complicated relationship with the regime, haunted by falsehoods and second-order complicities, but were not ultimately consenting. Sheinin’s work ends in a bar fight, both literally and figuratively, that goes a long way toward explaining how this relationship further evolved alongside the neo-liberal policies that vigorously continued well beyond Alfonsín’s transition government.

Consent of the Damned is exploratory, adventurous, fast-paced and eminently readable. While the work demands a considerable amount of familiarity with the existing literature on the subject, it rewards the astute reader with fresh insights and daring approaches to questions that have been long overlooked. Sheinin’s provocations will certainly challenge the field to reconsider long-held assumptions about this period and to revisit incomplete answers. While such a nuanced approach may rouse some scholarly consternation, certainly, the field will no longer be a windowless room.

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After a three-year study, the Brazilian Truth Commission which investigated the systematic murder, torture and other abuses carried out during the country’s military dictatorship, submitted its report in December 2014. The commission confirmed that 191 people were killed and 243 “disappeared” under military rule, which lasted from 1964 to 1985. More than 200 have never been found. The 2,000-page report named 377 officials who were blamed for grave human rights violations and recommended a revision of the problematic 1979 Amnesty Law so that perpetrators could be prosecuted.

In this brief and readable book, Jerry Dávila offers undergraduate students the necessary keys for better understanding the traumatic experiences of the Southern Cone during the years of military rule. By adopting a comparative perspective, Dávila allows students to consider the idiosyncrasies of each military dictatorship and at the same time the similarities among these authoritarian regimes. After all, Brazil, Argentina, and Chile went through similar processes during the same time period, and in all three ABC cases the military regime held power for a longer time than ever before, was more brutal and violent than any of its predecessors, and adopted a somewhat similar economic policy.

I have used this book in one of my courses at Tel Aviv University and it proved very successful in provoking fascinating discussions as to the nature
and development of the above mentioned dictatorships. Dávila provides a series of inter-related keys for such discussions: the context of the Cold War era; the extent of U.S. intervention; the history of previous military interventions in politics; the generational issue of both the radical left and the uniformed officers who held power in the 1960s and 1970s; the relationship between ideologies of economic development and the political arena; the strategies adopted by the military in order to assure its survival in power; the cost in human life of these strategies; the scale and nature of the resistance to the dictatorship, and the scale and nature of public support; daily life under the military regime; and race, class, and gender experiences in this period. To this list one could add an additional key: the nature of the transition from dictatorship to democracy in each case.

Dávila emphasizes correctly how the radical Left and the military officers seemed to mirror each other, at least to some extent. Both left-wing activists and soldiers shared a belief that it is possible to alter the social and economic order rapidly and profoundly. They both assigned to the State a key role in such a deep transformation and they both legitimized the use of violence in order to promote their political vision. The Cuban revolution and the anti-colonial struggles in the Third World had a huge impact on both camps. They convinced an entire generation of revolutionaries that they could effect a dramatic social change within a relatively short time, like the Cuban rebels of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. Revolutionary hopes in turn instilled fear among military officers as to their fate under a radically new order.

The book also raises the issue of the number of people killed by the security forces of each country. In the Brazilian case the number of victims was relatively small compared to their number in Chile, which was in the thousands, not in the hundreds, or in Argentina where the estimates vary between nine and 30 thousand. But such numbers tell us little about the extent of State violence. Obviously, each death was a huge loss for the victims, their family, relatives, friends, and neighbors. To this one has to add the horrible cases of torture — not only to obtain information but also to spread terror — and various other ways of terrorizing the population, censorship being one of them.

The Brazilian military dictatorship shared various similarities with its neighboring dictatorships of the Southern Cone, but at the same time it was certainly different. This difference had to do with the trajectory of the Brazilian armed forces, the nature of the challenge posed by the radical left, and the role played by the judiciary, the financial establishment, the media, and sectors of the Church. Marguerite Feitlowitz’s assertion about Argentina is relevant for the other military dictatorships as well: “The Dirty War happened because, in some measure, every part of Argentine society allowed it to.”
Various aspects of the transition from dictatorship to democracy do not receive sufficient attention in this book. Any transition of this kind involves several tasks: dismantling the institutional apparatus of the Old Regime; reaching basic agreements among major political forces about the characteristics of the new institutions; and putting these institutions in place, including the promulgation of new laws. No less important is the need to legitimate new democratic institutions, by, among other things, demonstrating the efficacy of civilian rule as far as economic and social policies are concerned.

In this context, coming to terms with the legacy of the authoritarian past is crucial. This means much more than changing the laws and re-writing history textbooks. The issue of whether the human rights violations should be investigated and subject to judicial consideration became an integral part of the transitional political agenda. In the Brazilian case, the emergence of a “new left”, a nonviolent legal political force, was a crucial factor in assuring a successful transition. But the logic of various measures taken in the 1980s does not hold today. We are in a different historical moment now. In the Argentine case, the members of the three juntas that ruled the country from March 1976 until 1983 were put on trial. Hundreds of military and police officers were also brought to justice in 1985 and 1986. True, the laws of Punto Final and Obediencia Debida put these trials on hold but they were resumed under the Kirshner governments. In Brazil it is indeed time to revise the 1979 Amnesty Law so that perpetrators can be prosecuted.

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The field of oral history originated at Columbia University with the idea of recording human memories as historical sources. Oral documents were valued for their reliability, and they served as complementary tools for the study of history, especially where written documents were missing. During recent decades, however, oral history became a research field that stands by itself. Focusing on oral histories as narratives, it developed new theories for interpreting the past through the perspective of the present or the relation between historical truth and manipulations of memory.