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Evita and the Crisis of 17 October 1945: A Case Study of Peronist and Anti-Peronist Mythology

by MARYSA NAVARRO

By the time Evita* died on 26 July 1952, she had become the source of two widely contradictory myths coexisting side by side as if their subject were two different persons. In one, she was the beloved saint who had sacrificed her life for the poor; in the other, the ambitious *parvenue* who used her power to satisfy her insatiable thirst for revenge.

These two images have permeated Argentine politics for the last thirty years and have also made their way into the literature on Peronism, scholarly or not. My purpose is to examine that literature with reference to one single event in Evita's life in order to show the widespread acceptance of the myths and to offer some possible explanations for the distortions surrounding her actions.

The specific event is Evita's participation in the crisis of 17 October 1945, a significant moment in the history of Peronism because it paved the way for General Juan Domingo Perón's first election to the presidency (February, 1946). It erupted on the 9th when Perón, then the strong-man in General Edelmiro J. Farrell's government, was forced to resign from his three cabinet posts, the Vice-Presidency, the Ministry of War, and the Secretariat of Labor. His arrest and imprisonment on Martín García Island prompted his military and labor supporters to organize their ranks in order to obtain his release. While the government wavered, they succeeded in bringing him back to Buenos Aires and, on 17 October, at the end of a day-long massive mobilization, they celebrated his triumphant return.

Another reason for selecting the October crisis is that the literature on Peronism – at least until quite recently – has coincided in attributing a relevant role in it to Evita. While her actions usually generate heated debates, in this case there has been almost total agreement. As soon as Perón was

* Throughout this essay, Eva Perón or María Eva Duarte de Perón will be called by her political name, Evita.

arrested, Evita supposedly warned his friends and together with them engineered the workers' demonstrations of 16 and 17 October that secured his release.

Such is the version presented in general histories of Argentina or in studies of Peronism. According to Arthur P. Whitaker, for example, Evita simply 'helped to organize [Perón's] rescue in the crisis of October 1945.'¹ George Blanksten explains that when the officers came to arrest Perón, they 'discovered that it was much easier to overthrow [him] than to dislodge his mistress. Perón, as is perhaps proper on such occasions, frantically begged his captors not to kill him. Evita was another matter. She flew into a tantrum, screamed and spat at the conspirators, and shouted defiant obscenities at them. . . She then proceeded to play a major role in frustrating the coup against Perón. She alerted his political lieutenants, and the machinery for restoring the colonel to power was rushed into operation.'² Pierre Lux-Wurm goes even further and states that Evita led Perón's supporters. 'Indefatigable and vociferous, she had repeatedly contacted labor unions, galvanized their leaders and roused up workers' gatherings. She convinced those who hesitated and chastised furiously the deserters.'³

Samuel L. Bailey, in *Labor, Nationalism and Politics in Argentina*, is far more cautious than the authors cited above. Although he states that Evita took part in the events of 17 October, he warns his readers in a footnote that her role 'is debatable'. In his opinion, Evita's role 'was not very important' when compared to the one played by Luís Gay and Cipriano Reyes.⁴ In *Argentina, A City and a Nation*, James Scobie seems to share Bailey's doubts because he writes: 'some say [that Evita] masterminded [Perón's] return to power following his arrest in October 1945.'⁵ For Robert Potash, Perón counted on several assets in October 1945, among others 'a band of close collaborators headed by Lieutenant Colonel Domingo Mercante, Eva Duarte and Colonel J. Filomeno Velazco.' But he also points out that 'the intense loyalty [Perón] inspired in the industrial masses' and 'his capacity for political manipulation' were more important than his collaborators.⁶

Until the mid-sixties, Evita's active and forceful participation in the

¹ Arthur P. Whitaker, *Argentina* (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1964), p. 113.

² George I. Blanksten, *Perón's Argentina* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1953), p. 91.

³ Pierre Lux-Wurm, *Le Péronisme* (Paris, 1965), pp. 101-2.

⁴ Samuel L. Bailey, *Labor, Nationalism and Politics in Argentina* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1967), p. 201.

⁵ James Scobie, *Argentina, A City and A Nation* (2nd edition New York, Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 223.

⁶ Robert A. Potash, *The Army & Politics in Argentina 1928-1945. Yrigoyen to Perón* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1969), p. 272.

October crisis was widely accepted by both Peronists and anti-Peronists.⁷ In 1965, however, the Argentine magazine *Primera Plana* published a series of articles on the origins of Peronism, based largely on interviews with participants. Its description of the crisis did not include the usual version of Evita's activities.⁸ Four years later, Félix Luna's *El 45. Crónica de un año decisivo*, the first major study of the October crisis, openly challenged the established version. Evita 'could not play any role whatsoever' wrote Luna, 'for the simple reason that Eva Perón was then only Eva Duarte. Her only political concerns were those that affected her lover; she only knew Perón's most intimate friends, she did not have substantial contacts with labor leaders and her irregular situation prevented her from reaching military circles... In conclusion, Eva Perón's role during the days previous to 17 October was minimal: a woman in love unable to defend her man.'⁹

By no means the definitive study of the 1945 crisis, *El 45* is nevertheless the best work on that subject published to date. Luna's conclusions are the result of extensive research, his argumentation is compelling and his evaluation has recently been confirmed by participants whose activities are not in question. In a book published in 1973, Cipriano Reyes agreed with him on very similar grounds; Luís F. Gay also concurred with him in an interview in November 1972, and Luís Monzalvo, a railroad union leader, implicitly supports Luna's position in his memoirs because he does not mention Evita's name in his account of the October crisis.¹⁰ Furthermore, the same year that Luna's book first appeared, Hugo Gambini, editor of *Primera Plana*, also published a short history of the crisis.¹¹ Evita's name was again absent from the list of people who took part in the labor agitation that preceded the

⁷ See, for example: Robert J. Alexander, *The Perón Era* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1951); Ricardo Boizard, *Esa noche de Perón* (Buenos Aires, 1955, 4th edition); Richard Bourne, *Political Leaders of Latin America* (Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1969); Fleur Cowles, *Bloody Precedent: The Perón Story* (Chicago, Frederick Muller, 1952); Tulio Halperín Donghi, *Argentina en el callejón* (Montevideo, Arca, 1964); Román J. Lombille, *Eva, la predestinada. Alucinante historia de éxitos y frustraciones* (Buenos Aires, Gure, 1955); Juan Perón, *Del poder al exilio. Cómo y quiénes me derrocaron* (Buenos Aires, no pub., no date), and Bernardo Rabinovitz, *Sucedió en la Argentina. Lo que no se dijo, 1943-1956* (Buenos Aires, Ediciones Gure, 1956).

⁸ See *Primera Plana* Nos. 152, 153 and 154 (October 1965).

⁹ Félix Luna, *El 45. Crónica de un año decisivo* (2nd edition, Buenos Aires, Editorial Sudamericana, 1972), pp. 340-1.

¹⁰ Cipriano Reyes, *Yo hice el 17 de octubre, Memorias* (Buenos Aires, 1973), p. 246. Also interview with Cipriano Reyes, November 1975. Luís Monzalvo, *Testigo de la primera hora del peronismo. Memorias de un ferroviario* (Buenos Aires, Editorial Pleamar, 1974). Also, Ruben Rotondaro, *Realidad y cambio social en el sindicalismo argentino* (Buenos Aires, Editorial Pleamar, 1971).

¹¹ Hugo Gambini, *El 17 de octubre de 1945* (Buenos Aires, Editorial Brújula, 1969).

mobilization but, unlike Luna, Gambini did not discuss her lack of participation in the events. More recently, in an article analyzing the behavior of the Argentine labor confederation during the crisis, Juan Carlos Torre could find no proof of her activities.¹²

According to Luna, the idea that Evita played a forceful role in the October crisis is an invention created by Peronists. Years after the events took place, they described her as having behaved in a militant fashion without ever giving details about this 'supposed activism.'¹³ On this issue, however, Luna's interpretation is not entirely accurate because he does not differentiate between Peronist and anti-Peronist accounts. In fact, not one but two October legends pertain to her, and they reflect very clearly the two myths of Evita, the saint and the *parvenue*. Her active and energetic participation as depicted in the works quoted at the beginning of this essay is, indeed, an invention but it was not created by Peronists. On the contrary, its origins are to be found in anti-Peronist sources. On the other hand, while Peronist sources first described Evita during the crisis, they did not attribute a militant attitude to her, but maintained only that she remained 'loyal' to Perón.¹⁴

Until Luna published *El 45*, the common denominator of all descriptions of Evita's actions in October 1945 was their failure to provide any kind of documentation, their lack of concrete details and their emphasis on her attitude. But, whereas Peronist sources asked us to accept that Evita remained faithful to Perón, anti-Peronist writers wanted us to believe she was a key factor in Perón's release and that, after failing to prevent his arrest, like Wonder Woman, she proceeded to mastermind and implement his rescue operation. How she managed to accomplish such an extraordinary feat is not clear at all, but most authors aver she did it with energy. Who exactly the friends were whom she warned and why they should listen to her or allow themselves to be bullied by her is left unexplained. How she knew whom to contact and where is still another mystery.

Despite the doubts voiced by Bailey, Scobie, and Potash, it is not entirely surprising that the two October legends should have remained unchallenged, for a look at the bibliography on Evita will soon disclose that, though she may have been Latin America's most famous woman politician, we know very little about her. Even her birthplace and her birthdate are not clearly established. Some authors indicate that she was born in Los Toldos on 7 May 1919; others agree that her birthplace was Los Toldos but change the date to 26 April 1922. As for Evita, she always claimed to have been

¹² 'La C.G.T. y el 17 de octubre,' *Todo es Historia*, No. 103 (February, 1976).

¹³ Luna, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

¹⁴ See *El Líder*, 16 October 1947 through 1952.

born in Junín on 7 May 1922 and so does the birth certificate she presented for her marriage to Perón.¹⁵

Most of our information on Evita does not come from scholarly research but from works written by militant anti-Peronist journalists, essayists or politicians. She was a polemical subject for the opposition long before she acquired any power or influence. First, because she was a radio actress, born to a poor family and illegitimate who had a conspicuous affair with Perón when he was the most controversial member of Farrell's government. Then, she proceeded to become Argentina's First Lady overnight and to irritate the opposition further by showing a keen interest in politics, an activity reserved to men. She went on to occupy a key position in Perón's government and, from 1949 to 1952, her power, albeit informal, was, nevertheless, only comparable to his. Furthermore, her inflammatory speeches and her political style in general sought to elicit either negative or positive but never indifferent responses.

Because of censorship restrictions imposed by Perón on the opposition, most anti-Peronist works on Evita appeared shortly after his fall (September, 1955). In all cases, they sought to counteract what the authors called the blatant lies propagated by Peronists and to expose what they understood to be the 'true' Evita. To them, she was a bad actress with few talents and even fewer scruples, a bitter, ignorant, scheming and hypocritical woman, obsessed by her deprived childhood and her devouring ambition to get rich and powerful to take revenge.¹⁶

Perhaps the best known anti-Evita book is Mary Main's biography, *The Woman With the Whip*, first published in English in 1952 under the pseudonym of Maria Flores.¹⁷ Written at a time when it was admittedly difficult to carry out research in Argentina, especially if results threatened to contradict prevailing dogmas, it is, nevertheless, hard to believe that Main even attempted to produce an objective account of Evita's life. Based on anecdotes, innuendo and vicious gossip, *The Woman With the Whip* is the ultimate example of the *parvenue* myth.

The numerous books written by Peronists, either before or after Perón's

¹⁵ My own research leads me to conclude that Evita was born in Los Toldos, on 7 May 1919. The birth certificate she presented for her marriage was false. She obtained it because her original document did not include the name of her father, Juan Duarte, and thus revealed her illegitimacy.

¹⁶ See Américo Ghioldi, *El mito de Eva Duarte* (Montevideo, 1952); Benigno Acozzano, *Eva Perón, su verdadera vida* (Buenos Aires, Editorial Lamas, 1955); Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, *¿Qué es esto? Catilinaria* (Buenos Aires, Editorial Lautaro, 1956) and Luís Franco, *Biografía patria* (Buenos Aires, Ediciones Stilcograf, 1958).

¹⁷ Mary Main (Maria Flores), *The Woman with the Whip: Eva Perón* (New York, Doubleday, 1952).

fall, are notoriously void of factual information on Evita. They are fundamentally rhetorical exercises, full of praise for her love for the poor, her spirit of sacrifice, her beauty, her loyalty to Perón, and so on.¹⁸ Together with anti-Peronist works, they are invaluable for the study of the various images and perceptions of Evita throughout the years, but they are not reliable sources because they have been written for the purpose of denigrating her or exalting her.¹⁹

Neither will factual information be found in Evita's own writings, for while Argentines may have been guilty of clinging to their myths, she has contributed in a very substantial way to the creation of several. Her ghost-written autobiography, *La razón de mi vida*, is her own statement of the idealized image of herself she wanted to perpetuate: the self-sacrificing woman, fanatically dedicated to Perón and his *descamisados* (shirtless ones). Thus, she distorts events, forgets conveniently whatever might affect her message adversely and, on occasions, she lies outright. She does not mention, for example, when or where she was born, who her parents were, the names of the labor leaders and military officers who helped to rescue Perón on 17 October 1945, and does not hesitate to say that when he was jailed in Martín García he wrote her several times, expressing his concern for the *descamisados*, whereas he sent her only two letters and the one that has been made public does not mention his supporters but tells her repeatedly how much he loves her.²⁰

The information about Evita's actions on 17 October included in her autobiography is disappointing. 'From the moment Perón left until the people reconquered him for them – and for me – my days were painful and feverish. . . I flung myself into the streets searching for those friends who might still be of help to him. . . I never felt so small as I did during those memorable eight days. I walked throughout all the neighborhoods of the big

¹⁸ See Francisco A. Costanzo, *Evita. Alma inspiradora de la justicia social en América* (Buenos Aires, 1948); Jerónimo M. Peralta, *Semblanza heroica de Eva Perón* (Buenos Aires, 1950); *Presencia de Eva Perón* (Buenos Aires, Subsecretaría de Informaciones de la Presidencia de la Nación, 1953) and José C. Valenti, *Cuatro mujeres de la historia americana* (Buenos Aires, 1951).

¹⁹ This statement can be applied in varying degrees to some works recently published: Otelio Borroni, Roberto Vacca, *La vida de Eva Perón. Testimonios para su historia* (Tomo I, Buenos Aires, Editorial Galerna, 1970); Juan José Sebrelí, *Eva Perón ¿Aventurera o militante?* (Buenos Aires, Editorial La Pleyade, 1971); Celina N. de Martínez Paiva y María Rosa Pizzuto de Rivero, *La verdad. Vida y obra de Eva Perón* (Buenos Aires, Editorial Astral, 1967); Arminda Duarte, *Mi hermana Evita* (Buenos Aires, Ediciones 'Centro de Estudios Eva Perón', 1972) and Carlos Paz and Oscar Deutsch, *Eva Perón, peronismo para el socialismo* (Buenos Aires, Ediciones del Mirador, 1974).

²⁰ Luna, *op. cit.*, pp. 337–8.

city. Since then I know the range of hearts that beat under the sky of my country.²¹

In 1951, Evita gave a lecture on the meaning of 17 October in the *Escuela Superior Peronista*. On this occasion, as on many others, she mentioned the crisis but she did not give any details of her own activities. She talked mostly about her feelings, especially about her eternal gratitude toward the *descamisados*, because on 17 October they had rescued Perón from the hands of his enemies and had returned him to her.²²

As indicated earlier, most statements by Evita require careful scrutiny: in the few sentences quoted above, for example, she manages to increase the number of days Perón spent in jail to eight. Yet, neither in her autobiography, nor in her lecture to the *Escuela Superior Peronista*, nor anywhere else does Evita say that her participation in the October events was significant. She only admits, in very vague terms, that she tried to free Perón.

The precise reconstruction of Evita's steps between the day Perón was arrested (12 October) and his release (17 October) presents serious difficulties. Setting aside all secondary sources published until Luna's study appeared because of their dubious value, we find that the earliest account of the crisis, Eduardo Colom's *17 de octubre, La revolución de los descamisados*, does not mention her,²³ and that no contemporary newspaper includes her name in connection with the labor agitation that preceded the 17th. Furthermore, the possibility of obtaining information from interviews with participants is limited for several reasons. Some of Perón's collaborators in the Secretariat of Labor are dead, others willing to discuss Evita's actions in October, 1945, were unable to keep in touch with her throughout the crisis and, finally, most Peronists refuse to approach the subject: for the past thirty-eight years, they have proved extremely reluctant to question their dogmas, and Evita's participation in the October events is one of them.²⁴ For example, Captain Héctor Russo and Major Fernando Estrada, both actively involved in the October crisis, are dead. Lieutenant Colonel Domingo A. Mercante, perhaps Perón's most trusted collaborator during the early forties and the man to whom he entrusted Evita when he was taken to Martín García, was detained and remained incommunicado from the 13th

²¹ Eva Perón, *La razón de mi vida* (Buenos Aires, Ediciones Peuser, 1951), p. 42.

²² See Eva Perón, *Historia del Peronismo* (Buenos Aires, Editorial Freeland, 1951).

²³ Eduardo Colom, *El 17 de octubre. La revolución de los descamisados* (Buenos Aires, La Epoca, 1946).

²⁴ A recent work by Carlos Abeijón and Jorge Santos Lafauci, *La mujer argentina antes y después de Eva Perón* (Buenos Aires, Editorial Cuarto Mundo, 1975), insists that Evita played a decisive role on 17 October and that she devised the plan for Perón's release together with Mercante.

to the 17th.²⁵ Another close friend, Roberto Petinato, later a high official in Perón's administration, says that he did not see Evita after the Colonel was arrested.²⁶ Pierina Dealessi, an actress in whose home she sought refuge one night during the crisis, does not know how she spent the days,²⁷ and among those persons who might very likely provide information, Evita's sisters, Blanca and Erminda Duarte, for example, refuse to answer any question on the subject.

Only two labor leaders have written that she took an active part in the mobilization. In his memoirs, Angel Perelman does not state that he actually saw Evita but recounts that he knew she was around the working-class districts.²⁸ In an interview published in 1970, Mariano Tedesco, a textile worker, claims that he met with her on several occasions 'to analyze the situation'.²⁹

Tedesco's statement, the only one of its kind, is highly suspicious, especially when people like Gay and Reyes insist that she was never part of the group of organizers. It is true that their opinions might be questioned because they eventually became political enemies of Perón – Reyes spent close to seven years in a Peronist jail. However, they readily admit the profound impact Perón and other military officers like Mercante had on the Argentine labor movement, and are proud of their participation in the events of 17 October.

The only possible conclusion that can be drawn from the sources available at present is that Evita did not play a relevant role in the October 1945 crisis. If such is the case, the question to be asked is how did the legends of her forceful participation come about?

Their origins are difficult to trace adequately but it does seem that, as Perón's government increased its authoritarianism and Evita's influence expanded, the assertions of her militancy on 17 October became louder. What is certain is that by 1950, when Evita was at the height of her power, the legends were firmly established. Peronist sources show that her name does not appear in the 1946 congressional debates as to whether 17 October ought to be declared a national holiday. Nor does it appear, as noted, in the earliest account of the crisis, but the October, 1947, anniversary issue of *Democracia* already mentions her 'loyalty' to Perón as do the ones published

²⁵ Luna, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

²⁶ Interview with Roberto Petinato, October 1974.

²⁷ Interview with Pierina Dealessi, November 1974.

²⁸ Angel Perelman, *Cómo hicimos el 17 de Octubre* (Buenos Aires, Editorial Coyoacán, 1961), p. 73.

²⁹ Interview with Mariano Tedesco quoted in Otelo Borroni and Roberto Vacca, *La vida de Eva Perón. Testimonios para su historia*, *op. cit.*, pp. 111–12.

in the following years. In 1952, that newspaper asserted that Evita 'faced the oligarchic reaction on 17 October and ensured the continuity of the Revolution that consolidated the greatness of the Argentine Republic.'³⁰

Because of the strict censorship restrictions imposed on the opposition, the evolution of the anti-Peronist version of the legend is best followed in English language publications. Throughout the years Perón was in power, anti-Peronists found themselves unable to express their views in books, magazines or newspapers but they kept in touch with visiting foreign scholars or journalists and the latter in particular consistently printed the rumors, anecdotes and even the jokes that made the rounds of opposition circles. A *Time* cover story on Evita of July, 1947, did not mention her in connection with the October mobilization,³¹ but Ruth Greenup in a *Sunday News* article of 14 September 1947, reported that, after supplying the details of Perón's arrest to the press, she 'engineered a howling riot in front of Government House by Shirtless Ones.' A long article published by *U.S. News & World Report* in 1949 stated that Evita 'stuck by' Perón during the 1945 crisis,³² and when journalist Fleur Cowles visited Argentina for a few days in 1950, the legend had already taken root. In her book *Bloody Precedent* which appeared in 1952, she described Evita going to 'work at once, organizing her "shirtless ones" with furious speed and dispatch, readying them to mass, to be available at her bidding.'³³

Robert J. Alexander, the first scholar in the United States to publish a study of Peronism in 1951, proved to be more cautious than Cowles. Although he did not mention Evita in his description of the October events, in a chapter dedicated to her, he indicated that she 'helped' Perón during the crisis.³⁴ On the other hand, Blanksten's *Perón's Argentina*, which he researched in 1950 and 1951, included an account of Evita's actions reminiscent of Cowles.³⁵ So did Mary Main's *The Woman With the Whip: Eva Perón*. According to Main, while Perón remained in his room in Martín García 'and grumbled about the weather, and the Opposition quibbled over points of leadership, Eva showed neither weakness nor hesitation. She had wept and stormed with fury when they had taken her lover off but no sooner was he gone that she began to fly around among her erstwhile friends, shrieking at them, bullying them, cajoling them and threatening them, demanding his release.'³⁶ The similarities exhibited by Cowles, Blanksten,

³⁰ *Democracia*, 27 July 1952.

³¹ See 'Little Eva,' *Time*, 14 July 1947.

³² See 'Eva Peron N. 1 Woman in Politics,' *U.S. News & World Report*, 25 March 1949.

³³ Cowles, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

³⁴ Alexander, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

³⁵ See p. 3.

³⁶ Main, *op. cit.* p. 79.

and Main can also be found in the works published by Argentines after Perón's fall. Evita is described facing Perón's enemies with insults, obscenities and cries and then rallying his supporters. In one account, Perón continued to show hesitation even after he was released from Martín García but Evita managed to dispel his fears by calling him a 'fag'.³⁷

Perhaps the best examples of the process described here are the accounts by *The Times* of London. On 18 October 1945, *The Times* printed an amazingly objective description of the crisis in which Evita's name was not mentioned. Several years later, her obituary in that same newspaper included the following statement: 'When her husband fell from power in October 1945, and was arrested, she it was above all others who roused the workers to paralyze the country until he was released and placed on the way to supreme power.'³⁸ Finally, in an article published on 4 August 1952, *The Times* explained that in 1945, Evita 'successfully urged 50,000 howling workers from the slaughterhouse district into the streets and got his freedom in eight days.'

Despite the substantial differences between the two versions of the October legend, their fundamental agreement about her participation is puzzling when it is remembered that Peronists and anti-Peronists disagree violently on most matters, especially those pertaining to Evita. The question therefore, is why did they both adopt it?

From a Peronist point of view, the legend placed Evita squarely in the traditional role that a woman should play vis-à-vis her husband: she had been faithful and supportive even in his darkest hour. Furthermore, the legend clearly enhanced her prestige. After all, 17 October was Loyalty Day, the Peronist national holiday par excellence. Until his demise, Colonel Mercante's most publicized asset, for example, was that he remained faithful to Perón in October 1945 while so many of his fellow officers betrayed him. The emphatic proclamations of Evita's loyalty took place in an atmosphere where the two branches of the Peronist Party, Congress, labor unions, the *Confederación General del Trabajo* (CGT, the Labor Federation) and the most varied organizations took every conceivable opportunity to exhibit their adherence to her. This was a time when streets, towns, subway stations, ships and even a province were named after her. In the months previous to her death, these 'homages' increased at a frantic pace and reached their highest point in July 1952, when Congress voted a law declaring her 'Spiritual Leader of the Nation.'

For the opposition, on the other hand, the legend fits the most orthodox anti-Peronist interpretation of the October crisis. Overlooking the various

³⁷ Acozzano, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

³⁸ *The Times* of London, 28 July 1952.

conditions that might explain Perón's support among working class and middle class sectors, from Communists to Conservatives, the opposition saw 17 October as a clever coup engineered by a small group of persons who had remained faithful to him and hurriedly managed to round up a mob. This interpretation was at the basis of the opposition's definition of Peronism as a totalitarian dictatorship with a popular support that was only apparent because it was the result of demagogic manipulation and would vanish once Perón had been removed from power. It was also the answer to the nineteen-fifties' official Peronist version of the events. As Evita recounted in her lecture to the *Escuela Superior Peronista*, for example, nobody organized the mobilization because 'the people' took to the streets by themselves. It was a spontaneous 'popular explosion.'³⁹ (At a time when labor leaders like Gay had been forcefully removed from the Secretariat of the CGT, when Reyes was in jail and when even Mercante had fallen out of favor, it is easy to see why Peronists could only exalt 'the people.')

The anti-Peronist legend depicted a woman who knew instinctively what to do in a moment of crisis, strong and sure of herself despite her initial reaction. Both her emotional outburst and her actions, however, reflected Evita as she appeared in the nineteen-fifties: the passionate rabble-rouser who chastized the oligarchy, declared her unending love for Perón and the *descamisados*, urging them to defend him with their lives, as well as being the second political figure in the Peronist hierarchy and President of the *Partido Peronista Femenino*, Perón's liaison with organized labor, and head of the wealthy Eva Perón Foundation. The legend was a backwards projection of Evita but it was also the embodiment of the opposition reaction to her ever since she had appeared on the political scene: she was the obscure, uneducated and vulgar upstart who had climbed out of the gutter by using men, the scheming woman who henpecked Perón and through him had successfully manipulated herself into a powerful position. Indeed, while on the surface the descriptions of Evita's energetic attitude during the October crisis might appear as an exceptional recognition of some positive qualities in her, they have, in fact, strongly negative connotations and are disparaging both to her and to Perón.

In sharp contrast with Evita's fearless attitude, Perón is depicted as paralyzed by fear, begging for his life and ready to surrender to his enemies, in other words, a coward.⁴⁰ He is, therefore, ridiculed, his masculinity

³⁹ Eva Perón, *Historia del Peronismo*, p. 180.

⁴⁰ The myth of Perón's cowardice has had a long life. In 1972, it was still being used as a reason to explain why he would not return to Argentina from exile, if allowed to do so by President Alejandro Agustín Lanusse.

undermined because of his pusillanimous behavior and, adding insult to injury, especially for a professional soldier, he is defended by a woman.

On the other hand, the woman who emerges from the various accounts is a hysterical fury who kicks, spits, and shouts obscenities at her enemies. Since women with a proper upbringing do not swear, curse or spit in public, Evita proves that, despite being Argentina's First Lady and wearing expensive clothes and jewelry, she is not a lady but an uncouth, vulgar upstart. At the same time, by protecting Perón, resisting his arrest, and efficiently organizing his release, Evita takes on a role assigned to him by social conventions. Her emotional outburst notwithstanding, she acts as he should have done and, in so doing, she further emasculates him and reveals her own masculinity. As described by anti-Peronist authors, the confrontation between Evita, Perón, and their enemies exposes his weak character, what Luís Franco calls his 'feminine softness'⁴¹ and her masculine personality. For Américo Ghioldi, Evita will lack 'feminine sensibility' and Ezequiel Martínez Estrada will not hesitate to say: 'he was the woman and she was the man.'⁴²

Masculine, calculating, domineering, and hysterical, a veritable Fury, the image of Evita portrayed in the anti-Peronist October legend is the antithesis of the myth exalted by Peronists and which she nurtured as well, the self-sacrificing, passionate, generous, loving woman, dutiful wife and paradigmatic mother who is childless because all the downtrodden, young or old are her children. While created by Peronists, the legend was, nonetheless, adopted by anti-Peronists because it served their ideological framework and, using a language that reflected their prejudices as well as the strong personality Evita had become by 1950, they embroidered it to their satisfaction.

⁴¹ Franco, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

⁴² Ghioldi, *op. cit.*, p. 140; Martínez Estrada, *op. cit.*, p. 241.