women "felt she was speaking and acting for them."²¹ Carlson also examined the positive aspects of the party. For example, Carlson stated that under Evita, piecework was declared illegal, the work week was limited to forty-four hours and a minimum wage was instituted.

As with the issue of suffrage, Carlson looked at the larger picture of women and power within Argentina. Anti-Peronists focused on the manipulation of the Perons, while other biographers looked only at the irrational behavior of the female members. These writers glossed over the effect the party had on working women and Argentine politics.

²⁰ Carlson, 196.

²¹ Ibid., 191.

Eva as Vice President

As head of a strong political party it seemed normal that on August 22, 1951, a crowd, with estimates between 200,000 and a million, gathered on *Avenida 9 de Julio* to demand that Evita be nominated as vice president on a Perón-Perón ticket. This pressure followed previous hints from the *Confederación General del Trabajo* (C.G.T.), which had officially supported Evita as Perón's running mate earlier in the year. Evita accepted the nomination during a rally filled with high drama, which several biographers recounted, only to renounce the nomination over the radio on August 31.

Writers speculated on the events surrounding her renunciation. Perón biographer George Blanksten stated that Evita gave two reasons for renouncing the vice presidency. The first was that she would assume the role of commander-in-chief in the event Perón died, a position she claimed inappropriate for a woman. Second, she declared she was not of legal age, a fact which the author disputed. Blanksten believed Evita's decision to renounce stemmed from army opposition, her deteriorating health, and reservations from conservative Peronists who felt Perón may be breaking too many traditions.

Blanksten's approach to her renunciation was typical of most historians. Other authors attempted to explain her reasons. Carlson said that her run at the vice presidency ended due to opposition from the military.

Barnes went further, claiming that Evita not only backed down due to the pressure of the military but that the military was still dissatisfied afterward. Fraser and Navarro were unsure as to whether the army complained or whether Perón felt her illness would soon render the decision unimportant. On the other hand, Perón biographer Joseph A. Page believed that the military could have been an excuse used by Perón to keep his wife out of the vice presidency. Ortiz agreed, stating that Perón's jealousy of Evita's relationship with her *descamisados* kept her from the ticket.

Disappointingly, all the authors mentioned above speculated why she renounced the position—an important issue—but their works lacked any analysis of the effect it had on the people who supported her. Although she never even ran for vice president, this stillborn nomination was a notable event for the nation. Never before had a woman been vice president of the country, and Evita's nomination was a serious attempt to correct this shortcoming. In addition, the nomination showed both the lengths and the limits of her power. Most writers failed to acknowledge this aspect.

Who held the power: Evita or Perón

Evita's role has been discussed in terms of her participation in politics, but how did her power compare to Perón's? In examining who held the ultimate power—Evita or Perón—it is interesting to note that Perón's biographers were more likely to feel that Evita would have been

inconsequential without Perón. Her biographers viewed each as being an important component to the well-run machinery of Peronism. Only the anti-Peronists saw Evita's power as standing apart from her husband's.

As an example of the sentiment of Perón's biographers, Robert J. Alexander wrote in 1979 that Perón was the only source of Evita's power. He stated, "Without Juan Perón, Evita Perón was nothing."²² He continued, stating that Evita's power "was nowhere near as great as most of her admirers and many of her detractors maintain."²³ Page, another Perón biographer, concurred writing that, "Although her political power kept expanding, Evita remained as dependent as ever upon her husband."²⁴ Page continued, "Her influence derived totally from him, to such an extent that she could never threaten his authority nor compete with him."²⁵ While Perón's biographers may have been accurate in stating Evita would have been nothing without Perón, they overlooked the historical reality that they met and married and as a result she became a vital component of the Perón regime.

Taylor also viewed Perón as the one who held the power. She explained that Evita was nothing without Perón, and although her power continued to grow, she never attempted to steal Perón's position or failed to

²² Alexander , 75.

²³ Ibid., 78.

²⁴ Page, 235.

²⁵ Ibid., 198.

support him. Taylor explained, "She never promoted herself or her image as independent of Perón, even on the grounds of her independent projects or power."²⁶ Taylor cited only the laudatory speeches she gave about Perón, which she made as propaganda for Perón, not necessarily her actual beliefs.

Meyer cited a quote Perón made years after Evita's death which confirmed that Evita had little power in the relationship. Perón proclaimed:

Eva Perón is my product. I prepared her to do what she did. I needed her in the social sector of my movement. And her work there was extraordinary. In a woman one must awaken the two extraordinary strengths which are the basis of her intuition: sensitivity and imagination. When those attributes are developed, the woman becomes a marvelous instrument. Of course, one must also give her a little bit of knowledge.²⁷

Evidently, Perón would have agreed with his own biographers.

In contrast, Navarro adeptly illustrated how Evita's strength, though emanating from Perón, took on a spirit of its own. In the article, "Evita's Charismatic Leadership," Navarro wrote, "Although Perón was the ultimate source of Evita's authority, the basis of her leadership came from the actual work she performed with the rank and file."²⁸ The author's point was that while he held the power, Perón relied on Evita to serve as a vital connection between him and the *descamisados*. In fact, after Perón became president,

²⁶ Taylor, 133.

²⁷ Meyer, 152.

²⁸ Navarro, "Evita's Charismatic Leadership," 56.

Evita built her own following among the *descamisados*. Because she served as the de facto head of the ministry of labor, Evita was seen as the decision maker. For example, a 1950 *Life* article by Robert Neville showed Evita as the distributor of wage increases.

When the railroad workers asked for a general 40% raise, Evita declared, 'I think they should get 50%,' and they did. When the telephone workers started bargaining by asking for a 70% raise while really hoping for 30%, Evita saw that they got 70%.²⁹

Furthermore, Evita essentially controlled the *Confederación General del Trabajo* (C.G.T.), an umbrella organization of trade unions. The group's early founders, such as Cipriano Reyes and Luis Gay, worked independently of Evita until they were replaced by Evita yes-man José Espejo in 1948.

Several authors expanded on Navarro's idea that each partner had different assets to bring to the power base, even if Perón had ultimate control of the country. They viewed Evita and Perón as political partners who supported and complemented each other. For example, Blanksten stated, that "If the first (Perón) is the inspiring brain and the creator of national feminism and woman suffrage, the second (Eva) is the living thought and the incarnation of the will of Argentine women."³⁰ Barnes also saw a partnership. He wrote, "While Perón handled the diplomats, the politicians

²⁹ Neville, 80.

³⁰ Blanksten, 94.

and businessmen, Evita looked after the voters who brought them to power—her *descamisados*.³¹

Quite a different perspective was found in anti-Peronist biographers who promoted Evita as powerful but questioned Perón's capacity and strength. For example, Main wrote that Perón actually owed his political position to Evita because she had been so instrumental during the events of October 1945. Cowles agreed with this view, claiming that Perón would not have been the powerful dictator that he was without Evita to support him. Obviously these two writers erred on the side of giving Evita far too much credit in an attempt to hurt Perón, who was still in power when the books were published.

With the exception of the anti-Peronists, no authors saw Evita's power as standing alone. Clearly the anti-Peronists felt this way for political reasons. The majority of authors viewed Evita and Perón as having a give and take relationship, based on Perón's power. This viewpoint seemed a fairer interpretation of the two leaders. Each generated a component of Peronism to which the people of Argentina related.

Was Evita a feminist?

When examining whether or not Evita was a feminist one can find a variety of perspectives. Authors such as Barnes and Blanksten believed she

³¹ Barnes, 73.

was a strong feminist leader while Main, Fraser and Navarro, and Carlson felt she could not be farther from being a feminist. Many other writers had trouble deciding because Evita contradicted herself both in words and behavior.

Barnes viewed her as a feminist because she veered from the traditional role of the Argentine woman. He called her the nation's foremost feminist and claimed that her voice penetrated beyond Argentina as she spoke out for women's rights during the Rainbow tour. He wrote that four million female workers were "liberated by her from shackles of their traditional subservient place in Latin society."³² Blanksten concurred that Evita played a major role in the feminist movement of Argentina and also referred to her as the nation's foremost feminist. "Eva was pictured as the country's model career girl," wrote Blanksten.³³

Other authors were not so adamant about Evita's feminism. They saw her as a contradiction. Her actions did not match her words. June E. Hahner, editor of Women in Latin American History: Their Lives and Views, stated Evita was attacked and insulted for her ambitions, which were improper for a woman of the time. But Hahner also pointed out that the power Evita exercised was executed through a man, and that Evita herself admitted she was not a feminist. Yet, according to Hahner, Evita objected to the apparent

³² Ibid., 112.

³³ Blanksten, 98.

lack of women within Argentina's power base. David William Foster, professor of Spanish at Arizona State University and author of over thirty books on Latin American literature, believed that "Read from present-day feminist perspective, Eva's self-portrait is as unconsciously parodic as it is paradigmatic of the shibboleths concerning masculine mind versus feminine heart."³⁴

Crassweller also saw a contraction in Evita's behavior. According to Crassweller, "She did more to bring women into public life in Argentina than a large army of feminists could have done."³⁵ Yet Crassweller felt Evita could not be considered a feminist because she ignored feminist theories and believed a women's movement should dedicate itself to a great man such as Perón.

Authors viewed Evita as a contradiction because of the inconsistencies found in her own statements. Page explored the contradicting feminist views which could be found within the pages of My Mission in Life. Page observed that Evita believed the world suffered from the want of women in the power structure. Yet she stated women were born for homemaking. "We were born to make homes. Not for the street," she wrote.³⁶ What Page did not mention

³⁴ David William Foster, "Narrative Persona in Eva Perón," in Women as Myth and Metaphor in Latin America, ed. Carmelo Virgillo & Naomi Lindstrom (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985), 68.

³⁵ Crassweller, 212.

³⁶ Perón, My Mission in Life, 190.

was that Evita rallied for rights in the home such as a monthly government allowance for women once they got married. She believed that in many loveless marriages women became forced laborers without a salary, security or limited working hours.

Although some authors believed Evita was a real feminist or had some feminist qualities, many disagreed altogether. Main wrote, "Eva herself, for all her frustrations, was no feminist."³⁷ Main felt this way because Evita viewed a woman's place as in the home. Main's perspective was original as she viewed Evita as more powerful than Perón. It seemed that Main was more interested in lambasting the Peronists and supporting the feminists within the oligarchy than in exploring Evita's feminist perspective. In rebuttal, Evita lashed out at the feminists of the oligarchy. She wrote in My Mission in Life:

I was not an old maid, nor even ugly enough for such a post...which, from the time of the English suffragettes down to today, generally belongs, almost exclusively, to women of this type...women whose first impulse undoubtedly had been to be like men.³⁸

Evita viewed these feminists as not entirely feminine, and in addition, resentful of their womanliness. (An attack she herself received for her actions.)

³⁷ Flores, 253.

³⁸ Perón, My Mission in Life, 185.

Fraser and Navarro agreed with Main but for different reasons. They explained that Evita never had a passion for suffrage or women's rights; they wrote that "where she did address herself to some of the implications of feminism, it was merely to dismiss feminists contemptuously as women who did not know how to be women."³⁹ The authors also believed her feminist ideology was based solely on Perón's view. Evita concurred with Fraser and Navarro, asserting that a women's movement should be devoted to a man. She wrote, "I think that perhaps no woman's movement will be glorious and lasting in the world if it does not give itself to the cause of a man."⁴⁰ She stated that by backing Perón, a woman would enhance her femininity. Fraser and Navarro did concede, however, that even though Evita propounded her husbands ideas, many women became involved in politics due to Evita's actions.

Carlson believed that everything Evita knew about feminism she learned from Perón, including the idea that women should follow a great man such as Perón. To support this Carlson used statements from My Mission in Life where Evita referred to Perón as the teacher and herself as the student. Evita wrote, "He cultured and I simple; he great and I small; he master and I pupil."⁴¹ Carlson felt that "Eva Perón had no real feminist

³⁹ Fraser, 109.

⁴⁰ Perón, My Mission in Life, 42.

⁴¹ Ibid.

philosophy."⁴² The author continued stating, "She spoke contemptuously of committed feminists as masculine women of the oligarchy, castrating women who wanted to be men."⁴³ Instead of adhering to modern feminist thought, "she held the nineteenth-century idea that women could improve society by civilizing and humanizing men."⁴⁴

Conclusion

How could such a powerful and active woman not be considered a feminist? Many authors saw her actions and her accomplishments as stemming from her passion for Peronism, not women. It is true; Evita did not seek either social or political equality with Perón. She also advocated women staying at home. Writers of Evita have been harsh in their criticism of her traditional perspective. Yet one must remember that she wrote My Mission in Life and gave speeches to support Perón's presidency. Additionally, she made anti-feminist statements to assault the oligarchy since the suffragettes were primarily from the oligarchy. Regardless of any public statements she made, Evita effected more changes in workers' lives and exercised more power in governmental decision-making than any other

⁴² Carlson, 195.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

female in the Western Hemisphere had done prior to her, reaping the full glory for her accomplishments.

Evita did not take on the traditional role of an Argentine first lady. In fact, she was not traditional at all. She assisted in the fight for women's equality, and she started a powerful political party. She was a working woman who put family life aside for her career. Perhaps she accomplished all of this by and for a man, but she successfully brought about economic (although temporary) and civil progress for working-class women. Cowles felt that if Evita had challenged male superiority, this stance could have turned out to be a major mistake, and possibly Evita was savvy enough to know that. Had Evita truly sought individual power, she would have exposed herself to her opponents and risked being destroyed.

In answering whether Evita was a feminist, clearly the majority of writers would say no, but most would concede she was a powerful woman who presented a message with which the working-class women could identify. Anti-Peronists looked to criticize her wherever possible. Their hatred for Evita was superseded only by their disdain for Perón. Perón's biographers looked at Evita as secondary to a strong male figure. Biographers of Evita gave her more credit than that, with Barnes consistently giving her too much credence for her actions. For many writers, the subject of Evita's feminist work was a side note rather than a focal point. Regardless of their stand, most authors were concerned with other issues such as the itinerary of

the Rainbow tour, her changing hairstyles or the scene at her father's funeral. They recounted feminist issues but did not analyze them, and in general seemed unfamiliar with the Argentine feminist movements. Carlson was the one exception, but only because her work focused entirely on the subject of Argentine feminism.

Although the majority of historians did not view Evita as a feminist, they acknowledged her individual strength and her influence on the working women of Argentina. Indeed, Evita was a strong woman. She may not have been part of the initial women's movement, but as a poor, small town girl, she would never have been given the opportunity to participate in the upper-class organizations centered in Buenos Aires. Once in a position of strength, however, Evita founded and headed an all-female political party. Her unsuccessful attempt to run as vice president demonstrated the frailty of her power, but it cannot take away from the observation that she touched the lives of many poor women in Argentina.

CHAPTER FIVE:

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the myths and perceptions of Eva Perón developed by both her supporters and her opponents. It has also discussed her role as a feminine leader and as a philanthropist. This writing has addressed these issues and presented the contrasting views of historians and biographers. It is evident from the numerous biographies on Evita, and the incorporation of her life into histories of feminism and Peronism, that she has been a subject of considerable historical interest. Evita's life was also sufficiently exalting enough to spawn several works of fiction. There were plays and musicals about Eva Perón including Henry Miller's Diamond Orchid, which opened in New York on February 10, 1965, and the well known Evita, by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber which opened in London on June 21, 1978.

By examining the myths and perceptions of Evita found in English, it is evident that her image has changed over time. There is a distinct pattern found in the biographies of Evita. The works that appeared following her death such as Mary Main's The Woman with the Whip: Eva Perón and Fleur Cowles' Bloody Precedent were anti-Peronist and displayed Evita in a negative light. These authors lived during the Perón era and developed strong opinions about Evita. They assisted in spreading the rumors of her

indecent past and accused her of displaying brutality and vengeance. Indeed, they are the original propagators of the Black myth. It is interesting to note that later in life Mary Main felt differently about Evita. In a 1980 interview with John Corry of The New York Times she proclaimed, "I once thought Argentina would have been different without the Peróns....Now I don't know."¹ She no longer believed Evita was inherently bad. She told Corry, "Eva did evil things, but she wasn't really evil. She lived a life of fantasy. She was her own creation."²

Regardless of Main's change in viewpoint, her book influenced future biographers. During the 1960s and 1970s the rumors started by Main and Cowles transformed to myth. Tim Rice based the lyrics of the musical Evita on Main's book which he referred to as the definitive book of Eva Perón.³ Popular biographies such as John Barnes' Evita First Lady: A Biography of Eva Perón and Paul Montgomery's Eva, Evita: The Life and Death of Eva Perón sensationalized Evita. They made her sexy, desperate and cunning. These works were written after Perón had died and did not carry the personal emotion that Main and Cowles had attached to their work.

¹ John Corry, , "Mary Main, Writer, Feels Empathy for Eva Perón," The New York Times, 10 May 1980, II 14.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

A transition occurred in 1980 when Nicholas Fraser and Marysa Navarro wrote Eva Perón. Fraser and Navarro attempted to discover the true Evita, as did Alicia Dujovne Ortiz in Eva Perón: A Biography, which has just appeared in English translation. Ortiz's book, while informative, focused extensively on Evita's choice in clothes and hairstyles. In addition, Fraser and Navarro and Ortiz incorporated a historiographical analysis of the biographies and histories on Evita written in Spanish. The last fifteen years have also seen a move toward objectivity because recent historians lacked the strong passions that the initial biographers felt for Evita. In recent popular works, however, there has been an inclination to explore the idolization of Evita as a modern political phenomenon. This can be seen in the film version of Evita as well as books Evita: Saint or Sinner? by W.A. Harbinson and Santa Evita by Tomás Eloy Martínez.

Histories written on Argentina and Peronism have followed a similar course. Histories written in the 1950s and 1960s supported the myths of Evita. Many general histories of Argentina included Evita in only a few pages, and as a result the authors assumed the myths already created by Evita biographers. These historians included: George Blanksten, Perón's Argentina; James Bruce, Those Perplexing Argentines; George Pendle, Argentina; and Arthur P. Whitaker, Argentina and The United States and Argentina. By the 1980s historians were attempting to be more objective. In 1983, Joseph A. Page, in Perón, A Biography, communicated some of the

myths of Evita but also attempted to show a fuller view of her. Page was followed by David Rock, in Argentina 1516-1982: From Spanish Colonization to the Falklands War, and Robert D. Crassweller, in Perón and the Enigmas of Argentina, who presented extremely critical and objective examinations of Evita.

Evita's autobiography was of no assistance in dissolving the myths. In My Mission in Life, she supported the claim of organizing the October 17 demonstration. As for her childhood, she was vague and nonspecific. Her other writing, In My Own Words, did not delve into her personal life whatsoever. It was a passionate call to Perón's supporters in an attempt to evoke backing for him after her death, and whether she actually wrote this piece is still in question.

Showing how historiography has changed in regard to Evita is much easier than placing her into historical perspective as there were not many who paralleled her power and her charisma. Historians often connected her to Eleanor Roosevelt as she was a contemporary and a first lady. Her Latin American counterpart was often seen as Doña María de la Encarnación Escurra de Rosas. Encarnación Rosas was the wife of Juan Manuel de Rosas, nineteenth-century Argentine dictator. Another woman compared to Evita

was María Estela Martínez de Perón (Isabel Perón), who took her spot as the first woman vice president and later president of Argentina.⁴

There is not an abundance of material in English on Latin American women. The most frequently written about Latin American women have been writers and artists. Writers who were Evita's contemporaries and have received considerable attention include: Isabel Allende of Perú (1942-), Nobel prize winner Gabriela Mistral of Chile (1889-1957), Victoria Ocampo of Argentina (1891-1979), Elena Poniatowska of México (1933-), and Luisa Valenzuela of Argentina (1938-). One of the most talked about artists has been Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) of México. Kahlo's letters and diary have been printed in English along with several biographies. Feminist leaders, lawyers, educators, actresses and doctors have also received attention, however these women are scarcely mentioned outside of studies on feminist movements. Social histories have incorporated women, but they are often presented as nameless and faceless groups.

Wives of politicians or female political figures, until recently, have had very little written about them in English. Two modern figures who have received notice are Violeta Barrios de Chamorro (1929-), president of Nicaragua from 1990 to 1996, and political activist Rigoberta Menchú Tum (1959-). Violeta Barrios de Chamorro became publisher of the newspaper *La*

⁴ Isabel Perón was Juan Perón's third wife. She was elected vice president in 1973 on a Perón-Perón ticket and assumed the presidency when Perón died on July 1, 1974. She was removed from power following a coup d'état on March 24, 1976.

Prensa following the assassination of her husband, Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, in 1978. Her involvement with the newspaper thrust her into politics, and she became the first female elected president in Latin America. Rigoberta Menchú, recognized for her work in defense of Indian civil rights in Guatemala, won the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize. She is noted for being the youngest and only indigenous person to have received this award to date.

Aside from these recent examples, female political figures are sparse in histories originating not only in the United States but in Latin America. In the article "Research on Latin American Women," Navarro explained that Latin American social scientists have written very little on the political participation of Latin American women. She explained that while Latin Americans started writing more on women in the 1970s, this focus was not feminist in nature. Women were not studied, as in the United States and Europe, "...to expand our empirical knowledge of women's experiences by retrieving lost or hidden past and by revealing its present characteristics through an interdisciplinary approach."⁵ Rather, women were studied in order "...to analyze the Latin American social formation, to understand how the capitalist mode of production in its dependent form operates."⁶

In "Women in Latin America: The State of Research, 1975" Meri Knaster agreed that women were not the focal point of studies. Instead they

⁵ Marysa Navarro, "Research on Latin American Women," Signs 5 (Autumn 1979), 113.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

were viewed "as an integral part of a social, political, cultural, and economic environment."⁷ Knaster also argued that until middle of the twentieth century "women who appeared in print were either related in some way to an illustrious male figure or were celebrated heroines in their own right."⁸ One figure that falls into this category and has been written about as much as Evita was La Malinche (c. 1505-1529). When Fernando Cortés landed in México in 1519, he received twenty maidens as a prize for his first victorious battle. One of the maidens was La Malinche. She spoke both Mayan and Náhuatl and thus became a great asset to the Spaniards once she could understand and speak Spanish. She became Cortés' mistress and bore him a son. Because of the role she played in the conquest, her life story has since become legendary with the contrasting views of traitor and sufferer. A good parallel to La Malinche would be Pocahontas, another story of an encounter of the New and Old Worlds. Yet Evita can be compared to La Malinche because both captured the public's interest in romance, sacrifice, heroism and treachery—the formula for enticing legends.

It is unfortunate that more about Latin American women is not written in English because there are quite a few interesting females who share roles similar to Evita's. By studying women with similarities to Evita

⁷ Meri Knaster, "Women in Latin America: The State of Research, 1975," Latin American Research Review 11, no. 1 (1976): 25.

⁸ Ibid.

historians may begin to understand why she was able to attain significant power and popularity in a male dominated society. Although first ladies traditionally served in social capacities, there are examples of those who stepped outside that role such as Darcy Sarmanho Vargas (1895-1968), wife of Brazilian President Getúlio Vargas. Mrs. Vargas was a philanthropist who dedicated her time to institutions for orphans and underprivileged girls. Another woman of power and interest was Princess-Regent Isabel (1846-1921) who served as regent of Brazil while her father, Pedro II, was out of the country in 1871, 1876, and 1888. An abolitionist, Princess Isabel was responsible for decreeing the emancipation of slaves in 1888.

Argentina's Encarnación Rosas, wife of Manuel Rosas, was a valid historical counterpart to Evita. Encarnación is not well known nor widely written about in the United States, but when she is mentioned, she is portrayed as very similar in character to Evita. Encarnación Rosas was viewed as a "staunch helpmeet and aid to him [Rosas] in later years."⁹ She ruled Buenos Aires while Rosas was fighting in the Indian campaigns. Like Evita, she looked to the poor for political support, but in contrast, she came from a wealthy family.

Several who wrote about Evita connected her to Encarnación Rosas, but few actually elaborated on what they meant. Fleur Cowles in Bloody

⁹ A. Curtis Wilgus, ed., South American Dictators During the First Century of Independence (Washington D.C.: George Washington University Press, 1937), 106-107.

Precedent, however, made strong connections. Cowles' book was a comparison of the two regimes: Perón's and Rosas.' The first half of her book was about the Rosas era. Cowles believed that Evita was similar to Encarnación Rosas because both were "fired by the same ambitions for their husbands king-makers" and had the support of the workers.¹⁰ "Evita's name is just as hallowed by the workers today as Encarnación's was in her day," wrote Cowles.¹¹ Also, Cowles saw them as similar because both women used spies and propaganda effectively. In addition, Encarnación died while Rosas was in power, just as Evita died during Perón's rule.

Even the first female South American president, Isabel Perón, who ruled from 1974 to 1976, has not become a popular subject of biographies and works of fiction. Little is written about her in English, and she is usually only included in surveys on Peronism or female leaders. Historians and biographers of Evita have largely ignored Isabel Perón. When historians did refer to her it was regarding her role in returning Evita's body to Argentina and her relationship with Perón. Historians typically portrayed her as an imitator of Evita, mimicking Evita's hairstyles and concern for the masses. Interestingly, Isabel and Evita had a great deal in common. Born María Estela Martínez in 1931, Isabel, like Evita, was one of five children. She was raised by her mother due to her father's early death. Isabel grew up poor in a small

¹⁰ Cowles, 143.

¹¹ Ibid., 197.

town and received only a rudimentary education. Also like Evita, she sought an artistic career (as a dancer and musician) which she pursued until she met and married Juan D. Perón and began to focus on politics. However, Isabel never captured the hearts and imagination of the people, and she governed in a time when economic problems crippled any chance for an era of good feeling. She was also married to a much older, less charismatic Perón. As a result, she never garnered the interest within literature that Evita has.

Moving away from South America, Evita has also been compared to Eleanor Roosevelt. Biographers of both Evita and Perón likened Evita to her contemporary Eleanor Roosevelt because of their joint commitment to social betterment. North American writers saw a clear connection to Roosevelt because, like Evita, she worked for social causes, spoke on radio programs and wrote newspaper columns. She also traveled across the United States so as to observe relief projects as well as working and living conditions first hand. Evita, likewise, toured Argentina's interior, delivered messages on the radio and published her own newspaper column. Robert J. Alexander compared Evita to Eleanor Roosevelt in Juan Domingo Perón: A History, because both traveled to the people to discover their social problems.

However, Leonard and Ruth Greenup, in Revolution Before Breakfast: Argentina 1941-1946, argued that the upper class Argentines balked at any resemblance to Eleanor Roosevelt. A comparison to Roosevelt could have been an affront to the oligarchy because Roosevelt came from an established,

well-to-do family whose lineage in the New World dated back to the 1640s. With Roosevelt, there was no poverty-stricken childhood to cover up or indecent artistic years to hide. A clear example of their differences was that Roosevelt spent a weekend at Windsor Castle in 1948, whereas the Royal family did not extend Evita the same welcome. Evita was also different from Roosevelt because she was a young and glamorous first lady. Roosevelt, born in 1884, did not become first lady until 1933. Not only was she a much older first lady, she was not as attractive. While Roosevelt had her share of critics, she was also treated differently in history because she was perceived as the wife of the president who won World War II, rather than the wife of a fascist, South American dictator.

Far more information is available on Roosevelt because she was a North American and because there were numerous papers documenting her life. She was a prolific writer and left many clues as to who she was and how she felt. Eleanor Roosevelt's letters, essays, newspaper columns and press conferences have been published. Consequently, numerous biographies, including several by Joseph P. Lash, described her life's work. Biographies covered her public and private life and even focused on specific issues such as her relationship with the media and her role in foreign policy making. Her autobiography, unlike Evita's My Mission in Life, discussed her life's events and accomplishments, not just her political views. Her life has not been filled with mystery.

Recently Evita has been compared to a celebrity. Madonna (1959-), the star of the film Evita, has been compared to Evita. "'Eva Perón is actually Madonna, but in 1948 instead of 1996,' says director Alan Parker."¹² Nancy Griffin wrote in Newsweek, "The maligned and adored Madonna Louise Ciccone stars as one of the most maligned and adored figures of the century."¹³ In the documentary Evita: The Story of Eva Perón, the similarities to Madonna are also recounted as they both grew up in small towns, endured public scandals and were starlets.

W. A. Harbinson, in Evita: Saint or Sinner?, dedicated over a quarter of his book to the Madonna-Evita comparison. The author wrote, "Indeed, in its own distinctive, modern way, Madonna's life is a replay of the life of Evita Perón: a rags-to-riches tale in which, once success is achieved, ruthless will is deployed to sustain it."¹⁴ This vulgar and sensational biography, which is nothing more than a rewrite of works by Mary Main and Paul Montgomery, was designed to sell books on the basis of Evita's sexuality and to capitalize off the then upcoming movie release. The author attempted to draw parallels from the two women's working class backgrounds, loss of a parent in early life and drive to be successful and famous.

¹² Nancy Griffin, "Madonna Tangos with Evita," Newsweek, 16 December 1996, 60.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Harbinson, 163.

While some comparisons have merit, Harbinson overdid his analysis. For instance, he stated, "Like Madonna, Evita began as an impoverished brunette and then became a platinum-blonde performer."¹⁵ This type of comparison lacks validity as numerous starving actresses have dyed their hair. Harbinson grasped for false similarities, yet he failed to address the differences such as that Madonna is a superstar who, while successful, has been completely self-serving. Evita, in contrast, spent from dawn to dusk working for her political causes that, while partially self-serving, included creating the largest and most far-reaching welfare program Argentina had ever seen. Furthermore, Evita grew up poor and illegitimate in the pampas of Argentina. Madonna attended college, studied dance and had opportunities Evita never had.

Many Argentines felt Madonna was a poor choice to play Evita and protested against the movie. "The idea of Madonna as Evita—it's stupefying," stated Argentine Victor Bo, producer of another film on Eva Perón's life.¹⁶ Madonna was not the only reason for protest. The musical Evita has long caused a stir in Argentina. President Carlos Menem deemed the musical "a total and absolute disgrace."¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid., 184-185.

¹⁶ David Schrieberg, "Don't Cry for Menem," Newsweek, 25 September 1995, 55.

¹⁷ Ibid.

There is no question Evita was singular to Latin American history. She rose from poverty and illegitimacy to become the most powerful woman in the Western Hemisphere. With her power she opened doors to the women of Argentina. She gave them opportunities outside the home that had never before been available. As the wife of a dictator she diligently supported her husband and assisted in the suppression of democracy, most notably through her control of the media and the arts. She also created a massive welfare program and served as de facto leader of the ministry of labor.

Evita also incited myths. These myths have made her one of the most known women in Latin American history. These intriguing myths spurred the musical Evita which placed Evita's life into fiction and placed her in the international spotlight. The musical's success has led to an interest in her life and a thirst for more information about her. No other female political figure of twentieth-century Latin America has received such attention.

Evita captured the attention of historians and writers around the world because she crossed the line of what was expected from a president's wife. She went outside the traditional role and dazzled the world. She overcame poverty and illegitimacy to become a leader and an example to others. She was a novelty. But if Evita lived today she no longer would be. Had Evita become vice president, she would have been the first female in that role in the Western Hemisphere. Since then many women have become leaders of their countries such as previously mentioned Violeta Barrios de Chamorro,

president of Nicaragua; Mary Eugenia Charles (1919-), prime minister of Dominica; and Ertha Pascal-Trouillot (1944-), provisional president of Haiti.

As histories start appearing about women such as these who have since achieved power and notoriety, Evita may become less fascinating as a biographical subject, but would remain a fascinating character of legendary, if not romantic, proportions.

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