Isabella Cosse’s “Human Rights and the Status of Children” is a welcome and necessary addition to the fields of Cold War, human rights, family, and children’s history. Her article succinctly highlights the symbiotic relationship between Amnesty International (AI) and the Mothers and the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo during Argentina’s Dirty War (1974–1983) who were seeking justice for the missing children in their lives. Cosse posits that “childhood as a concept and children themselves gained significance and became a priority early on in the human rights movement,” but since children had never been closely studied as direct or indirect victims of atrocities such as the dictatorship in Argentina, activists and strategists alike were forced to contend with this new form of advocacy (341). Cosse notes that children in Argentina became victims of the dictatorial regime in different ways. Some were left with neighbors after their parents were taken or left to fend for themselves on the streets. Others were given to child services to be put up for adoption. Infants, she notes, were most often “secretly and illegally placed with families of military and police officers” to prevent them from growing up entrenched in their parents’ ideologies (340).

Cosse explains that AI offices were inundated with denunciations from Argentina, but they found themselves at a loss at first since, despite AI’s extensive work with different categories of human rights abuses, disappeared children did not fit into any of these previously established categories. What AI discovered was that the death and disappearances of children was endemic to right-wing regimes and was actually a curated part of their repressive efforts. In this way, children and their fates were treated with the same calculation as their militant relatives. Eventually, AI reports evolved to consider childhood as a social category, where the victims’ ages were used to construct denunciation cases and give them legitimacy. This allowed for a clear distinction between children and adults when discussing groups needing human rights advocacy. In addition, Cosse notes that making childhood its own human rights category created a bridge

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with humanitarianism. This is an important point because combining the two seemed to allude to a greater impact on AI’s ability to make successful denunciation cases against the Argentinian regime.

In the interests of highlighting the plight of these children and their families, Cosse breaks down the process in a two ways. First, she discusses the evolution of the perception of children and their suffering under Argentina’s repressive government in the late 1970s by human rights groups and other activists. Second, she complicates the ongoing scholarly discussion surrounding the relationship between human rights and humanitarianism. In doing so, her article breaks down how children came to be distinguished as both their own category of victims and as receivers of human rights demands. In following the development of children as a priority for human rights denunciations, Cosse argues that children and the concept of childhood were an important part of Amnesty International’s rhetoric during its work against authoritarian regimes in Latin America and that the development of this new category “entailed interweaving human rights advocacy with humanitarian sensitivity” during the late 1970s when human rights language was most publicly prominent (342). Moreover, she argues that advocacy groups were able to strengthen their accusations because the inclusion of children as direct victims of state repression gave them greater moral and ethical weight. Here, she pulls from the anthropological notion of the “social intolerable” to emphasize how the victimization of children—through murder, disappearances, and captivity—helped to depoliticize their situation in Argentina, thus allowing for greater advocacy and support around the world (343). “While crimes against children had existed in the past,” Cosse emphasizes, “their new status in human rights demands was prompted by a shift in how childhood was perceived” (352).

This article is well-researched and well-written, and its strength lies in the abundance of firsthand accounts and testimonies collected from sources such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Amnesty International Archive. Cosse masterfully intertwines the compelling narrative of family members searching for their missing children with the story of AI’s critical work in getting children recognized as a protected category under human rights ideology during this critical time in Latin America’s Cold War history. In addition, Cosse takes care to also highlight how these child victims’ experiences also varied based upon their age and sex—infants were easier to “rehome” than older children who were more likely to fight their new caretakers, and when girls were victimized, this tapped into gendered ideas of fragility. While it may be easy to grant AI all of the credit in expanding protections for the victims of right-wing violence, Cosse continuously and purposefully highlights the invaluable work done by the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo as the on-the-ground, grassroots activists who helped launch the work that AI was able to use to help hold the dictatorship accountable for its actions on a global level.

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Throughout the article, the children’s voices are ever-present both in Cosse’s analysis and in AI’s denunciations at the time.

Cosse’s primary source material is extensive and includes works in English, Spanish, French, German, and Portuguese. Her research brings together official reports from Amnesty International, the Organization of American States, newspaper and periodical articles, posters, and personal narratives from collections in the Amnesty International Archive in Amsterdam and the Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut in Berlin amongst others. In reporting on the fate of some of the missing children she highlights in the article, Cosse demonstrates an ongoing interest in the work of the Grandmothers and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and other individual campaigns to find children who have yet to be found even decades later through videos and individual websites. She pays equal attention to *Life* and *New York Times* articles and the reports from AI to highlight how exhaustive and all-encompassing these stories of disappeared children were around the globe further emphasizing the importance of the article.

“Human Rights and the Status of Children” is also well-grounded in the historiography and Cosse does an excellent job of placing her work in an inter-disciplinary context. In looking at the history of childhood, biographies and autobiographies appear to be more popular in the current literature. However, the more general study of children and childhood is becoming increasingly popular in works on material culture, education, and class and state formation. This work contributes to scholarship on children and their experiences during times of war and upheaval. Of equal importance is the contribution this work makes to women’s history as it relates to the role gender plays in the framing of social movements. This work also adds to Cosse’s work in both English and Spanish on children and childhood in Latin America, and it further helps solidify her as one of the foremost scholars on childhood and conflict in Latin America.

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Moreover, her work pulls from scholarship beyond history—like Lynn Hunt’s and Samuel Moyn’s works on human rights, to works on memory, advocacy, cultural studies, and psychology—to present a well-rounded look at the implications of human rights abuses on children during and after this dark period in Argentine history.⁶

Cosse’s article is clear, coherent, and compelling. Its accessible prose and gripping topic will make it relevant for undergraduates and advanced academics alike. Anyone interested in, or seeking to learn more about, the complexities of the Cold War in Latin America should add this article to their reading list. In addition to providing a more complex view of Cold War regimes in the region, it exposes another layer of atrocities committed by the dictatorship in Argentina. Cosse also makes it clear, however, that the victimization of children was not exclusive to Argentina and was actually a regional issue “given that under Operation Condor...child abductions cut across borders” (341). While this work focuses on both AI and the Mothers and the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, readers cannot and should not lose sight of the fact that much of AI’s progress is due to the diligent work of the women on the ground in Argentina who yearn for the return of their children and grandchildren. Cosse’s article not only furthers unearths the lengths that right-wing parties went to in order to maintain control over their opponents and remain in power, but it also elevates the courage and work of local women to fight against the violence done to them and their families, making them a bastion of hope and determination in the face of insurmountable odds.

Edrea Mendoza Quintero is a PhD candidate in the History Department at the University of New Mexico. She received her MA from Louisiana State University and her BA from the University of Denver. Her dissertation, tentatively titled “‘Planificar es cuestión de querer’: Women’s Reproductive Rights and the State in Mexico during the 1970s and 1980s” examines state-sponsored sex education, family planning programs, and the abortion debates happening at the time to better understand how the Mexican government placed much of the burden of population control measures on the shoulders of women by bringing into question their citizenship as it relates to their reproductive capabilities. Edrea is a first-generation daughter of immigrants. In addition to her academic experience, she has also worked in local, state, and federal archives, libraries, and museums.