



Memory Politics and Transitional Justice

THE STRUGGLE FOR MEMORY IN LATIN AMERICA

Recent History and Political Violence

EDITED BY Eugenia Allier-Montaña
AND Emilio Crenzel



The Struggle for Memory in Latin America

MEMORY POLITICS AND TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

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By Gabriel Gatti

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Political Violence*

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LATIN AMERICA

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EUGENIA ALLIER-MONTAÑO

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EMILIO CRENZEL

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This event, organized in the framework of the research project, brought together specialists on Latin America’s recent history, who presented specific studies on the “memory struggles” around the recent pasts of political violence in several countries of the continent. Therefore, we would like to thank, in the first place, the Social Research Institute of Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, as without its facilities and, above all, without its academic and administrative staff, neither the seminar nor this book would have been possible. We would like to express our gratitude in particular to César Iván Vilchis Ortega and Roxana Díaz Castellanos, project interns, for their valuable work editing the text.

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Introduction

Emilio Crenzel
and
Eugenia Allier-Montaña

Violence is a constitutive element of the history of Latin America. Following the wars for independence and the civil wars of the nineteenth century that shaped the various national states, in the second half of the twentieth century the region experienced a new cycle of violence perpetrated in the context of the Cold War and under different frameworks: civil wars, military dictatorships, and authoritarian regimes. Because of their magnitude, the political, economic, and cultural transformations they gave way to, and the deep ruptures they caused in communities and subjectivities, the memories of these processes of violence still resonate strongly in Latin America's present. Official and unofficial accounts have been produced to try to attribute meaning to these processes, they have been and are still the object of court proceedings, they are part of public discussions and political agendas, they have been portrayed in a wide range of cultural productions, and they have been evoked in urban spaces through archives, parks, monuments, and memory sites, and by way of public policies that seek to ensure that these pasts are conveyed to future generations. They are a recurring source of confrontations in the streets and of disputes in legal institutions, and they are covered by news featured in the media.

Consequently, these pasts in fact constitute pasts/presents and have become a privileged object of "memory struggles" where diverse actors compete to establish their interpretation of the events of the past as the prevailing representation. Ever since the very development of the processes of violence, naming and explaining what happened has been a goal of the various actors and groups involved and a field of contention between them. As of the mid-1980s, in the political contexts of the transitions from dictatorships to democracies in the Latin American Southern Cone, and after the peace-building processes that put an end to the civil wars in Central

America, there was a resurgence of the struggles to assign meaning to these pasts. In other cases, such as Colombia, these struggles unfolded in the midst of a violent conflict.

If in the past clashes were, in many instances, armed, today they are expressed politically through a struggle over the meaning that should be assigned to what happened in these countries. And this is because memory struggles are political memories.

The aim of this book is to historicize these political memories of Latin America's recent pasts of violence.

To do that, it takes up the premises put forward by Maurice Halbwachs, the founder of the concept of collective memory, who posited that individuals remember in their capacity as members of spatially defined and temporally situated groups that give meaning to individual experiences through specific frameworks and according to present interests and values (Halbwachs 2004). The crisis of the nation-state and the decline of comprehensive accounts seeking to explain past and present while projecting future horizons, the acceleration of social time as a result of unprecedented technological changes, the expansion of the culture of memory in public and private lives, and the revitalization of public remembrance and discussion of the Holocaust are all factors that combined to bring renewed interest in this area of study. In this framework, since the 1980s research on memory in the field of history and other disciplines of the social sciences and humanities has become practically a global phenomenon (Huyssen 1995).

Latin America has not been a stranger to this process, although with varying degrees of intensity. In Argentina, the research conducted on the memories of political violence and the last dictatorship constitutes a significantly expanding field of studies; in Colombia, Peru, Uruguay, and Central America, study groups on memory and recent history have been created and various research projects on the processes of violence and authoritarianism have been carried out, while in Mexico, studies appear to be more focused on events such as the country's independence and the Revolution. Despite the fact that most of the countries in the region still favor a history centered on long-term processes and events, the military dictatorships, civil wars, and other recent violent processes have led historians to take an interest in a history that they are part of or close to. In this sense, research on the recent past has had to confront traditional historiographic approaches that attributed a "subjectivity" to such studies, given the "historian's personal involvement," the absence of an appropriate "temporal perspective" that translated into "failure to distance" oneself from the object of study and the impossibility of constructing it due to a lack of documents. New generations of historians have challenged these

assumptions by highlighting the illusionary nature of “value neutrality,” absent even with respect to topics that are far removed from the researcher’s life experiences, by stressing that the possibility of taking distance from the object of study is not achieved through the passage of time but through the epistemological stance with which that object is approached, and by underlining the multiplicity and potential of the available archives, documents, and testimonies that form a considerable and diverse mass of sources through which to study these pasts/presents.

These issues were part of the discussions conducted under the International Seminar on “Memory, History, Violence, and Politics in Latin America,” held in June 2011 at the Social Research Institute of Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, in Mexico. This meeting brought together specialists in the recent history of Latin America who presented works on “memory struggles” in various countries of the continent, addressing their histories of violence, the leading initiatives aimed at processing them, and the actors involved in these confrontations (groups of victims, national and transnational human rights organizations, governments, political parties, armed forces, religious institutions), and then compared national case studies. The book gathers this previous work and offers readers similarly structured chapters that facilitate a cross-sectional comparison of memory struggles.

In this framework, Emilio Crenzel examines the struggles over memory in Argentina, where the last military dictatorship (1976–1983) established the practice of forced disappearance of persons in its distinctive repressive mode. Crenzel analyzes how a human rights culture was adopted in the denunciation of state crimes; he explains the nonnegotiated transition, after the Falklands/Malvinas War, and presents the official policies implemented after the country’s democratization: the establishment of a commission that investigated the fate of the disappeared and the military junta trial. The author highlights how criminal justice frameworks shaped the public truth regarding this past and the memory struggles themselves. At the same time, he shows the role played by victims of dictatorial violence in establishing the hegemonic meaning regarding human rights abuses in the country. His contribution problematizes a relationship that is central for recent history studies: the links between truth, justice, memory, and power.

The history of memories in Uruguay is addressed by Eugenia Allier-Montaña and Camilo Vicente Ovalle, who highlight the moments of emergence and decline of public memories and the strategy deployed by the various actors involved in the conflicts over the treatment of the crimes against humanity perpetrated by the dictatorship. Their analysis underlines the importance of social movements, generational change, and the

influence that events in other Southern Cone countries had in the shift in power relations that shaped the complex intertwining of truth, justice, and memory in Uruguay. The chapter also examines the variations in official policies for addressing the human rights abuses committed by the dictatorship and underlines the importance of the changes in their political nature as a key explanatory factor of the truth, reparation, and justice policies. Lastly, the authors underscore the capacity of human rights organizations, which succeeded in turning their memory of the recent past into the hegemonic memory.

Claudio Javier Barrientos traces a history of memory struggles in Chile: from the Unidad Popular government to the brutal repression that marked the country from 1973 to 1990 under the Pinochet regime, and the negotiated transition that reflected the power retained by the dictator. Barrientos studies the struggle for human rights and its connection to the broader resistance against the dictatorship. He looks at how the negotiated transition was translated in the public truth of the human rights violations forged by Chile's democracy, and observes two simultaneous memory-building processes. On the one hand, the expansion of the state's recognition of the status of victims of state violence to include various groups of victims, the limited materialization of justice, despite the regime's amnesty law, and the multiplication of memory sites. On the other, the existence of a significant portion of Chilean society that views the Pinochet regime in a positive light.

Samantha Viz Quadrat examines Brazil's memory struggles, from the repressive phases of that country's long-standing dictatorship and how, even now, the amnesty law passed in 1979 continues to inhibit the processing of the crimes perpetrated under the dictatorship. Her analysis of the memory policies implemented by the different constitutional governments that came after the military regime on the one hand sheds light on how the margins of the available public truth regarding the regime's crimes were expanded through the issuance of several reports, the partial disclosure of the files of the repression, and the forming of an official truth commission. And, on the other, it shows the current persistence of the limits imposed on the materialization of justice by the very regime that violated human rights.

Luis Roniger, Leonardo Senkman, and María Antonia Sánchez analyze how the deployment of public policies on truth and the construction of memory required many years in Paraguay. They study the establishment in 2003 of the Truth and Justice Commission, which they argue could have been a catalyzing force for the strengthening of a collective memory in the country. However, they underline that the commission ultimately did not succeed in that sense as its final report failed to generate the consensus

it had hoped to reach. The authors moreover place special emphasis on the study of the construction of a democratic citizenry, as well as on the role played by human rights victims and activists in the recent memory struggles.

Cynthia E. Milton examines the history of memory struggles in Peru and the role played by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (CVR) that investigated the massive human rights abuses perpetrated in that country. Milton highlights that, in contrast to the rest of the continent, human rights abuses in Peru were perpetrated under democratic governments and the responsibility for the victims of the conflict between the state and the insurgents was symmetrical. She studies the impact of the CVR report that revealed the magnitude and characteristics of the armed conflict, in which the majority of the victims were Quechua-speaking peasants, and its effects on the judicial sphere, in the establishment of memory sites, in reparation policies, and in the public discourses about the past. The author underscores the contradiction between the deployment in Peru of a variety of transitional and posttransitional policies that coexist with the power wielded by conservative groups, with class inequalities, and with racism, factors that the CVR in fact identified as causes of the conflict and the violations of human dignity.

Eugenia Allier-Montaña addresses the case of Mexico, focusing on the repression of the student movement in 1968. In contrast to other countries, the authoritarian state in Mexico maintained an ambiguous stance, supporting the Left and harboring political exiles from other countries, while at the same time cracking down on domestic political dissent. The author explores the different stages of political memories regarding the movement, vilified by the government as a “communist plot” and portrayed among the population as “government repression” against the “struggle for democracy,” and how these came to be the dominant memories. Allier-Montaña shows that, in contrast to what happened in other countries of Latin America, in Mexico there does not seem to be a battle over the memory of the recent past. However, while the voice of the repressors gradually disappeared from the public space, repression has not been the object of judicial processes nor has there been any reparation for its victims. Her contribution reveals that seemingly democratic regimes can in fact be the force behind repressive processes and that the dominant memory is not necessarily translated into acknowledgment of and reparation for the victims.

Jefferson Jaramillo Marín studies the case of Colombia, analyzing a scenario in which the violent past not only does not end but continues into the present. Jaramillo highlights three stages in the conflict, each with a different form of violence, which were the object of various commissions

formed to examine them and bring them to an end. His study takes on a specific analytical challenge: How can we go about understanding and studying memory when the processes it refers to are still ongoing? To do that the author focuses on two situations connected with these commissions. On the one hand, he shows how they offer particular ways of processing and dealing with the various manifestations of violence, and, on the other, he explores to what extent these devices contribute to condense the dominant representations and narratives about these violent pasts and presents.

The chapter by Eduardo Rey Tristán, Alberto Martín Álvarez, and Jorge Juárez Ávila addresses the construction of memories following the peace agreements that put an end to the armed conflict in El Salvador. Through the study of the conflict's leading actors, the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), the authors show continuities linking the armed conflict with the discursive struggle to give meaning to that conflict. They analyze the lack of recognition for the conflict's victims, as well as the FMLN's persistent silence, as a result of its desire to avoid any questionings of its members' possible involvement in human rights violations. In historicizing these processes, the authors privilege the examination of the Truth Commission formed in the early 1990s and analyze the use of the memory of the conflict by El Salvador's leading political actors as an instrument to win votes in the country's elections.

Julieta Rostica historicizes the struggles over the meanings of the armed conflict in Guatemala, showing how the overthrow of the reformist government of Jacobo Arbenz opened up a cycle of political violence in the country, and she examines the staggering number of serious human rights abuses perpetrated during the armed conflict that devastated Guatemala, leaving a toll of more than 200,000 people murdered, including entire Mayan communities that were massacred. In this framework, Rostica examines the dispute between the narratives on the armed conflict branched by the armed forces, the human rights movement, the indigenous communities, and the guerrilla groups, and posits that the peace accords that put an end to the violence did not resolve these confrontations. On the contrary, in studying the narratives of the two truth commissions that were established in Guatemala (one official and the other formed by civil society), she reveals how they proposed different readings of the conflict.

Benedetta Calandra looks at the United States, a key player because of its recurring interventions in the political affairs of the continent but paradoxically absent from recent history and memory studies in Latin America. Calandra analyzes the Clinton Administration's decisions to make public previously classified files of the State Department and other government

agencies whose documents confirmed the United States' involvement and its support of repressive regimes in Latin America during the second half of the twentieth century. The author underlines the complexity that the declassification of these files entailed, the nonlinearity of the process, and the reversibility of these decisions, highlighting the multiple players who were involved in these initiatives, including governments, transnational human rights networks and activists in Latin America. Lastly, she highlights the significant consequences and challenges that making public such a vast amount of documents has for legal investigations and historical research on human rights abuses and for understanding US policy in the region.

In this way, the book provides a panoramic view of the various forms of political violence experienced by Latin American countries in the second half of the twentieth century, which gives insight into the nature of such processes and enables a continent-wide historicization of the struggles over the memory of these pasts. This represents a major contribution to a field of studies that while recognizing the close ties between the political events that marked the continent in recent decades, had thus far lacked a study with a perspective of this scope.

The book combines a comprehensive approach with attention to particularities. It allows for a dimensioning of the magnitudes and characteristics of political violence both on a continental scale and with respect to national specificities. The sheer number of people who were killed, disappeared, tortured, imprisoned for political reasons, and exiled, and who were otherwise victims of human rights abuses illustrates the enormous massacre that was perpetrated in Latin America under the international context of the Cold War. But, at the same time, by analyzing national histories these studies provide an understanding of the particular modes of this violence in each country and how they were specifically embedded in the country's political history, class structure, and ethnic makeup.

In analyzing the processes of violence in each country the book takes into account the different scales. For example, the social frameworks of memory, the actors involved and their power relations, and the presence of the past in the present are different in the way Peru's armed conflict is remembered in the department of Ayacucho, one of the epicenters of the conflict, from the way it is remembered in Lima, the country's capital. The book, then, does not conceive scales as static borders. It strives to identify how the transnational is reflected in the national and local spheres and to make out how local or national experiences leave their mark at the continental level. It takes a similar approach to examine the specific impact of the processes of political violence and to historicize the memories of the experiences of violence according to political, class, ethnic, and gender variables. In this way, the book exposes the difficulties of popular sectors,

indigenous communities, and women in making their memories heard in the public sphere. In this sense, it focuses on exploring the changes and continuities revealed by hegemonic practices, ideas, and representations of the pasts of violence through a comprehensive historical perspective that makes it possible to think of these pasts in an epochal context. Thus, it allows for the possibility of looking diachronically and synchronically at memory struggles from a comparative perspective on a Latin American scale.¹

A cross-sectional reading of the contributions of this book reveals several commonalities among the various political junctures at the continental level, namely in the period of political radicalization and revolutionary projects, the dictatorships, authoritarianisms and civil wars, the transitions, and the construction of the memory of the pasts of violence as a specific goal of public policies.

In this framework, in the first place, the emergence and consolidation of a culture of human rights in Latin America stand out, although unevenly. Specifically, this culture involves the revalorization of the civil and political rights that had been trampled by dictatorships and civil wars and the political role that the international system of human rights and transnational nongovernmental network has played and still plays. During the dictatorships and the civil wars, these actors were able to limit to a certain extent the abuses committed against human integrity, gave activists and humanitarian organizations access to international forums, provided them with a language that allowed their demands to reach broader audiences, and were instrumental in the political and cultural changes that took place in significant sectors of Latin America's Left, namely in the incorporation of a human rights culture.² Later, their influence was translated in the expansion of an American system of norms for the protection and defense of human rights and the enforcement of such norms by the continent's states.

Second, an overview of the contributions reveals the importance of power relations during transitions, both from dictatorship to democracy and from war to peace, and how certain paradigms for dealing with the pasts of extreme violence took root during such circumstances. In those places in which the transitions were not negotiated, as was the case of Argentina, the processes of truth, justice, and memory were deeper. The same thing happened to a lesser extent in countries where the political forces responsible for human rights abuses were pushed out of the government, although retaining significant power, as was the case of Fujimorism in Peru, while in countries such as Chile, where the dictatorship garnered a broad social base that legitimized the Pinochet regime's memory of the coup d'état, the investigation of those crimes was more limited and social

memory still divides society in two. Colombia represents an exception in the implementation of transitional justice mechanisms, as these were created while the armed conflict was still ongoing. Mexico stands out because of the absence of successful official accountability measures, even though the prevailing memory holds the state responsible for the 1968 massacre.

Despite these differences, several transitions share a common polarizing view in the official readings of the past political violence. In Argentina and Uruguay, the confrontation of forces on the far Left and far Right was posited as a process that pitted local forces against each other, while in Chile and Central America it was seen as a reflection of the Cold War. In spite of its obvious limitations in terms of historical interpretation, this idea was enormously productive during the transitions as it restricted the responsibilities of the political community and civil society for the violence and presented the state as the guarantor of political peace in the present.

A third shared aspect can be identified in almost all the countries in terms of the construction of new public truths about the political violence, the dictatorships, and the civil wars. The truth commissions constituted, in the continent, the leading mode of production of truths about these processes of violence. Their reports established a break between the present and the past and imagined that memory would prevent the use of violence for the resolution of political conflicts in the future. However, the studies show that these public truths had a different impact from one Latin American society to another (from the strong impact of the *Never Again* report in Argentina³ to the scarce social significance of the Truth Commission Report in Paraguay). The ways in which these truths were connected with justice and memory were also different. On the one hand, they were almost always independent from the materialization of justice.⁴ On the other, these truths established categories for naming and understanding the pasts of violence, which operated in public memories by providing actors with or robbing them of certain social recognitions. For example, the category of victim or perpetrator is not simply an objective category. It is the result of processes of definition and construction of meanings about these pasts that are developed in specific political and cultural contexts. The continent's truth commissions in fact adopted divergent criteria, as a result of diverse power relations, to include or exclude murdered guerrillas or members of the armed forces in or from the category of victim, a decision that, in addition to being translated into different memory and reparation policies, officialized different notions of what constitutes human rights in each country.

Fourth, the book underscores the relational nature of the political processes of the continent and the circulation and assimilation of discourses and practices among its actors. The armed forces developed more or less

identical representations, based on the anticommunist discourse and the coordination of continent-wide counterinsurgency actions, to justify their political and military interventions, and, later, to confront the accusations of human rights violations, avoid taking responsibility for their actions, and keep silent about their crimes. But, also, the circulation of experts and activists in the framework of transnational human rights networks enabled the sharing of experiences, ideas, and practices among human rights organizations and associations of victims and, later, especially as these countries began opening up and transitioning to democracy, among political parties and forces across the continent. As an example, "Truth Commissions," spread across Latin America, with each new commission drawing on its predecessors' experience to learn how to conduct their investigations and prepare their reports. Also, certain national events had a continental impact and received general attention from conflicting actors.

Fifth, the book evidences the generational dimension of memory struggles. This dimension was the product of the lengthy dictatorships of the Southern Cone, the drawn-out armed conflicts in Peru, Colombia, and Central America, and the long-standing authoritarian regime in Mexico; of the transgenerational effects that the different forms of violence and the abuses caused in the subjectivities of individuals, families, and communities; and of the tenacity that kept human rights organizations and associations of relatives of victims fighting for decades to maintain these pasts alive in the public memory and political agendas of these societies. The generational dimension is also revealed in the political changes that took place in much of Latin America in the early twenty-first century, which saw leading figures of the struggles of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s heading the government in several countries of the region. These shifts in the political map of the continent gave power to a generation that, because of its political biographies, was interested in preserving the memories of these pasts. Lastly, conveying to younger generations a meaning of what happened in these pasts has become of late—spurred by the process of generational transition—a key concern and a new arena for confrontation. The disputes over the contents of history or civics textbooks, the debates over the criteria for providing access to files, the museums, and the monuments all illustrate this.

The book underlines the dynamic and permanently changing nature of social memory and shows how, in the context of memory struggles, interventions aimed at assigning meaning to the past, even those proposed by those in power, can be eroded and defeated by other constructions of meanings. As the various chapters show, the rupturing of silences, the emergence of new public truths, the achievement of justice, the assumption of responsibilities, the discovery or declassification of files, or the

creation of memory sites have all been the result of long, intense, and complex confrontations. In these struggles, a key role was played by the testimonies given by the victims of the processes of violence or by others close to them. The words and actions of the relatives of the disappeared, of the victims of torture, of political prisoners, of exiles, of survivors of clandestine jails and of mass killings of indigenous communities have been essential for reconstructing the materiality of the abuses, denouncing the perpetrators, and restoring dignity and humanity to the victims of violence in Latin America. Without these voices, it would have been impossible even to begin dealing with the extreme forms of violence suffered and to legally or culturally judge the guilty parties, and memory would have been trapped by, and identified with, the violence. In fact, in several countries of the continent the condition of victim—because of its legitimacy—has been gradually losing its stigma and gaining a privileged place of enunciation in the public sphere. While this process is not restricted to Latin America—as some authors (Wieviorka 1998) have already shown that it is an epochal sign—this situation poses the challenge of achieving a public memory that is the result of a plural construction, without privileges, that will contribute to consolidate and expand citizen rights.

This book does not venture a forecast of what the future will bring to Latin America's memory struggles, and thus it does not intend to predict what meanings will be given to this last great dismal period in the history of the continent. What is certain is that, several decades after most of these tragic pasts, human rights have achieved a status in Latin America's legal system that would have been unimaginable even for the most optimistic activists who battled against the region's dictatorships or denounced state crimes. Moreover, in most of these countries the condition of citizenship has expanded to include new rights, and the inter-American system of human rights has come out stronger. However, this progress contrasts with the persistence of social inequalities that question the reality of citizen rights for all, with the overwhelming majority of crimes remaining unpunished, with the silences, fractures, and wounds left by violence still present, with torture still being used as a regular method by the police, with the armed forces in many cases still performing intelligence and domestic security tasks, and, also, with the existence of voices that insist on the futility of looking back or of groups that justify the trampling of the right to life and other basic rights for the sake of security.

The possible futures of these memories are, thus, uncertain. But there is something that is certain, and which is one of the core lessons that can be derived from these studies: Nothing is predetermined or unchangeable. In sum, the future of the memories will be the result of what we do with these pasts and what we will leave as a legacy for the generations to come.

NOTES

1. For an earlier approach in this sense, see Jelin (2002).
2. On the activism of transnational human rights networks in the region, see Sikkink (1996).
3. On the impact of Argentina's commission and its *Nunca Más* report on a Latin American scale, see Crenzel (2008).
4. On truth commissions globally, see Hayner (2011). On the relationship between criminal justice, human rights, and consolidation of democracy globally, see Sikkink (2011).

Part I

Dictatorships and Authoritarian Regimes

Chapter 1

Toward a History of the Memory of Political Violence and the Disappeared in Argentina

Emilio Crenzel

Introduction

The political violence that Argentina suffered in the 1970s and early 1980s was rooted in the country's institutional history and the new international context following the end of the Second World War. A dozen military coups were staged in Argentina from 1930 to 1983. The intervention of the armed forces in institutional life came to be seen as natural by broad sectors of civil society and the political community. This together with the influence of nationalist, conservative, and Catholic fundamentalist ideas formed a culture characterized by contempt for the law and rejection of the other and in which resorting to violence acquired a privileged status.¹ In the mid-1940s, the emergence of Peronism—a political movement with an industrialist project led by Colonel Juan Perón, which incorporated the labor movement into political life, even if it was in a subordinate role through an alliance between classes—launched a process of polarization that was aggravated in 1955 after Perón was ousted from power and banned from politics. This gave way to a cycle of social unrest and political radicalization fueled by the Cold War and the victory of the Cuban Revolution that included the emergence of Marxist and Peronist guerrilla groups. In that context, the armed forces adopted the counterinsurgency

methods employed by the French army in the Algeria and Indochina wars and the National Security Doctrine of the United States, both of which included torture as a key component of military intelligence and the belief that a full-scale war had to be waged against an enemy that could be lurking anywhere in society.²

Perón's return to the presidency in 1973 did not put an end to political violence. Guerrilla groups took up arms again and under Peron's government a death squad known as the Triple A (Argentine Anticommunist Alliance) began operating with official backing from the government, murdering hundreds of political activists. At the same time, a number of repressive measures were legally implemented, targeting left-wing opposition and even radicalized sectors within the Peronist movement.

Following his death in 1974, Perón was succeeded by his widow, María Estela Martínez, who declared a state of siege on November 6, 1974, by Decree 1368. In February 1975, she issued Decree 265 authorizing the armed forces to wipe out subversive activities in the province of Tucumán, and in October 1975, she expanded the scope of this authorization to the rest of the country (Decree 2772). Political violence became a part of everyday life. From 1973 to 1976, 1,543 political assassinations were committed; 5,148 people were imprisoned for political reasons; and another 900 were forcefully disappeared (CONADEP 1984).

In that climate of violence, a coup d'état was staged on March 24, 1976, and the practice of forcefully disappearing dissidents became systematic. The disappearances consisted of the detention or abduction of individuals by military or police officers who took them to illegal holding sites or camps, where they were tortured and for the most part murdered. Their bodies were then buried in unmarked graves, incinerated, or thrown into the sea; their property was looted; and their children snatched by members of the repressive forces who changed their identities. As of October 2014, *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* had recovered 115 of these missing children and restored their identities. As these crimes were being committed, the state simultaneously denied any responsibility in them.³

Human rights organizations maintain that as many as 30,000 people were disappeared. As of 2009, the National Human Rights Secretariat had recorded 7,140 cases of forced disappearance and 2,793 survivors of clandestine detention centers and was processing an additional 1,000 reports. No new official figures have been made public since 2009.⁴ Obtaining a precise figure for the number of disappeared persons is made difficult by the very nature of the crime, the perpetrators' refusal to hand over the records they have in their power, the role certain actors play by publicly denouncing their own figures, and the political contexts that frame the disputes over these figures (Brisk 1994, 676–692). Eighty percent of all

disappearances were perpetrated in major cities (Buenos Aires and its metropolitan area, Córdoba, La Plata, Rosario, and Tucumán); 81 percent of the victims were aged 16–35 at the time of their disappearance, and 70 percent were men. Thirty percent of the disappeared were blue-collar workers, 21 percent were students, 18 percent were white-collar workers, and 11 percent were professionals. Most were members of Peronist, Marxist, guerrilla, or class-based organizations. Another 10,000 people were imprisoned for political reasons; 1,360 were murdered; and an estimated 250,000—in a population of 25 million—were forced into exile.⁵

The Dictatorship and Human Rights Abuses (1976–1983)

The disappearances entailed a rupture with respect to the conception of death traditionally held in Argentina, typical of Western culture. The in-between state into which the disappeared were thrown—neither living nor dead—fractured the basic social frameworks for evoking. The natural end of life, which comes with death, was suspended, thus generating constantly renewed cycles of despair and hope among the relatives and friends of the disappeared. Even if they believed their loved ones were being held captive, the relatives of the disappeared did not know where they were or how long their captivity would last. In most cases, the absence of a body or a grave completely blurred the line between the world of the living and the world of the dead that is represented by cemeteries and prevented the bereaved from practicing rites—such as holding wakes and funerals—that help process loss (Da Silva Catela 2001, 114–119 and 122–123). The disappearances marked a turning point in the history of political violence in Argentina. Prior to the coup, political assassinations were acknowledged by their perpetrators, the corpses were disposed of in public spaces, and these acts were reported in the press.

After almost two years of refusing to admit the existence of disappeared persons or denying any interest by the state in the fate of these missing people through the dismissal of the thousands of habeas corpus petitions filed by relatives, in a press conference held in December 1977, de facto president Jorge Videla publicly described the disappeared as guerrillas and explained their disappearance as resulting from the country's state of war (*La Prensa*, September 15, 1977, 2 and 3).

Videla's statement was voiced to counter growing demands from numerous human rights organizations, including: the *Liga Argentina por los Derechos Humanos*, founded in 1937; the *Servicio de Paz y Justicia*, formed

in 1974 with a nonviolent approach; the *Asamblea Permanente por los Derechos Humanos* (APDH), created in 1975 in the face of growing political violence; the Ecumenical Movement for Human Rights, established in 1976 by religious groups of different faiths; the *Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales* (CELS), a group that broke away from APDH in 1979; *Familiares de Detenidos y Desaparecidos por Razones Políticas*, formed in 1976; and the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* and *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* created in April and October 1977, respectively, by mothers and grandmothers of disappearance victims. This diverse movement gathered reports and published them in the form of paid ads in various press media in the country and abroad and promoted mobilizations, such as the unique form of demonstration introduced by the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, who would protest by marching continuously around the Plaza de Mayo monument, located across the street from the Casa Rosada, the seat of the Argentine government, demanding to know the fate of the disappeared. These demands were also raised outside the country by organizations of political exiles, such as the *Comisión Argentina de Derechos Humanos* (CADHU) and the *Centro Argentino de Información y Solidaridad* (CAIS), by transnational human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, which even conducted a country mission to investigate the reports in 1976, and by foreign governments, in particular, the United States, France, Italy, and Sweden.

In a context marked by widespread terror and the stigmatization of the persecuted, and with the armed forces simultaneously assuming the self-appointed role of defenders of morality and patriotic values, which were understood as natural elements of “Western Christian” civilization, the relatives of the victims and the human rights organizations chose to portray the disappeared as individuals, as opposed to political subjects, highlighting their basic identifying particulars, such as their gender and age, placing them in comprehensive categories, such as their nationality, religious beliefs, and occupations, and stressing their moral values. These categories restored the humanity that the disappeared had been denied and underlined the indiscriminate nature of the violence unleashed by the “terrorist state” and the “innocence” of its victims, devoid of any political connections, but in particular any relation with guerrilla elements. These denunciations did not historicize state violence, exposing only a confrontation between victims and victimizers, displacing both the Marxist class-struggle approach and the people-oligarchy antinomy of the populist tradition, which had prevailed among radical activists prior to the coup. The legitimization of political violence was replaced with human rights demands: the right not to be tortured and the right not to be subjected to forced disappearance or arbitrary arrest. Thus, in denouncing the

disappearances and other human rights abuses, they presented a truth that was essentially factual and rested heavily on the account of the physical harm suffered by the victims.

As Markarian has shown for the Uruguayan case, this form of denunciation was shaped through the new relationships that its protagonists established with transnational human rights networks (Markarian 2005, 104–105). Through those ties they incorporated the human rights culture that was spreading globally in the mid-1970s (Sikkink 1996, 59–84).

In September 1979, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) sent a mission to Argentina after receiving hundreds of disappearance complaints. Even as it was rejected by the dictatorship and questioned by countless social and political organizations who objected its “interference in internal affairs,” the IACHR received reports, interviewed government authorities, political leaders, and heads of human rights organizations, and inspected military facilities, such as the *Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada* (ESMA) and “La Rivera” in the province of Córdoba, which had been denounced as clandestine detention centers where disappeared persons were held captive and cemeteries where victims had allegedly been buried in unmarked graves.

The IACHR report, issued in April 1980, contained 5,580 disappearance reports (most of them gathered by APDH), attributed the responsibility of the disappearances to the military juntas, expressed concern for the “thousands of detainees who have disappeared” and who “may be presumed dead,” and recommended, among other measures, that the perpetrators be brought to trial and punished. A few days before the arrival of the mission, the dictatorship passed Law No. 22,068, which stipulated that any person whose disappearance had been reported would be presumed dead, a provision that was rejected by human rights organizations and the IACHR (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos 1980, 13–18 and 147–152). Unwilling to accept the death of their sons and daughters without knowing how they had died and who was responsible, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo countered by raising the demand “*Aparición con vida*” (Bring them back alive), which would become a major slogan of the organization.

These and other denunciations were to some extent neutralized by the dictatorship, who only after the defeat of Argentina in the Malvinas/Falklands War with the United Kingdom in June 1982 became increasingly isolated both domestically and internationally. As a result of this defeat, in contrast to the other countries of the Southern Cone of Latin America, the Argentine dictatorship was unable to impose negotiated conditions for the transition to democracy. Thus, despite having 70 percent of the population against it, on September 22, 1983, a month before the