The Patagonian Experience of Political Repression during the First Anti-Peronist Dictatorship in Argentina (1955-1958): Rethinking Local History in Ethnic Studies.

**Introduction**

The dictatorship that overthrew the Perón government in Argentina on 16 September 1955 almost immediately implemented a repressive, anti-Peronist policy. One of its most infamous and controversial decisions to "*desperonizar*" the country was the Decree-Law 4.161, which was sanctioned by the Federal Government on 5 March 1956 and prohibited any reference (in words, images, songs, etc.) to Peronism. It granted a prison sentence of between thirty days and six months, exacted fines, and sometimes even dismissed from public office anyone who publicized

the photograph, portrait or sculpture of the Peronist officials or their relatives, the coat of arms and the Peronist flag, the proper name of the deposed president, that of his relatives, the expressions "Peronism," "Peronist," "Justicialism," "Justicialist,""Third Position," the abbreviation "PP," the dates exalted by the deposed regime, the musical compositions called "March of the Peronist boys," and "*Evita capitana*" or fragments of them, the play "The reason of my life" or fragments of it, and the speeches of the deposed president and his wife or fragments thereof.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The application of this decree-law generated plenty of stories throughout Argentina. In Neuquén, Northern Patagonia, the local Peronist politician, Felipe Sapag, recalled the following personal anecdote involving a neighbor, a local anti-Peronist politician and member of the UCR party, Miguel Majluf:

We had an employee in our store, Agapito Sánchez, very Spanish, who loved Spanish music and always put the record player at full volume to improve sales, towards the street, as a form of propaganda. Once, Don Miguel [Majluf, an immigrant from the Middle East, as was the Sapag family], heard something strange and went to report us to the police; he said that we were playing Peronist music, which at that time was forbidden. The police chief came to see what music we were playing and it turns out that Agapito had put on a Spanish singer called "*Parecito Pharaoh.*" Majluf had confused the word "Pharaoh" with "Perón"! Even the commissar laughed out loud.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Regardless of the language difficulties of families of Arab descent in Argentina, the confrontation between Sapag and Majluf in Patagonia during the period of Peronism’s proscription is part of Neuquén’s local history. These two families of Middle Eastern origin clashed and competed at the highest level of local power. For instance, during the elections for the governorship of the province of Neuquén in 1962, the families competed for the same office: Majluf was the UCRI party’s candidate for governor, while Sapag was backed by the local neo-Peronist party (MPN). [[3]](#endnote-3)

In the local history of Neuquén, the political protagonism of ethnic migrant minorities during the proscription of Peronism in Argentina (1955-1973) is evident. If we compare the leaders elected to govern the Province of Neuquén during those years, for example, the evidence is more than interesting: in the first provincial elections of 1958 and later in the elections for governor in 1962, 1963, and 1973, only candidates of Jewish and Arab descent (members of ethnic-immigrant minorities at both the subnational and national levels) were voted to chair the provincial executive branch of Neuquén, a situation that mirrors ones in other provinces during this same period.

Seeking to contribute to the literature on the history of ethnic-migrant minorities in Argentina, especially vis à vis Peronism, this article analyzes reports on and testimonies of political repression in Neuquén, Northern Patagonia, at the time of the first anti-Peronist dictatorship, known as the "Liberating Revolution" (1955-1958). It argues that despite repression throughout Argentina in those years, a pattern of social inclusion developed locally in Patagonia, where political identities were constructed through a "Patagonian experience" rather than by attachment to the political identities and discussions between Peronists and anti-Peronists at the national level.

An analysis of the reports of the federal intervention in Neuquén during this period of dictatorship—especially those of the National Commission of Investigations in charge of political repression—as well as the testimony, especially of ethnic-migrant minorities, on their socio-political experiences in those years,[[4]](#endnote-4) allow us to rethink the history of ethnic migrant minorities in Argentina while illustrating the complexity of local experiences of political participation in national processes.

Despite the centrality of subnational politics in the country, especially during the proscription of Peronism, local repression of ethnic-migrant minorities has received little attention in migrant and ethnic studies of Argentina. In general, scholars in the field have assumed that the political participation of these minorities in the years of the repression was part of the process of shaping a sense of belonging through an attachment to national citizenship during the conflict between Peronists and anti-Peronists. However, through their political participation and thus through their experience of political repression, members of ethnic and migrant minorities negotiated their citizenship and belonging in local contexts, even though the ramifications of these negotiations took on meaning for all of the country’s inhabitants. In other words, the political participation of ethnic migrant minorities in Patagonia during the period of repression represent a particular Argentinean experience in the broader sense. From this perspective, it is possible to deepen our understanding of the experience of ethnic-migrant minorities in Argentinean politics and thus contribute to the ethnic studies of Latin America.

**Anti-Peronist Repression in Patagonia: The Complex Execution of National Decisions in Subnational Contexts**

The coup d'état that overthrew the government of Juan Domingo Perón in 1955 led almost immediately to various repressive policies directed at the followers of the "deposed regime." The dictatorship of the "Liberating Revolution" assumed its functions on 16 September, 1955, and just twenty days afterwards, on 7 October 1955, the federal government put into operation the National Commission of Investigations through Decree-Law 479, with the intention to "*desperonizar*" Argentina.

Thereafter, the government formally relied on the Commission of Investigation to judge the "bad" performance of the officials of the "deposed regime" so as to exclude the followers of the "tyrant" from the public sector, state companies, and from the public sphere in general.

In order to develop this political-institutional change in the country, the federal government of the "Liberating Revolution" granted the National Commission of Investigations broad powers, including access to all information on the activities of the followers of the "deposed regime."

The agents of this commission were authorized to investigate and arrest suspects, search private homes or public institutions, sequester private documents, dictate precautionary decisions, access the private backgrounds of people in entities, organizations, etc. All this was done in order to ensure "the best success of the investigation" of the work of all those individuals identified with Peronism within the state and, therefore, to justify and legitimize the coup d'état of 1955.

In order to carry out this policy throughout the entire country, the federal government divided the operations of National Commission of Investigations, which was under the authority of the Ministry of Interior, among geographic regions in a pyramidal, vertical, and centralized structure based on the division of the country into provinces.

A mere twelve days after being created on the national level, the Commission of Investigations was put into operation in Neuquén (Northern Patagonia) thanks to Decree No. 128 of 24 October, 1955, and was placed in charge not only of replacing officials identified with Peronism in the region (e.g., by appointing the municipal authorities in the various localities of Neuquén), but also of informing and investigating all activities related to the followers of Peronism in this territory, especially—but not only—in the public sector and state companies, for which the Neuquenean Commission of Investigations created administrative subdivisions in order to increase its own effectiveness.

With these measures and the help of the National Commission of Investigations the dictatorship wanted to modify the structure of power in Argentina’s state institutions, which had been configured during Peron's government, between the years 1946-1955. As indicated by Decree Law No. 479:

One of the essential purposes pursued by the government is to reintegrate the public administration to the conditions of morality, honesty and prestige that should characterize the work in the public sector.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The Neuquenean Commission of Investigations published Supplementary Decree No. 210 on 21 November 1955—a month and a half after it was created on the national level—thereby designating the Commission of Investigations of the municipality of Neuquén, and Supplementary Decree No. 271, which established the Commission of Investigations of the city of Zapala (the two main urban centers of Neuquén in those years) on 30 November 1955.

This territorial division of the National Commission of Investigations in Neuquén, which was duplicated in all the provinces of the country, had the objective of achieving *desperonización* in the most remote corners of the territory. Agents of the Ministry of Interior were authorized to investigate and report on public and privates activities in these years within a context in which the dictatorship’s principal goal was to remove and pass judgment on the work of Peronists in the public sector, especially of those who had played functions during the "deposed regime."

For instance, in File 292 ("Reserved") of 9 February 1956, the President of the Commission of Investigations of the Municipality of Neuquén, Captain (R) Isidoro Herrera, informed the Minister of the Government of Neuquén, Lieutenant Colonel Francisco S. Torres, of the imprisonment of various officials:

According to the documented and testimonial evidence that was conclusively gathered in the summary, the former Mayor Agapito Cortes Rearte, secretary-financial officer, Juan Cárlos [sic] Sobich, former accountant, Raúl Pintos, former accountant of the Province, Pío Giordanelli and former census delegate Amelia G. de Scalia [were arrested] because the first three were involved in subtraction of public funds; and the fourth was the instigator of the subtraction of public funds and falsification of public documents and the last, by instigation and participation in subtraction of public funds. All those named were remitted [...] to the First Sectional Commissioner of this city.[[6]](#endnote-6)

This and other examples of the work of the Commission of Investigations in Neuquén (at the subnational level) helped construct an image of "almost direct" correspondence between the repressive policies of *desperonization* initiated by the federal government and their application in the provinces during the years of dictatorship, especially as the work of the Commission of Investigations in the provinces and municipalities ran parallel to its work in establishments run by the federal government. [[7]](#endnote-7)

Although throughout the "Liberating Revolution" "*desperonization*" policies were the common denominator throughout Argentina (both at the national and subnational level), this did not signify the absence of specific local processes, which were different and in some cases opposed to those that took place at the national level.

At the same time that the Commission of Investigations replaced the authorities that had been appointed by the "deposed regime" in the capital city of Neuquén (an aspect of repressive policies that were accentuated after General Pedro E. Aramburu’s rise to President on 13 November 1955), the agents of the Commission of Investigations in Neuquén informed their superiors in the federal government in Buenos Aires that several of the policies decided upon by the national executive branch could not be applied in the local towns of Patagonia, a situation that can be considered characteristic of other local towns during this period as well.

For instance, on 31 on January 1956, ten days before presenting the report in which the municipal authorities of the city of Neuquén were imprisoned for their responsibilities during the "deposed regime," the Ministry of Interior received intelligence ("Exp. 274, Reserved") indicating that despite the overthrow of Juan Domingo Perón’s government, it would be impossible to remove all the Peronist authorities in certain cities of the territory of Neuquén because these often were

the only people in the place in condition to be in charge, for reasons of illustration, since the rest of the inhabitants are either foreigners with little knowledge of Spanish, or illiterate Argentines, or with very little education.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Furthermore, on 17 January 1956, only about twenty days before imprisoning the authorities of the municipality of Neuquén appointed by the Perón administration, the police commissioner of Neuquén, Eriserto B. Mena, sent a note to the Minister of Interior in Buenos Aires, informing him that the police in Neuquén (also in charge of providing logistical support for the Commission of Investigations) could not fully apply the anti-Peronist policies of the "Liberating Revolution" within its own institution.

More specifically Mena informed the Minister of the Interior that he could not obey the order to remove every police officer with "a Peronist background" in Neuquén (despite their affiliation with the "former ruling party") because

these officials are in charge of very small police stations with small populations and without any influence on the political order. [[9]](#endnote-9)

Disregarding the persecution and repression of Peronist followers in Neuquén (in adherence to the policies of local authorities imposed by the Federal Government), the difficulty of applying the anti-Peronist policies sanctioned by the "Liberating Revolution" government at the subnational level in Argentina was due not only to the socio-demographic qualities of the provinces.

In this sense, communications between the provincial and national authorities in charge of applying repressive policies during the years of dictatorship allow us to observe these tensions and visualize the complexity of enforcing repressive policies at the subnational level in Patagonia as well as in state offices throughout the country.

For example, during the investigation of employees with a "Peronist background" at the State Postal Office Company located in Neuquén (District 22 of the postal system), the nation’s Secretary of Communications, Captain Ramón Casanova, sent a report to the Minister of Interior complaining that the provincial investigative commission in Neuquén was not taking into consideration the particularities of the State Postal Office Company in this section. As Casanova explained to the Minister of Interior,

this Department considers [...] that the requests for information such as that dealt with by these acts [....] must be made directly (to the Secretary of Communications), because as it corresponds to us to resolve in the summaries that involve agents of our office, and it is the local office who is better able to understand the facts and the information related to them, which must be a true reflection of the aforementioned summary proceedings. If other sources are used, errors may occur that could cause, even temporarily, unjust prejudice of agents, who, prior to the respective summary inquiries, could be in a position to disprove the charges that were originally made to them (by the Investigative Commission). [[10]](#endnote-10)

The agents of the Ministry of Interior working in Neuquén felt that several of the decisions made by the Federal Government against Peron's supporters would be counterproductive in the local context of Patagonia. For instance, according to intelligence report no. 149 dated to 10 October 1956 and entitled "The working reality of Plaza Huincul" (an important oil city in the province of Neuquén), the Federal Government needed to understand that “Argentine unionism has national and honest roots. Especially the leaders from the inland, as in this case.” In their report, the intelligence officials were therefore complaining that “the Argentine unionist who had the stain of having campaigned in Peronism is the beaten one [and] that those who undermine the base of Argentina national identity [...] are immune and replenished.”[[11]](#endnote-11)

In this report, the agents who were working for the government of the "Liberating Revolution" (which had overthrown the Perón government one year before), "recommended" keeping Neuquén workers in the oil sector despite their being political leaders who were identified in Neuquén as Peronists, arguing that this "recommendation" was based on a "local reality" that, according to them, was unknown or not understood by the federal authorities due mostly to the socio-geographical and cultural distance between Patagonia and Buenos Aires.

This issue of "(non) knowledge" or "incomprehension" of "local realities" at the subnational level by the federal authorities in Buenos Aires was a topic of discussion and concern in the military government during this dictatorship, due especially to its work in Patagonia and the region’s status as a national territory in the process of provincialization, and not merely to the need for applying policies directed against the "deposed regime."

For example, on 23 September 1957, the Minister of Interior, Carlos Aramburu, received a confidential communication from Brigadier General Heriberto Ahrens, chief of the army coordination staff, entitled "Referent of government action in Patagonia," which informed him of the need to organize a series of meetings among various ministries in order to coordinate a special policy for Patagonia, due, among other reasons, to the delicate political situation in the south of the country. |According to Ahrens,

of the 450,000 inhabitants of Patagonia, only 200,000 are Argentines; the rest 250,000, are foreigners with a high percentage of Chileans. [[12]](#endnote-12)

According to this official communication, the need for the federal government to coordinate the work carried out in Patagonia was important to the "Liberating Revolution" dictatorship because

the problem of governing and the problem of national defense are concomitant to the point that the solutions of the first directly satisfy the interests of the second. [[13]](#endnote-13)

The military government of the "Liberating Revolution" therefore sought to organize a series of work meetings for representatives of the different ministries with the aim of analyzing and understanding the state of affairs in Patagonia and thus defining a policy suitable to its particular situation—one that according to the dictatorship was different from that of the rest of the country.

The region’s peculiar position can be contextualized in the history and status of Patagonia. Conquered by the military in 1885, the territory was still undergoing the process of provincialization begun by the second Perón government. The dictatorship of the "Liberating Revolution" discussed how to continue the process.

Nevertheless, the issue of "(non) knowledge" or "incomprehension" of Patagonia’s local context (at a subnational level) during the "Liberating Revolution" was a topic of debate among not only officials of the military government, but also local "anti-Peronist" actors who supported the dictatorship in Patagonia.

In the specific case of Neuquén, local political repression generated discussion and conflict among actors opposed to the "deposed regime," mainly because of the way in which "local reality" was understood and thus the way in which the policies of "de-peronization" determined Neuquén’s military government were implemented.

This can be seen, for example, in certain confrontations between local authorities appointed by the military government (and for this reason generally considered as "new" and outsiders in Patagonia) and local anti-Peronist actors who had participated in local public life prior to the 1955 coup d'état, such as certain local authorities of the Catholic Church or individuals related to the Argentine Rural Society in Patagonia.

An example of this kind of conflict can be seen in the way in which the Governor-Comptroller of the province of Neuquén, Captain Ricardo Hermelo, presented his dispute with Father Ernesto Santo, the Catholic priest of Plaza Huincul—a type of conflict that also took place in other zones in Patagonia.

On September 7 1956, Hermelo sent a request to the Minister of Interior, Laureano Landaburu, requesting the transfer of the priest of Plaza Huincul because he had demonstrated a

pernicious intention to create a climate of discomfort among the oil workers and their respective authorities. Therefore, Minister, I insist that the transfer of the aforementioned priest be immediately arranged, because a similar situation urgently demands that this measure be adopted. [[14]](#endnote-14)

The request of the Governor-Comptroller of the province of Neuquén was due to a meeting that the priest had organized "with some 300 workers” of YPF (a state-owned petroleum company) at 5:30 p.m. on 25 August 1956 in the city’s cinema Cutral Có, an act that the Federal Auditor considered contrary to the military government’s policy of "de-initiation."

In his defense, the priest explained to the minister that he had called the meeting precisely due to the need to repair the mistakes made by the officials of Neuquén’s provisional government, who had not executed the policy of President Aramburu as they had dismissed twenty-three workers "without previous summary of the company according to the regulations of YPF."

In response to a request by the Governor-Comptroller of the province of Neuquén, the priest also sent a letter to the Secretary of Religious Affairs of the military government, Dr. Ricardo Lanusse, on 29 September 1956, in which he explained what had happened, stating that he needed to intercede due to the difference between the policies of the military government and their execution by the authorities in Neuquén, a difference that had caused "the suffering of twenty-three families of Plaza Huincul."

The priest claimed that his intention had been to reassure the population as these local authorities had acted against the positions of the dictatorship of the "Liberation Revolution" principally because they had not complied with the

speech of the Hon. Mr. Provisional General Gen. Eugenio Aramburu to the Armed Forces, on 6 July [1956], when he stated that "after the investigations are completed, the Government considers that the opportunity has arrived to [...] lift the disqualifications for union elections in those that have not broken the law [sic].”[[15]](#endnote-15)

The priest therefore pointed out to Lanusse that

you can easily take charge of the psychological effect produced by the layoffs [...] after the authoritative words of the President that [...] had put a drop of peace and tranquility in many homes on this earth.

This way of presenting the conflict and especially the priest’s clarification that there were local particularities in Neuquén that the authorities imposed by the military government did not understand and/or did not consider in their work (such as the role of the state-owned YPF in the periphery of Neuquén), illustrates that regardless of the country’s common objective ("de-Peronization"), local particularities suggested a need to adjust policies even if that meant opposing the decisions of authorities in the dictatorship.

It was in this complex local context that on 28 July 1957 the military government organized elections for the constituent convention, thereby opening the period in Argentinean history in which Peronism was banned from the elections (1957-1973).

With these elections, the military government sought to reform the national constitution approved by Perón’s government in 1949. In Patagonia, however, these elections had another aim: to organize local constituent conventions that would write, for the first time in Argentinean history, provincial constitutions for this region.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Despite the option of a blank vote for Perón in exile (which won first place at the national level),[[17]](#endnote-17) during these elections for a local constituent convention in Neuquén the UCRI party came in first place, receiving 38.23%[[18]](#endnote-19) of the votes, a list presided by Ángel Edelman, son of immigrants of Jewish origin from a Jewish colony in Entre Ríos.

Nationwide repression did not prevent the local constituent convention in Neuquén headed by Edelman from discussing the collective identity and even the religious character of the future province. For instance, during the session of 24 November 1957, Edelman headed the discussion on whether the constitution of Neuquén should include the phrase, "invoking God's protection, source of all reason and justice," which was part of the preamble to the national constitution of 1853.

In the end, the constituent convention of Neuquén decided to keep the phrase, a decision justified by the fact that it already existed in the earlier national constitution. Along with this decision, the convention headed by Edelman therefore included in Article 3 of the constitution a clarification stating that "Neuquén is an indivisible, secular, democratic, and social province."

While the representatives of the Christian Democratic Party were the most prominent advocates of including the phrase, and the representatives of the Socialist and the Communist Party were its main opponents, the discussion it provoked can be related to certain local political practices in Neuquén during the years of the dictatorship. Despite the "Catholic and Nationalist dictatorship," the majority of representatives at the local constituent convention of Neuquén, which was in charge of writing the region’s first provincial constitution, did not take an oath on the bible when assuming their responsibilities. Of the twenty-four representatives at the provincial convention in Neuquén, only seven took their oath on a bible ("for God and the fatherland, and on these Holy Gospels"), while the rest simply took the pledge to "the Homeland and my honor."[[19]](#endnote-20)

Political discussions on identity issues included a wide range of topics. For instance, representative José Jaritonsky of the UCRI (a merchant from the Patagonian city of Zapala) requested during the session of 3 October 1957 that the provincial convention of Neuquén pay tribute to the Israeli people, a "nation to which ties of blood bind me"—a request that did not generate any special discussion among the others at the convention.

It was within this local setting that the implementation of certain policies decided by the military government generated a series of conflicts in Neuquén on a subnational level that positioned the political discussions on the national level—especially the conflict between Peronists and anti-Peronists—in second place, thereby creating a situation in which the followers of the "deposed regime" could participate along with local anti-Peronist actors.

An example of this can be seen in the case of the oil employee strike in Plaza Huincul in 1958, an event considered by various scholars as central to the political history of Neuquén, and one that illustrates the "local Patagonian experience" during the dictatorship of the "Liberating Revolution”.

**The Patagonian Experience of Politics and Belonging during the Period of Repression in Argentina (1955-1958)**

The famous strike of the oil employees of Plaza Huincul in Patagonia officially began on 14 February 1958 following the refusal of the state company YPF to increase salaries according to the demands of the local petroleum unions (S.U.P.E. in Spanish).

The claim in Patagonia was based on differences in the cost of living. Prices in Argentina were rising in 1958. That year, the market basket in Argentina was calculated at $1142.70, an estimate based on prices in Buenos Aires. Prices were higher in Patagonia, however, so the Neuquén press questioned how a family could live on a salary of $1400 and claimed it was impossible.[[20]](#endnote-21)

Dealing with the S.U.P.E. strike, the military government of the "Liberating Revolution" sanctioned a decree jointly signed by General Aramburu and Julio Cueto Rúa, the Minister of Commerce and Industry that established “the partial mobilization of Argentine native, naturalized or foreign personnel that provides services in the state company YPF.” [[21]](#endnote-22) It went on to state that

mobilization means for the personnel not only the obligation to go to work; but also to execute it in the way that the authorities establish it, in order to regularize the services. [Therefore] the break of these instructions [...] meant the violation of the military regime established by this decree.

This military government’s decision meant that YPF workers were now considered under the Code of Military Justice, without differences between Argentines and foreigners or Peronists and anti-Peronists. This decision by the military government established that "the administrative hierarchy of the YPF company is transformed into a military hierarchy," meaning that the employees were now regarded as soldiers.

The military government’s attitude reveals the homogeneous approach of the authorities in Buenos Aires towards YPF’s character in the country as whole, ignoring (or not taking into consideration) its character at the local level in Patagonia, especially in Neuquén.

After the military government in Buenos Aires announced its decision, most of the strikers in Plaza Huincul decided almost immediately to continue with the protest and prevent the application of the decree regardless of their party or political identification. At this point, the oil workers in Plaza Huincul moved out of their homes, hiding in the town or taking refuge in fields and surrounding areas, while their relatives stayed put.

This situation not only placed the salary dispute and division between "Peronism and anti-Peronism" in secondary place, but also generated the collective participation of the local population ("*huinculense*") in a common interest, whereby residence in a common local area legitimized participation for all inhabitants, independent or in parallel to their political identifications at the national level.

The fact that the oil union was led by a communist did not determine the rise of the protest or the participation of the local society. All the more so because the decision taken by many of the YPF workers revealed the lack of knowledge (and/or consideration) of the "local reality," which the *huinculenses* felt was a consequence of the policies set by the authorities of the government of the "Liberating Revolution." This helped transform a salary demand demanded by unionized workers at a state company into a collective demand by the local population against the "policies of the national government located in Buenos Aires."

Olga Lione, who was born in Córdoba on 29 March 1928, settled in Cutral Có in 1957, working as a correspondent for the Rio Negro newspaper. Olga remembers that at the time of the strike, she lived "in Sáenz Peña Street [...] in a boarding house [...]," and that she along with her neighbors helped the strikers hide from the military whenever it came looking for them. According to Olga, the military authorities sent by the government did not know the inhabitants of the town or the strikers whom they came to arrest. This made it easier for local inhabitants to help the strikers. As Olga recalls,

we were sitting on the sidewalk with neighbors, and at night the soldiers came to arrest strikers. We were together with the strikers talking in the street. The soldiers asked us if we know the strikers. “Who?” “Do you know him?”—all sitting there on the sidewalk— “do you know him?” “No.” “Do you know him?” “No, I do not.” And he was himself one of the strikers [...] later we took him out of the town.

Born on 11 June, 1933 in the periphery of Neuquén, Bernabé Mora started working in the supply sector at YPF in 1952. He recalls that

many people protected strikers. In the house of my father, for example, two strikers entered the patio at about ten o'clock at night, the soldiers were looking for them, and they stayed there for two days, until they managed to escape at night.

The decision of the Military Government, which wished to ensure production by the state energy company, created a framework for local participation based on the perception of a distance between "national" and "local" discussions—a distance that erased the identity frontiers between Peronists and anti-Peronists. The military government’s response to the salary demand thus lowered the axis of political discussion from a national to the local-subnational level (in Plaza Huincul as well as in Neuquén in general) despite the repression during the dictatorship.

The participation of the local community in the Plaza Huincul strike was reinforced by YPF’s role in Patagonian society (and specifically within *huinculense* society)—a role that the military government of the "Liberating Revolution" seemed to ignore (or not consider) in its policies.

According to Julio Durval Fuentes, who was born in Cutral Có on 9 July 1935 and worked for YPF Plaza Huincul from 1953 to 1986,

Around YPF, many people lived, many people lived well: merchants, painters, mechanics, plasterers, domestic service [...] All these dissatisfied people also strengthened the strike. The merchants noticed it right away. They depended totally on the income of the people of YPF. [Therefore] there were many people who benefited a lot from the strike, one of them was Felipe Sapag. Felipe had carnage, then he gave credit to the people, he supported them. He endured part of the strike, and I believe that Sapag the politician was born in this strike.

Edda Lidia "Coca" Claro, who was born in Neuquén on 1 July, 1931, settled in Cutral Có in 1948. She joined YPF in 1950, working in the administration and the distillery. "Coca" recalls that

we gathered things together, the food, we distributed it to all the ladies whose husbands were not there, we made all that, the solidarity network, that was what the women did […] we gathered together. The people responded very well. The shops [...] Well, commerce lives on people, right?

This supportive attitude among the local population was not the result of a political or union decision. Felisa Alarcón, who was born in Plaza Huincul on 19 November 1930 and worked at the Sol Camp of the Esso oil company in the region when the YPF authorities confronted the military government of the "Liberating Revolution," explained that

we had nothing to do with YPF, but we came because we already had the mission to help the strikers, to collaborate with the people of YPF We lived in the Esso and we had the people we could rescue, who were from Y.P.F. and were persecuted by the army. I had twelve people in my house, I had two rooms and a kitchen, but I put them there.

Among those of the local population who supported the strikers (part of them indigenous people, immigrants, as well as temporary workers from abroad, especially from Chile and Bolivia) the merchants played an important role, helping with different foods.

The anti-Peronist union leader, Ángel Marcos Zanini, remembered that

the people helped a lot. The town itself was with us, it was a great family, both the merchants of Cutral Có and the people in general. Everyone participated, helping.

The merchants who collaborated included both those like Felipe Sapag (an owner of a butchery and a supermarket during the dictatorship of the "Liberating Revolution"), who identified with the "deposed regime" in local discussions, and merchants who identified themselves as anti-Peronists, like Esteban Nolasco, who owned a bakery and butchery, and who, together with Amado Majluf, represented the UCRI party in Neuquén.

In Patagonia, this kind of experience at the local-subnational level helped shape a historical narrative of Patagonian-Argentineness. In the case of the inhabitants of Plaza Huincul, their experience during "*la huelga del '58*" ("the strike of '58") became part of "*Huinculense*" and Neuquenean political history, one in which the local population (both Peronist and anti-Peronist) joined in a common cause during the dictatorship and expressed a sense of local belonging vis-à-vis the national discussion as represented by the federal government in Buenos Aires.

According to Felipe Sapag, during the dictatorship of 1955-1958, the local, socio-political experience in Patagonia played an important role in the formation of MPN (in Spanish, the *Movimiento Popular Neuquino*), a provincial political party that never lost an election for the office of the governor of Neuquén from its inception in 1962 to the present, above all because “the trade unionists were very important, mainly those of YPF, with whom we lived and shared the reality of Cutral Có and Plaza Huincul.”

The experience during the strike by the oil employees of Plaza Huincul paralleled that of others in which the identity boundaries between Peronists and anti-Peronists were erased or at least grew more complex by acquiring local characteristics. For example, the military authorities in Neuquén imposed by the government in Buenos Aires often needed to cooperate with Peronist leaders on different issues, even for personal reasons.

Amado Sapag remembers an anecdote regarding the city of Zapala (where the Argentine army had one of its chief military bases in Patagonia), in which it is possible to observe how local characteristics at the subnational level affected repression during the dictatorship of the "Liberating Revolution". As Sapag recalls,

when the dictatorship of 1955 started, the military wanted to shoot us because we were dangerous for them. They did not put us in prisoners, but they had this intention. I have an anecdote with Pipe [his nephew, son of Elias], who had the celiac syndrome. The son of Colonel Bergman, who was in charge of the Command in Neuquén, had a son in the same condition. His wife knew that Pipe had healed and asked dad how we had done it. Dad told her: "Talk with Elias wife". They came with the boy to (the Patagonian town of) Copahue (near the volcano) and after fifteen days he was cured, just like Pipe. Medicine did not affect the disease, but in Copahue the miracle took place. After that Bergman wanted to make a monument for Sapag, so thanks to him, during the dictatorship of '55 they did not treat us so badly. They threw us out, they made us summaries, but ...

In his testimony, Sapag reveals how discussions and political identities at the national level existed side by side with the social relations typical of local everyday life in Patagonia, where a particular experience was shaped in a subnational context during the years of repression. In other words, political identities in Argentina were not only not automatically duplicated in the local context of Patagonia, but were also resignified for local societies.

This feature of the repression is evident not only in relations with the military authorities imposed by the dictatorship in Patagonia. Sapag, for example, recalls the same kind of experience with Pedro Heredia, the leader of the Communist Party of Neuquén, an anti-Peronist who supported the '55 coup and the dictatorship of the "Liberating Revolution," as well as an active participant in the constituent convention of Neuquén in 1957.

Sapag and Heredia collaborated and helped each other both during the Perón government (1946-1955) and the dictatorship of the "Liberating Revolution" (1955-1958). According to Sapag,

Heredia was unemployed in 1949 because the authorities of YPF state company had dismissed him for being opposite to Perón as a communist. [...] Elías Sapag helped him get a job during the Perón government. [...] After a few years, when the dictatorship of 1955 came, which the communists had supported, Heredia helped us […] he told us that he was very grateful to us because we had helped him when he needed it.

The conflict between Peronists and Anti-Peronists in Neuquen, which occurred in the rest of the country as well, took place in the context of and juxtaposed to local social relations. The experiences of anti-Peronist repression in Patagonia, especially within the context of provincialization, reinforced a kind of subnational political identification and a sense of belonging to an Argentinian, local-regional, collective identity—even among Peronists. Thus the proscription of Peronist activities from 1958 on led to a process of renegotiating citizenship in a complex, national-subnational space, and not merely on the national level. As Sapag explained, this experience amounted to a kind of "federalist political belonging."

It is in this context that neo-Peronism (or Peronism without Perón) began to develop in Neuquén. Discussions were articulated at the national and local level but were based on social relationships in the local context, where certain practices held different meanings than they did at the national level. Sapag remembers Perón’s decisions from exile, which went unfulfilled in Neuquén:

We are tired of the blank vote, which is good for the nation because it is the game of Perón, but here (in Neuquen) it is a disaster. We voted blank, we won by more than fifty percent, we celebrated one day, and others assume the political power, with less than twenty percent. Then they persecute us to put us prisoners. I think we have to make a provincial party to vote in the municipalities and in the provincial government. For the national order, we see what Perón says ...

In this way, the political repression of the first anti-Peronist dictatorship in 1955 as well as the subsequent political elections in which Peronism was proscribed took place in the framework of "Patagonian experiences" that affected not only political identities but also political processes, including the repression, which affected the sense of belonging among Patagonian inhabitants, including those of ethnic-migrant minorities.

**Conclusion**

This article examines testimony and reports on interventions made by the dictatorship that overthrew the Peron government (1955-1958) in Neuquén, in northern Patagonia. It examines documents that reflect the complex "local-Patagonian experience" during the first anti-Peronist dictatorship in Argentina, and discusses how political identity and citizenship were negotiated at the local-subnational level during the period of repression and did not merely mirror political identities and discussions at the national level.

Neuquenean society had interests, needs, social relations, and practices that existed alongside the broader context of anti-Peronist repression. The policies of the dictatorship, which sought to exclude Perón's followers from public life in Argentina, ran parallel to local social relations and political practices in Patagonia. The conflict between Peronists and anti-Peronists in Neuquenean society was thus not a binary one, but a more complex process in which local and national actors with diverse goals and practices interacted.

The local Patagonian situation was not a minor aspect of Argentinian "de-peronization." Its characteristics and experiences were simultaneously similar to and different from those in the rest of the country. In this sense, local social and political relations played a central role in the lives of Patagonians during the period of repression—even in the case of ethnic migrant minorities and their relations with the military authorities imposed by the federal government.

In this sense, the socio-political experiences in Patagonia during the years of repression illustrate the role of local processes in the history of ethnic-migrant minorities in Argentina, where differences between national and subnational contexts played a central role in their identities and practices, especially in the territorial distribution of power, which also enabled a framework of inclusion and participation in the country.

From the perspective of ethnic studies, the local processes in Patagonia during the confrontation between Peronists and anti-Peronists can be seen as underscoring the important role of subnationality in the history of ethnic migrant minorities in the country. Since the dynamics of local societies—due either to their cultural or political qualities—have implications on identity, they affect experiences of repression as well.

The situation in Patagonia requires further research so that it can be compared to those in other provinces as well as to different cases of local experiences and processes and thus deepen the explanatory framework of the nature of local subnational social contexts. Nevertheless, this case study allows us to rethink the history of ethnic-migrant minorities in Argentina, especially vis à vis Peronism, since it demonstrates that local history cannot be considered as a "micro-case" or in "ascending and descending" order. In other words, the prefix "sub" (as in “subnational”) does not place local experiences and identities in a secondary role as all of them are part of the daily life of a country’s inhabitants.

Such a perspective makes it possible to refine our study of the participation of ethnic migrant groups in politics, highlight the role of local context in the identities and experiences of these groups within the country, and thus deepen our understanding of the history of ethnic migrant groups in Latin America.

1. Decreto-Ley Nº 4.161, 5 de marzo de 1956, Anales de Legislación Argentina, Año 1956. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In the specific case of the Sapag family (a family of Lebanese-Maronite immigrants) its political involvement in Neuquén is of academic interest in local history mainly because the Sapag brothers—Elías, Felipe and Amado—participated in the founding and leadership of a provincial political party in Patagonia (in Spanish, the Movimiento Popular Neuquino, MPN) that succeeded in defeating Peron's official party in the 1973 election for the office of governor of Neuquén, during Perón’s return to power in Argentina. Elías Sapag and his parents, Canaan and Nacira, immigrated to Argentina in 1913. They chose Neuquén as they had relatives who had been living in northern Patagonia since 1902 (Sapag 2008, 58). They settled in the periphery of the province, first in the village of Covunco and then in the settlements of Zapala and Cutral Co, where the Sapag family developed commercial activities through *negocios de ramos generales*. They then branched out into the fruit trade and mining activities—economic activities that ran parallel to their participation in local social activities.

The MPN political party was officially created on 30 June 1961, when the electoral district judge of Neuquén granted legal status to the provincial party chaired by Elías Sapag (Elies ibn Caanán al Sabbagh), known as the "Caliph" (Castillo 2005, 264). With the creation of the MPN, "Caliph" Elías Sapag held the position of national senator in Argentina for 16 years, a record in the country. His brother, Felipe, was elected governor of Neuquén in five elections, while another brother, Amado, held the office of mayor of the city of Zapala, one of the most important cities in Neuquén, for five terms: 1963-1966, 1966-1968, 1970-1972, 1973-1976, and 1983-1987, in addition to the years 1952-1955. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This research is part of a broader analysis of the complex political participation of ethnic-migrant minorities during periods of dictatorships in Latin America, which also analyzes the relationship between ethnicity and politics at the subnational level of federal countries—a relationship that has not received sufficient attention in the studies on ethnicity in Latin America. From this perspective this project seeks to contribute to the ethnic and political historic studies of the Global South. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Decreto Ley Nº 479, del 7 de octubre de 1955, Anales de Legislación Argentina, Año 1955. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. (AGN), Ministerio del Interior, Provincias, Carpeta Comisión Investigadora. Folios 181, caja 3, 292r. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. E. Mases, "Desperonización y Reperonización. La Norpatagonia como campo de batalla político-cultural 1955-1958," in Rafart, Gabriel, Mases, Enrique, (eds.)*, El Peronismo Desde los Territorios a la Nación. Su historia en Rio Negro y Neuquén (1943-1958)* (Neuquén: Universidad Nacional del Comahue, 2003), 202. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. (AGN), Ministerio del Interior, Provincias, Carpeta Comisión Investigadora. Año 1956, Folio 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Medida que anticipaba la creación de la Policía de Neuquén, a través del decreto 1905 del 17 de abril de 1957. (AGN), Ministerio del Interior, Provincias, Carpeta Jefatura de Policías. Folio 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. (AGN), Ministerio del Interior, Provincias, Carpeta Comisión Investigadora. Folio 7. Expte. Nº61-MC/1956 “Reservado”, Informe Nº1458-MC Reservado, 19 de noviembre de 1956. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. (AGN), Ministerio del Interior, Provincias, Carpeta Comisión Investigadora, Asuntos Reservados, Año 1956. Folio1. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. (AGN), Ministerio del Interior, Provincias, Carpeta informes Año 1955-1958. Folio 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibíd. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. (AGN), Ministerio del Interior, Provincias, Carpeta Comisión Investigadora, Año 1956. Folio 2, 508r. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. (AGN), Ministerio del Interior, Provincias, Carpeta Comisión Investigadora, Asuntos Reservados, Año 1956-1958. Folio V. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Las futuras provincias de Neuquén, de Río Negro, Chubut y Santa Cruz. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Which obtained first place at the national level, with 2,115,861 votes against the UCRP with 2,106,524 votes and the UCRI with 1,847,603 votes Something is wrong with this sentence. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. The defeat of the blank votes in Neuquén took place in the context of an active campaign on the part of Neuquenean Peronists to vote blank. According to Department I of the Secretary of Intelligence of the State (formerly SIDE, currently Federal Intelligence Agency, known as AFI in Spanish, the principal intelligence agency of Argentina), the "supporters of the deposed regime" developed several political activities in favor of the blank vote in the main cities of Neuquén, especially in Plaza Huincul, Cutral Có, Zapala, and San Martin de los Andes. Reports "F. 25" and "F. 26" of 16 August 1957 report, for instance, that "in the city of Zapala, soldiers took from the public highway [...] pamphlets with the following inscription: ‘Make fatherland, kill a gorilla and vote blank.’ Following the results of these elections in Neuquén, the Neuquén Provincial Constituent Convention was formed as follows: the UCRI with 10 conventionals, the UCRP with 5, the Democratic Party with 3, the Christian Democrats and the Socialist Party with 2 conventionals apiece, and the Progressive Democratic Party and the Communist Party with 1 conventional, respectively: a total of 24 conventionals. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. Armando Casanova (of the UCRI, merchant in the city of Cutral Có), Héctor Cichero (of the UCRI, railroad employee of Neuquén), Pedro Heredia (of the Communist Party, mining employee of Chos-Malal), Diego Axel Jacob (of the Socialist Party, worker in the local Radio station), José Jaritonsky (of the UCRI, merchant in the city of Zapala), Ervigio Lovotti (of the Progressive Democracy, Democrats? administrative employee in the city of Zapala), José Cecilio Sánchez (of the Socialist Party, railroad employee of Neuquén), Robinson Sepúlveda (of the UCRI, Centenario merchant) and Miguel Mujica (of the UCRP, dentist in Cutral Có). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. In this context, the union leaders in Plaza Huincul played a leading role in the claim of the petroleum unions (S.U.P.E. in Spanish) and included several members of the Communist Party who were authorized to occupy their posts by the dictatorship of the "Liberation Revolution" due to their active participation against the Perón government between 1946 and 1955. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. (AGN), Ministerio del Interior, Provincias, Carpeta Decreto, Año 1956-1958. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)