

*La historia oficial: The Alternative Facts of Argentina's Dirty War*

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In the movie *La historia oficial*, the Oscar winner for 1985 Best Foreign Movie by director Luis Puenzo, Argentina's military regime imposes its official version of the history of Argentina on the people of Argentina, contrary to actual historical events. The movie title considers the double-meaning of the word *historia* in Spanish, which could be translated as "history" and/or "story" in English. The movie takes place in Argentina in 1983, immediately after the Dirty War that results in a one-party political system. The country is ruled by a totalitarian government that kidnaps, tortures, and disappears its disobedient citizens. High school history teacher Alicia Marnet de Ibáñez, who is the most visible element of the totalitarian government, must teach the official history to students who question the military regime's alternative facts. The history taught in Argentine schools conflicts with actual historical events that were never officially recorded, therefore, not real history. As the movie progresses, Alicia transforms from history teacher to historiographer who examines the official history against the unofficial, undocumented historical events. To further complicate her precarious situation, her husband Roberto is a lawyer who holds a government position under the dictatorship. She eventually learns to question official facts that she had previously accepted conclusively. In the end, Alicia and the viewer learn that not only the official history of Argentina is false, but also the official story regarding Alicia's adopted daughter Gaby.

From the beginning of the movie, we see the two conflicting histories juxtaposed for us to examine as to which one is the true history. In the very first scene, the behavior of the characters casts doubt on the regime's version of history as the teachers and students sing the national anthem. Although they are singing, "Libertad, libertad, libertad," they do so unconvincingly and with a total lack of patriotic passion. We see here the tension created by the oppression of the military regime on

the people who live under political oppression. This opening scene represents the tension the viewer will experience throughout the movie.

The next scene takes place in the classroom of Alicia Marnet de Ibáñez who tells her students that she will teach the history of Argentina starting from 1810. She stresses that to understand history is to understand the world because the people cannot live without memory and that history is the memory of the people. From the beginning, we see how Alicia betrays her belief of the theory of history by the way she conducts her history class. One student, Horacio Costa, notices this inconsistency and he repeatedly challenges Alicia to define what history is. Alicia, however, agrees with Horacio by the end of the movie. Horacio, like Horatio in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, lives to tell the tale of all those who were murdered in order to preserve their history. Although she never outwardly shows any change in her views due to Horacio's ideas of history, she slowly changes her view regarding *la historia oficial* and actual historical events. She sees a new connection between the past and the present, which have consequences in the present and will have consequences in her near future. Although she tries to disregard the past, she knows that no people cannot survive without memory. The conflict between Alicia and Horacio represents the conflict between the regime in power and the Argentine people.

Alicia teaches *la historia oficial*, in other words, the history officially sanctioned by the military regime of Dictator Videla. Moreover, her husband Roberto Horacio Ibáñez is a lawyer and has a government position within that regime. She doesn't ask too many questions about what his official duties are. She must teach the official history or risk her career and life, as one of her teaching colleagues cautions her. Therefore, Alicia teaches the official history of the ruling regime.

At a party for Roberto and his colleagues, we learn that the military coup d'état occurred in 1976 and that the war of the Malvinas (the Falkland Islands) ended in the previous year of 1982. When the discussion of history turns to the history of present-day Argentina, everyone becomes

extremely uncomfortable and they immediately change the subject, thereby signaling that *la historia oficial* should not be examined too closely. History is a subject best left to the military regime.

Later, when the student Horacio questions Alicia about the version of history that she teaches, we see a clash between *la historia oficial* and what actually happened in the past. The students question what happened to the gaucho Juan Moreira, because the official history presents a different version of events. Horacio also cites Mariano Moreno whose writings directly confront the present-day government. Freedom of the press does not exist in their world, so Horacio quotes Moreno who said, “If they don’t let us publish the truth, lies will triumph, so will poverty and the brutalization of the people. They didn’t assassinate Moreno for no reason. They threw him into the sea.” Alicia insists that Moreno was not assassinated. Another student states that Moreno was poisoned. Alicia responds that those are merely theories that have not been proven. Horacio counters that, “There’s no proof because history is written by the assassins.” Alicia finally ends the class by saying, “This is a history class, not a debate.”

The students are forced to accept the official history that Alicia teaches them, as written by the regime. The movie, however, presents various conflicting histories to the viewer. During this scene, Alicia participates as part of the dominant discourse of the regime, thereby acting as the authority figure that indoctrinates the students to the official history. Therefore, lies, poverty, and the brutalization of the people take place in the Argentina where they now live, and, as Horacio points out, Alicia belongs to the assassins by teaching the official history full of lies. We learn from history in order not to repeat mistakes, but we see here a repetition of the horrors that occurred to Mariano Moreno and what is now happening in the Argentina of the movie. Argentina has not learned from the mistakes of the past, and therefore, repeats them.

To complicate matters even further, Alicia and her husband have an adopted daughter Gabriela Alicia Ibáñez because Alicia could not bear her own children despite all types of medical treatments. Roberto took charge of finding an adopted child for them, but he tells Alicia that he was

not present for the birth of Gaby. They celebrate Gaby's birthday on the anniversary of the day Roberto brought Gaby home. After the birthday party, Alicia recalls the day five years earlier when Roberto brought Gaby home late one night. She feels guilty because she didn't go to the hospital to pick up Gaby after her birth. When she asks Roberto, what happened at the hospital, he responds, "We said we would never talk about that again," and pretends not to remember any details of the birth. Alicia wants to know if the mother consented to the adoption. Alicia always feels guilty on Gaby's birthday/anniversary.

Once again, we see the opposition between the official history of the dominant discourse and what actually happened. What should be a joyful birthday celebration becomes an instrument of oppression for Alicia. Moreover, during the birthday party, we see some small boys carrying toy rifles playing like soldiers, imitating what they have witnessed. When Gaby is alone in her bedroom, the boys kick open the bedroom door and pretend to kidnap Gaby, who cries immediately. This scene serves as a microcosm, a play within a play if you will, of what has happened in Argentina and also suggests that Gaby was kidnapped from her biological mother.

Alicia never questions the history she teaches her students until her friend Ana talks about her kidnapping and how they tortured her. Only then does Alicia begin to suspect that her husband Roberto may be doing similar kidnapping and torturing for the regime. Ana tells Alicia about the pregnant women who were kidnapped and whose children disappeared. Alicia says that she feels guilty. And, in a way, she is because she never questioned Gaby's history, just as she never questioned the history she teaches. She obeys every official order without questioning its consequences. Later, we learn that Ana's boyfriend disappeared, and that Roberto was somehow responsible in his disappearance, but we never learn exactly how.

The day after Gaby's birthday party, Alicia goes to class and her students have filled the blackboard with newspaper clippings of lists of people who have disappeared. When Alicia enters, Horacio is reading an article by Mariano Moreno printed in *La Gaceta*, Buenos Aires, June 12, 1810:

“if they oppose restrictions to speech, the spirit as matter will vegetate” and “brutalization will forever cause dejection, ruin, and misery.” Alicia seems to be oblivious to Horacio, but we suspect that she is listening to him. She orders a student to take down the newspaper clippings from the blackboard, but Alicia keeps them. We know that at some moment she reads them because she later tells Roberto that she has read about the disappearances in the newspapers. One day when Alicia goes to Roberto’s office, she sees the old man Macci unconscious in a chair before they could hide him. She suspects foul play. She also suspects that Roberto is somehow involved in this oppressive system. Now that Alicia’s suspicions are aroused, she investigates Gaby’s birth even further. She looks for doctor Jáifer who delivered Gaby but is unsuccessful. Alicia feels guilty and goes to confession. The priest tells her that she should not question where Gaby came from, thereby implying the church is also propagating the official history.

Alicia now begins investigating the history of Gaby’s birth in earnest, becoming a true historiographer. She reads about the disappeared babies in the newspapers. Alicia goes to an agency that deals with disappearances and says that she is a family member looking for a girl who disappeared. They comb the newspapers for more information together. Alicia even goes to the hospital where Gaby was born in order to discover Gaby’s true history.

When she tells Roberto about the disappearances she reads in the newspapers, he tells her that the newspapers are very subversive. He also complains about how hard they are working him at the office, but he never says what exactly he does at the office. Roberto is now worried about his own welfare because his colleague Andrada and his daughter have disappeared. Little by little, Alicia begins to piece together the truth. Alicia’s friend Ana visits Roberto as he is putting boxes of office files in his car. She accuses Roberto of reporting her boyfriend Pedro to the regime. Someone else accuses Roberto of informing on Rolo. In the end, Roberto denies working at the ministry responsible for all the disappearances.

After all this, Alicia can no longer teach the official history with the same unquestioning frame of mind. When she returns the essays to the students, she critiques Horacio's essay harshly. She asks Horacio, "On which text do you base your argument?", referring to the fact that Horacio wrote, "they cut off Castelli's tongue to prevent him from talking" and Horacio responds, "Do you only believe in what you read in books?" Alicia pays no attention to Horacio's response and tells him, "I implore you to include a bibliography since this topic interests you." Her words are betrayed by the grade she gives Horacio: a 9. There is a contradiction between her words and her actions. Her actions do not correspond to her words. In appearance, she performs the role of history teacher of the ruling regime, but in reality, she now feels the same oppression as her students. She now takes heed to what her students say in class. Now, the history teacher is learning from the students.

One night when Roberto comes home, he demands to know why Alicia goes out so much. On another night when Roberto comes home late, Alicia asks, "Could Gaby be the daughter of those disappeared women?" Roberto denies it. Alicia soon meets Sara Rebollo who is a Mother of the Plaza de Mayo. Sara may possibly be Gaby's grandmother. Sara follows Alicia and shows Alicia pictures of Gaby's parents as proof that she might be the grandmother. Sara knows that her daughter disappeared when she was pregnant, and she sees similarities in appearances between her daughter and Gaby. When the woman begins to cry, Alicia tells her that crying won't help, because she knows from personal experience. Then Alicia asks her, "If Gaby is your granddaughter, what do we do?"

One day, Alicia brings Sara home to talk to Roberto. Alicia explains to Roberto that Sara may be Gaby's grandmother. Roberto tells Sara to leave the house immediately. Alicia tells Sara that they'll meet the next day. A few days later, Roberto comes home with two brief cases full of documents that he must review. He's worried because, "the general is like a crazed man." Alicia doesn't let him work in peace. She insists on knowing more about how Roberto got Gaby: "Why did they give her to you?" Roberto is upset by this and says, "Am I a torturer?" And even though

Roberto denies being evil, Alicia says, “Then it is true.” Roberto’s denial helps confirm what Alicia had suspected.

The next day, Roberto returns home and Gaby is not there. Roberto beats up Alicia so dexterously that he performs like the torturer he denied being. He bangs her head against the door and then smashes her fingers with door. Now, Alicia finally knows the truth. Roberto wants to know where Gaby is and she says that she is at his parents’ house. He calls his parents to verify that she is there and Gaby sings to him. While they are both listening to Gaby sing, Alicia hugs Roberto in her last act of tenderness that the three of them will experience together. While Gaby continues to sing to Roberto, Alicia leaves Roberto. Just as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo doubted the official history of the military regime, we now see this confrontation represented by Roberto as the regime and Alicia as one of the mothers.

The movie *La historia oficial* shows the enormous difference between the two meanings of *historia*. The official history serves to maintain their totalitarian government in power through indoctrination and threats of violence over the people. Despite being in power, the regime defends their power by any means possible because they are outnumbered by the people they govern. This demonstrates how, when the people realize the official history is based on lies, they will search for the truth despite censorship. So when we hear the students singing, “Libertad, libertad, libertad,” we understand the word has lost its original meaning, just as *la historia oficial* has. When the movie ends with Gaby singing, Alicia regains the memory of actual history that will help her, and by extension, the Argentine people, survive. We see the official history is merely a construct to maintain the power of the military regime, in order to oppress the people.

In conclusion, the movie *La historia oficial* serves as a cautionary tale as to what can happen when alternative facts replace actual historical events. Just because history is written by the victors and/or assassins, does not mean that it must be accepted without questioning. In fact, all history should be examined, or we will find ourselves in dire circumstances such as Alicia who toed the

military regime's party line, and when she finally acts, she does so at the peril of her husband's government post, her job as a secondary school history teacher, and the welfare of her adopted daughter. Alicia examines history and changes as a result, but she will no longer live the lie that was *la historia oficial*.

Works Cited

*La historia oficial*. Directed by Luis Puenzo. Fox Lorber, 1985.