

Peron and Peronism¹

Early life and career of Peron

Perón in his career was in many ways typical of the upwardly mobile, lower-middle-class youth of Argentina. He entered military school at 16 and made somewhat better than average progress through the officer ranks. A strongly built six-foot-tall youth, Perón became the champion fencer of the army and a fine skier and boxer. He served in Chile as a military attaché and travelled to Italy to observe the rise of the Fascists and Nazis during 1938–40. He had a bent for history and political philosophy and published in those fields.

In 1943, after participating in a successful military coup, Perón became Argentina's minister of labour, a position through which he enacted various social measures to help the country's growing class of urban industrial workers. Gaining the admiration of the masses, Perón called for the state to take a leading role in the economy to ensure cooperation between businesses and labour. In 1946 he was elected to the presidency with the strong support of the workers and their labour unions; he also gained the support of many lower-middle-class citizens and of the country's industrialists. After Perón was overthrown and exiled in 1955 by the military, the leaderless Peronist movement was weakened by factional conflicts, since it was composed of many divergent elements, from left-wing trade unionists to right-wing authoritarian nationalists. Nonetheless, the movement remained the main civilian contender for power in Argentina.

Marriage to Eva Duarte

In early October 1945, Perón was ousted from his positions by a coup of rival army and navy officers. But associates in the labour unions rallied the workers of greater Buenos Aires, and Perón was released from custody on Oct. 17, 1945. That night, from the balcony of the presidential palace, he addressed 300,000 people, and his address was broadcast to the country on radio. He promised to lead the people to victory in the pending presidential election and to build with them a strong and just nation. A few days later he married actress Eva Duarte, or Evita, as she became popularly called, who would help him rule Argentina in the years ahead.

After a campaign marked by repression of the liberal opposition by the federal police and by strong-arm squads, Perón was elected president in February 1946 with 56 percent of the popular vote.

Perón set Argentina on a course of industrialization and state intervention in the economy, calculated to provide greater economic and social benefits for the working class. He also adopted a strong anti-United States and anti-British position, preaching the virtues of his so-called justicialismo (“social justice”) and “Third Position,” an authoritarian and populist system between communism and capitalism.

If Perón did not structurally revolutionize Argentina, he did reshape the country, bringing needed benefits to industrial workers in the form of wage increases and fringe benefits. He nationalized

¹ This article has been taken from two Encyclopedia Britannica articles, “Peron, Juan” and “Peronist.”

the railroads and other utilities and financed public works on a large scale. The funds for those costly innovations—and for the graft that early began to corrode his regime—came from the foreign exchange accumulated by Argentine exports during World War II and from the profits of the state agency that set the prices for agricultural products. Perón dictated the political life of the country by his command of the armed forces. He severely restricted and in some areas eliminated constitutional liberties, and in 1949 he arranged a convention to write a new constitution that would permit his reelection.

Perón in exile

Re-elected leader of the Justicialist Party (Partido Justicialista) by a somewhat larger margin in 1951, Perón modified some of his policies. But he was overthrown and fled to Paraguay on Sept. 19, 1955, after an army-navy revolt led by democratically inspired officers who reflected growing popular discontent with inflation, corruption, demagoguery, and oppression.

Perón finally settled in Madrid. There in 1961 he married for the third time (his first wife had died of cancer, as had Evita in 1952); his new wife was the former María Estela (called Isabel) Martínez, an Argentine dancer.

In election after election the Peronists emerged as a large, indigestible mass in the Argentine body politic. Neither the civilian nor the military regimes that precariously ruled in Argentina after 1955 were able to solve the relatively rich country's condition of "dynamic stagnation," in part because they refused to give political office to the Peronists.

The military regime of Gen. Alejandro Lanusse, which took power in March 1971, proclaimed its intention to restore constitutional democracy by the end of 1973 and allowed the reestablishment of political parties, including the Peronist party. Upon invitation from the military government, Perón returned to Argentina for a short time in November 1972. In the elections of March 1973, Peronist candidates captured the presidency and majorities in the legislature, and, in June, Perón was welcomed back to Argentina with wild excitement. In October, in a special election, he was elected president and, at his insistence, his wife—whom the Argentines disliked and resented—became vice president.

A legacy of turmoil

While in exile Perón had wooed the left-wing Peronists and had supported the most belligerent labour unions. Once returned to power, however, he formed close links with the armed forces and other previously opposition right-wing groups. When he died in 1974, he left to his widow and successor as president an untenable situation. Isabel Perón failed to obtain the firm support of any power group, not even the labour unions. Deep dissension between right-wing and left-wing Peronists erupted into terrorism and violence after Perón's death in 1974. Terrorist activity and political violence increased. On March 24, 1976, the armed forces took power, removed Isabel Perón from office, and set up a military junta.

What is Perónism?

Speech by Juan Peron on 20 August, 1948

In Congress a few days ago, some of our legislators have asked what Peronism is. Peronism is humanism in action; Peronism is a new political doctrine, which rejects all the ills of the politics of previous times; in the social sphere it is a theory which establishes a little equality among men, which grants them similar opportunities and assures them of a future so that in this land there may be no one who lacks what he needs for a living, even though it may be necessary that those who are wildly squandering what they possess may be deprived of the right to do so, for the benefit of those who have nothing at all; in the economic sphere its aim is that every Argentine should pull his weight for the Argentines and that economic policy which maintained that this was a permanent and perfect school of capitalist exploitation should be replaced by a doctrine of social economy under which the distribution of our wealth, which we force the earth to yield up to us and which furthermore we are elaborating, may be shared out fairly among all those who have contributed by their efforts to amass it.

That is Peronism. And Peronism is not learned, nor just talked about: one feels it or else disagrees. Peronism is a question of the heart rather than of the head. Fortunately I am not one of those Presidents who live a life apart, but on the contrary I live among my people, just as I have always lived; so that I share all the ups and downs, all their successes and all their disappointments with my working class people. I feel an intimate satisfaction when I see a workman who is well dressed or taking his family to the theater. I feel just as satisfied as I would feel if I were that workman myself. That is Peronism.

I have never been of the opinion that in this world there should be groups of men against other groups, nations against nations and much less can I admit that men should be enemies because they profess a different religion. How could it be admitted, how could it be explained that anti-Semitism should exist in Argentina? In Argentina there should not be more than one single class of men: men who work together for the welfare of the nation, without any discrimination whatever. They are good Argentines, no matter what their origin, their race or their religion may be, if they work every day for the greatness of the Nation, and they are bad Argentines, no matter what they say or how much they shout, if they are not laying a new stone every day towards the construction of the building of the happiness and grandeur of our Nation.

That is the only discrimination which Argentina should make among its inhabitants: those who are doing constructive work and those who are not; those who are benefactors to the country and those who are not. For this reason in this freest land of the free, as long as I am President of the Republic, no one will be persecuted by anyone else.