

# The Narrative of the Disappearances in Argentina: The *Nunca Más* Report

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The systematic disappearance of persons after the March 1976 *coup d'état* by the military junta, commanded by General Jorge Videla, resulted in two significant changes with respect to the intense history of political violence in twentieth-century Argentina. On the one hand, it turned the state's decision to exterminate its perceived enemies into an objective reality. On the other, it meant the clandestine exercise of political death. These characteristics also set the local military dictatorship apart from other Southern Cone dictatorships in the 1970s. In 1984, the commission appointed to investigate human right abuses recorded 8,960 cases of disappearances, 82 percent of which occurred in 1976 and 1977, during the first two years of the dictatorship (CONADEP, 1984).<sup>1</sup>

## A Long History of Political Violence

The disappearances, however, were not an absolute departure from Argentina's political history. One cannot conceptualise the Argentine horror simply in terms of a 'breakdown of civilisation' (Huyssen, 2002: 17; Vezzetti, 2002: 13) given the political national history of the last century. Since 1930, in a political tradition that goes back to the nineteenth century, wide sectors of the society regarded military interventionism in the political arena as a 'matter of course'. With the influence of ideas from Catholic Integrism (a current that rejected communism, the principles of the French Revolution,

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1 Human Rights organisations estimate there were 30,000 disappearances. In Uruguay, prolonged imprisonment prevailed; in Chile, disappearances represent one-third of the total murders; and in Brazil and Bolivia, fewer than 100 cases were recorded. On political repression in Uruguay, Chile and Brazil, see SERPAJ (1989); Comisión Nacional de Verdad y Reconciliación (National Commission of Truth and Reconciliation) (1991) and Arquidiócesis de San Pablo (Sao Paulo Archdioceses) (1985), respectively.

and changes in Catholic dogma and rituals), and prominence of nationalistic and conservative actors in public life, a culture marked by disrespect for the law and the rejection of otherness had emerged, a culture that privileged the use of violence to settle disputes. Furthermore, the use of torture had become a regular practice (Rodríguez Molas, 1984; García, 1995; Zanatta, 1996; Devoto, 2002).

In the 1940s, the emergence of Peronism polarised the political scene; the country divided into pro-Peronists and anti-Peronists – a process that continued after the 1955 *coup d'état* against Juan Perón. Parallel to this, in the context of the Cold War and the Cuban Revolution, whose influence was reflected in the ideas of the new Peronist and Marxist Left, the Argentine armed forces incorporated the Doctrine of National Security. Moreover, learning from the French experience in Indochina and Algeria, the governmental leadership thought that the 'enemy' could be located anywhere in civil society and, consequently, they perceived any social and labour conflict as a threat to national security. Hence, they did not hesitate to use torture as an instrument of military intelligence.

In 1966, the so-called Argentine Revolution seized the University of Buenos Aires and dismissed its faculty, stepped up censorship and fostered moral crusades against modern 'transgressive' practices embraced by young people (a more open sexuality, wearing long hair or mini-skirts, etc.). On 29 May 1969, in the climate of political radicalisation and student protests, student and labour militants took over the main streets of the city of Córdoba, defying the police and the military, to voice their demands and to call for the restoration of civil liberties in what would be known as the *Cordobazo*. After the *Cordobazo*, guerrilla organisations such as the Marxist Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP; People's Revolutionary Army) and Montoneros (Peronist) appeared on the scene to combat the 'system's violence' and bring about social change.

Despite the amnesty for political prisoners granted by the Peronist government of President Héctor Cámpora, at the moment he took office (25 May 1973), the ERP guerrillas continued to operate. The Montoneros in turn, resumed their political violence soon after Peron took office on 12 October 1973, its militias becoming clandestine in the following year. Simultaneously, a paramilitary organisation, the Alianza Anticomunista Argentina (Argentine Anticommunist Alliance), was formed to threaten and/or murder political opponents, intellectuals, trade unionists and artists with ties to the Peronist or Marxist Left. On 1 July 1974, Perón died and was succeeded in office by his wife, María Estela Martínez de Perón. Political violence increased under the weak leadership of the new president, who clearly sided with right-wing sectors of the Peronist party. On 5 February 1975, by Decree No. 265, the President launched Operation Independence, authorising the armed forces to 'carry out any military actions that may be necessary to neutralise and/or

annihilate all subversive element activities in the province of Tucumán' (National Executive Power, 1975). This north-east province was the epicentre of ERP guerrilla activities.

In October 1975 the Peronist government, with the opposition's approval, extended the military's involvement in the 'war against subversion' to the rest of the country through Decree No. 2772, issued by Provisional President Italo Luder (*Boletín Oficial de Argentina*, 1975). The idea that Argentina was a country at war was no longer limited exclusively to the armed forces and guerrilla groups, but became evident in the way that political violence evolved. From 1973 to 1976, there were 8,509 armed actions, 1,543 political murders, 900 disappeared persons and 5,148 political prisoners. Revolutionary and counter-revolutionary warfare experiences guided the practice of insurgent, state and paramilitary violence (*Archivo CONADEP*, 2010; Yooll, 1989). In this context, the armed forces overcame the isolation in which they had been since they stepped down from the government in 1973, and were able to establish themselves politically, as the only actor capable of restoring order.

In contrast to the Peruvian case, where the repression occurred under a democratic government (as described and analysed by Carlos Aguirre in this volume), in Argentina disappearances became the backbone of the anti-subversive war after the coup. Although 92 percent of the total disappearances occurred during the military government, the dictatorship always denied its responsibility for the practice, relativised the number of disappeared persons, or justified this practice as part of the 'war against subversion'. The leadership presented the disappeared as members of the guerrillas who had run away or died in combat, and the disappearances themselves as practices typical of the guerrillas or merely as isolated 'excesses' incurred during their repression (Bousquet, 1983: 61).

With time, the allegations by the disappeared's families attracted international attention. In 1976, Amnesty International and, in 1979, the OAS's Inter-American Commission on Human Rights visited the country after receiving thousands of accusations of human rights violations. The reports they produced were the first documents to request an end to the disappearances and the prosecution of the perpetrators (in practice, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo had been demanding this since the beginning of the disappearances) (Amnesty International, 1977; Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 1980: 17–18, 148–152, 289–291; Jelin, 1995: 119). The military dictatorship managed to prevent the dissemination of these reports and others with similar allegations (Mignone, 1991: 56–57, 111 and Novaro and Palermo, 2002: 281–282, 297–298).

The entire process of the disappearances comprised a sequence of violent actions that included public and secret instances. In general, the abductions

took place in front of witnesses, whereas, in most cases, the captivity, torture and murder of the disappeared took place in a clandestine manner; Emilio Mignone, President of the Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (Centre of Legal and Social Studies) human rights organisation, created during the dictatorship, estimated that 72 percent of the abductions occurred before witnesses (Mignone, 1991: 67, 68). This procedure made it more difficult afterwards to reconstruct an integral picture of the sequence, to identify the state's responsibility, and to come to terms with the fact that the last phase in the sequence was murder—even for those reporting the crime (Yankelevich, 2004: 239–243; based on interviews with Meijide, 2004; and Calvo, 2005).

At the same time, a homogeneous style of criticism from the left emerged. Revolutionary arguments to denounce political repression, prevailing until the coup of 1976, were replaced by a humanitarian and moralistic narrative that called for empathy with the extreme suffering of the disappeared, placing the crime outside history. This narrative privileged the factual and detailed description of the violations perpetrated, and of the prisons, as well as the accuracy of the victims' and perpetrators' names. Those that had been affected by the repression were no longer presented as political activists. Instead they were characterised in terms of their basic identity data, such as their age and sex, and through comprehensive categories, such as their occupation, showing the indiscriminate character of the state's violence and the innocence of the victims.<sup>2</sup>

It was only after the dictatorship's military defeat in the Malvinas/Falklands War in June 1982 that the public silence about the disappearances was broken. The press published extensive and sensationalistic reports on the exhumations of the corpses of the disappeared carried out in public cemeteries, testimonies of survivors and perpetrators, and the reports produced by the human rights organisations (González Bombal and Landi, 1995: 156).

Upon taking office as President on 10 December 1983, the Radical Party's Raúl Alfonsín ordered the prosecution of both guerrilla and military junta heads. The provision was made under the framework of the so-called 'theory of the two evils', limiting the responsibility for political violence to the leadership at both extremes of the political and military divide, and designating state violence as a response to guerilla violence. It was also established that

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2 About this type of narrative, see Laqueur (1989: 176–204). Markarian (2006) analysed the constitution of this narrative about political violence and its predominance among Uruguayan political exiles. Vezzetti (2002: 118) showed that this style of presentation was constructed as a way to face the dictatorship's stigmatising discourse.

those issuing the illegal orders for repression and those who had committed excesses during the fulfillment of these orders would be prosecuted, whereas those who had restricted themselves to obeying orders would be exempt from prosecution. The latter were assumed to have been unable to disobey because of the hierarchical military structure; nor could they have understood the nature of the situation, due to the prevailing ideological context (Official Bulletin, 15 December 1983: 4 and 5; Nino, 1997: 106, 107; Minutes of the House of Representatives, 5 January 1984: 422–424 and Orders 157 and 158, 13 December 1983). Finally, Alfonsín created the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP), consisting of prominent figures without a political or military background, some of whom were members of human rights organisations. CONADEP was chaired by the writer Ernesto Sábato (1911–2011). Its function would be to receive and compile evidence about the disappearances, forward them to the judiciary, look into the *destino* (both ‘fate’ and ‘the place where they ended up’) of the disappeared, and issue a final report (National Executive Power executive order number 187, 15 December 1983, Official Bulletin, 19 December 1983).

CONADEP concentrated on and centralised the depositions about the disappearances submitted in the country and abroad during the dictatorship, received thousands of new ones from the families of the disappeared, as well as from survivors of that extreme experience and from perpetrators and witnesses. The committee inspected the ‘Secret Detention Centres’ where the disappeared had been clandestinely imprisoned, and also mortuaries and cemeteries, in search of information to determine their *destino*. The public report that the CONADEP produced was called *Nunca Más* (Never Again), and it gave rise to a new interpretation of the political violence that the country had undergone, proposing an intelligible narrative of the disappearances, a new knowledge about their magnitude, and ascertaining the responsibility of the armed forces for perpetrating them.

*Nunca Más* has since become an object of study from many perspectives. A first set of studies has examined its impact on the justice system during the transition to democracy (Funes, 2001; Kritz, 1995; Marchesi, 2001; Hayner, 1994, 2001; Grandin, 2005: 46–67). A second group of scholars has devoted itself to understanding the continuities and discontinuities in the representations and ideas about human rights violations that the report included (Basile, 1989; González Bombal, 1995; Drucaroff, 2002; Vezzetti, 2002; Corralini, Di Iorio, Lobo and Pigliapochi, 2003). This chapter will analyse *Nunca Mas*’s explicatory and narrative strategy, as well as its connections with the premises set forth by the Alfonsín administration in understanding the past exercise of political violence and also in relation to the human rights organisations’ style of presenting their accusations.

## **Nunca Más: A New Narrative of Political Violence**

The very cover of the report anticipates the style of the narrative. The wine-red colour of the book cover illustrates the blood that was spilled in the country. In the manner of street graffiti, on a red background and in white letters, a phrase summarises a statement that looks into the future and is set against the past that it rejects: 'Never Again'. From the start, the book (produced in fifteen days by Pablo Barragán) (Interview with P Barragán) suggests that political violence was the result of ideological extremes. This violence is not accounted for in historical terms, nor are the reasons that gave rise to it explained. Far from looking for its roots in national history, the report presents violence as a phenomenon transcending local boundaries (CONADEP, 1984: 7; Crenzel, 2011).

The report repudiates the violence prior to the coup (during the period 1973–1976), but emphasises the tone taken by the state's 'response' from 1976. Thus, the sequence of violence that it presents is contrary to the prevailing revolutionary imagination that justified 'popular violence' as a response to 'the system's violence'. In contrast, the report validates the military interpretation in which the state's action simply had the aim of confronting and defeating guerrilla warfare. However, at the same time, the report contests this perspective by establishing a qualitative difference between insurgent violence and the disappearance of persons, and by this very same statement, establishes clearly the dictatorship's responsibility for the latter (CONADEP, 1984: 7). In this same sense, the report validates the knowledge construed by the military regime about 'terrorism', but it establishes the specific practice of the disappearances as deplorable state crimes. Thus, the report dismisses the possibility of producing a new public truth about guerrilla violence and accepts the military narrative of such violence (CONADEP, 1984: 10–11).

In this way, *Nunca Más* reproduces the view of the Executive Orders that both the guerrilla and military leaderships should be prosecuted, limiting the responsibility for the exercise of political violence to these two actors. It does so using an 'impartial' language ingrained in the law, summoning truth to cooperate in the establishment of justice and requesting that the search for justice and reparation should not produce any hatred or resentment, or detract from the primacy of politics in generating national reconciliation (CONADEP, 1984: 10–11).

By limiting the dictatorship's responsibility for the disappearances, the report cuts out the past and defines its object: the illegal actions of the armed forces after the military coup of 1976. Although it does mention, at a later point, the existence of disappeared persons in 1975, under Isabel Perón's administration, this recognition is confined to the prologue (CONADEP, 1984: 16, 58, 299, 383). Thus, the report proposes an institutional periodisation

of violence on the basis of the dichotomy between 'democracy' and 'dictatorship' that silences the political and moral responsibilities of the Peronist administration, the armed forces, the political parties and the society for disappearances produced before the 1976 coup.

On the contrary, the disappearances are presented as a product of a 'state of the state' (or 'state within the state'). The dictatorial state exerts violence on life with impunity; it has the scope of a network and the depth of capillaries, while society is depicted in a dual position, but always innocent. Society is a possible victim and an outside observer that, if it had justified the horror, might be considered an accomplice of the prevailing terror (CONADEP, 1984: 9). Thus, the prologue of *Nunca Más* proposes a 'we' that is external to the exercise of state violence and terror, an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1997) of citizens who are external to the internal antagonisms that marked Argentine society. The report projects this image onto the past in the above-mentioned terms. Yet, in establishing that the law is the golden rule of political struggle, the report also projects the primacy of law to the present and into the future.

In spite of these statements in the prologue, the corpus of the book proposes a shared responsibility of the perpetrators of the disappearances and other social groups. In particular, it highlights the complicity of the judiciary with the armed forces, but also mentions that of the educational authorities, factory supervisors and managers, and even companies (CONADEP, 1984: 379, 397). However, except in the case of the judiciary, the responsibility of other actors is always presented in private terms, never on an institutional basis. Thus, when describing the role of the Catholic Church, the report emphasises that the bishops 'repeatedly condemned the repression' and 'described [the methods used] as sinful', while it regrets 'the participation of some members of the clergy who consented or validated – with their presence, their silence and even their justificatory words – these very actions' (CONADEP, 1984: 259). Finally, the report does not mention the attitudes adopted by big corporations, the political class and the union leadership.

Possibly, because of the profile assumed by the 'we' in *Nunca Más*, the question about how the horror was possible does not come up. The questioning is restricted to the judiciary's inability to tackle the violation of the law. On the contrary, *Nunca Más* proposes as its central question a prospective interrogative: how to prevent this from happening again? (CONADEP, 1984: 9, 15). The absence of the question of how the horror was possible is complemented and reinforced by the absence of references to any sort of continuity with practices developed by successive dictatorships and political actors during the second half of the twentieth century (Cavarozzi, 1988: 37–78). The absence of this question is also underscored by the failure to mention cultural values pertaining to the country's political history, in



relation to which the expectation that this horror will not happen again could be read as idealistic or unreal. In the report, the hope of these events never happening again is embedded in the continuity of the present, the restored democratic order.

*Nunca Más* proposes an image of vastness and unpredictability about those who could be the object of disappearance, depending on the vastness of the definition of the 'enemy' (CONADEP, 1984: 9–10). This proposition tends to detach the exercise of horror from all rationality. On the other hand, the report presents the disappeared as a heterogeneous and inclusive group, but with boundaries. It limits them to those who fought injustice, participated in proletarian struggles, opposed the dictatorship or attempted to change the social order. But it also mentions 'the friends of these people and the friends of friends, plus others whose names were given out for motives of personal vengeance, or by the kidnapped under torture' (CONADEP, 1984: 9–10).

In spite of this vastness, the persons mentioned all have one attribute in common: they are foreign to guerrilla warfare. This boundary, set in the prologue, is transcended in the course of the book, when political activists become included. In most of the testimonies (64 percent), the report simply includes their names, and it describes them as 'people or human beings' in 16 percent of the cases. Likewise, it calls them 'the kidnapped, the detained, the disappeared, the imprisoned or the prisoners' – only in 16 percent of the cases does the report mention their political activism (Corralini, Di Iorio, Lobo and Pigliapochi, 2003). Within this small subset of victims, their belonging to a certain sector of activity (for example, their trade or occupation) is described, and only in a negligible proportion of cases (3 percent) is their political participation mentioned; yet this appears always far away from the guerrilla groups.

On the other hand, the report gives the personal information about the disappeared including, in most testimonies, their first and last names, and in only a few cases, just their initials. The latter occurs in cases of disappeared women who were victims of sexual violence (CONADEP, 1984: 49–52, 67, 155, 191, 211 and 317). Whereas, on arrival at the camps, the names of the disappeared were substituted by a number, *Nunca Más* gives them back their names and their basic identity data. Interestingly, while, in Nazi camps, the number assigned to the prisoners was tattooed on their arms, the identification number of the disappeared in Argentina also replaced their identity, but was only recorded in their memories. These different forms of identity replacement are linked, I think, to the different premises held by the two determinations to exterminate: the bodily and unavoidable record of those 'guilty of being,' in the case of the Nazi genocide, and the changeable record, embedded in the memory of the captives, for those 'guilty of doing' in Argentina. Additionally, the report classifies the disappeared by age and sex,



revealing a predominance of young men. Almost 82 percent of the disappeared were between the ages of sixteen and 35, and 70 percent were men (CONADEP, 1984: 294). It also presents their distribution by profession or occupation: workers (30.2 percent), students (21 percent), employees (17.9 percent), professionals (10.7 percent), teachers (5.7 percent), self-employed and others (5 percent), housewives (3.8 percent), conscripts and security force subordinate personnel (2.5 percent), journalists (1.6 percent), artistic activities (1.3 percent) and clergy (0.3 percent). Thus, the report highlights the importance and the majority of the disappearances amongst workers and students. The names are listed in only three types of cases among the disappeared: journalists, clergymen, and lawyers. This selection emphasises the violation of the law, the detainees' lack of opportunity to defend themselves, or to express ideas and principles that were constrained by the state order that upset their lives (CONADEP, 1984: 296, 375).

The scope with which the report features the disappeared and the restrictions that it establishes around their commitments are also reflected in the second chapter, 'Víctimas' (The Victims). Its sections combine the different above-mentioned demographic and socio-occupational variables and include specific sections on journalists, clergymen, conscripts and union workers. The other subtitles 'Niños desaparecidos y mujeres embarazadas' (Children and pregnant women who disappeared), 'Adolescentes' (Adolescents), 'La familia como víctima' (The family as victim), 'La represión no respetó inválidos ni lisiados' (The repression respected neither the sick nor the disabled), reinforce the image of the wide scope of the disappearances as well as their helplessness and 'innocence'. (CONADEP, 1984: 345–346) By mentioning these attributes, and by taking up the narrative created by the human rights organisations, the report depicts the disappeared as innocent victims, because of their 'foreignness' to guerrilla warfare and politics. Thus, the claim rests on the moral condition of the disappeared rather than on the universal and inalienable character of their rights (Novaro and Palermo, 2002: 489).

In this fashion, *Nunca Más* re-established the humanity of the disappeared, presenting their names, ages, sex, and professional and occupational activities. This makes for an abstract humanisation, presenting their lives generically and clouding their condition as concrete historical beings, their own political will, and all attributes that would remind us of the actual confrontations that divided Argentine society. Thus, the report gives a new political significance to the identity of the disappeared, counter to the dictatorship's perspective, which identified them as guerrilla members. At the same time, it renders them apolitical by presenting them as innocent victims, ignoring their political activism.

On the other hand, the identity of the perpetrators is amply recorded in the testimonies, which mention over 400 names. In six out of ten cases, their

status as members of the state's armed forces or law enforcement agencies is explicit, it seems, based on Corralini, Di Iorio, Lobo and Pigliapochi (2003). Regarding their values, the report shows the repressive coordination of the dictatorships in the Southern Cone and explains at the end, and in a few pages, the doctrine that guided them (CONADEP, 1984: 265–276). Because of this expository strategy, the political arguments are subordinated to the pure description of the violations and emerge as their corollary, not as their pre-condition.

In spite of this, the report defines the scope and depth of the crime, classifying it as a 'crime against humanity' or as 'genocide'. The use of hell-related metaphors to describe the experience of disappearance complements these statements (CONADEP, 1984: 7, 8, 9, 11, 247). Through them, the report highlights the violation of the religious and political principles held in the Western world and upholds, by opposition, the very humanity of man. This interpretation of the violations debunks, from inside their own sphere, the dictatorships' discourse that justified their actions as the defence of the values of 'Western and Christian' civilisation (CONADEP, 1984: 8, 15, 347–139).

### **The Restoration of the Reality of the Crime**

*Nunca Más* attempts to restore the very same materiality of the crimes denied time and again by their authors. The reconstruction of the facts is based on an expository strategy that combines the presentation of the disappearances as a system, the practices that they entailed, and their embeddedness in a meaningful framework that made them intelligible. In this process, the report produces a new knowledge about the magnitude and scope that the disappearances reached in the country. For this purpose, the narration goes through the same sequential rationale of the disappearances: abduction, torture, secret captivity and extermination. Thus, the public and clandestine moments of the crime of disappearance are articulated in a single narrative. Its truth is sustained by a realistic and detailed description of the disappearance system and its stages, on the basis of testimonies and primary sources produced by various actors. This strategy, therefore, combines the objective and the subjective reconstruction of the facts from different viewpoints.

On this basis, the report proposes a constant confrontation with the explanations for the disappearances provided by the military. The text describes the abduction operations and sets them in space and time, and details the different forms of violence exerted against people and objects. It establishes the military and police composition of the 'task forces' that perpetrated them and shows the materiality of the Clandestine Detention Centres, specifying their location and characteristics. Through this, the report restores the space and time coordinates of the facts, socialises the topography

of horror, and breaks the secret around it and its consequence: its social normalisation.

*Nunca Más* describes the systematic character and the multiple shapes of torture. It mentions children and even babies who disappeared with their parents, as well as children born in captivity. Their identities were faked and they were adopted by families of the military or police personnel, or their acquaintances (CONADEP, 1984: 63, 303). Likewise, the report establishes the widespread physical elimination of the disappeared, presenting various forms of death. Contesting the voice of the military, it points out that murders were often concealed as deaths resulting from 'non-existent confrontations or attempted escapes'. In many cases the corpses of the disappeared 'were destroyed to prevent their future identification' by throwing the captives, still alive, from military planes into the sea or lakes or rivers, by burying them in anonymous ditches in public cemeteries under the label NN, or by incineration (CONADEP, 1984: 137, 224–226, 234–246 and 480).

On the other hand, *Nunca Más* sheds light on a quantitative dimension of the disappearances (8,960 cases) that was unknown until 1984 (CONADEP, 1984: 293). The figure is presented as a provisional record, for the authors warn that 'many disappearances have not been reported because the victims have no families left, because the families prefer not to report them or because they live in places far removed from urban centers' (CONADEP, 1984: 293 and 479). However, the report does not include among the disappeared those persons whose corpses were found and identified, nor those that survived clandestine captivity (Hayner, 2001: 302). It also establishes the number of Clandestine Detention Centres, detected at around 340 – a figure that until then was unknown even to human rights organisations; earlier, there were only partial descriptions of the main clandestine centres (Duhalde, 1983: 96–102 and 163–166). This information, in addition to the list of these places, their location and distribution, reconstructs the magnitude and scope of the clandestine system at a national level. The fact that they were mostly located in military or police units completely undermines the military's denial of responsibility for the disappearances.

In presenting the major stages involved in the disappearances and in describing them in detail, revealing the systematic character of their exercise and blaming the armed forces, *Nunca Más* becomes an integrated narration that debunks the interpretative monopoly exercised until then by the perpetrators of the disappearances. As has been said, the dictatorship had denied the existence of disappearances, dismissing them as mere 'errors' or 'excesses' committed in all wars. *Nunca Más*, however, holds the armed forces responsible for the disappearances, and refutes their exceptional character, presenting them as the result of a system of exterminium planned by the military juntas (CONADEP, 1984: 16 and 17).

The report exposes the truth about the disappearances by including multiple testimonies and documents from different voices, which, in combination, acquire a new dimension. The fragmented character of the public and clandestine moments of the crimes, the division of tasks among perpetrators, the concealment of their identities behind 'war names', and the deliberate destruction of files and buildings presented a new challenge in terms of reconstructing events. Only a narration that would combine testimony and document, that would be collective and from the inside, would be able to recompose the scene and its protagonists with enough emotional and argumentative strength.

The narrative is mainly built on the basis of the allegations made by the survivors and the families of the disappeared. Of the approximately 379 testimonies that the report included, 59 percent correspond to survivors, 20 percent to individuals who witnessed a disappearance, 15 percent to relatives of disappeared individuals, 4 percent to friends or acquaintances of disappeared individuals, and 2 percent to perpetrators (Corralini, Di Iorio, Lobo and Pigliapochi, 2003). CONADEP operates by breaking down each testimony into fragments. Thus, the narrative establishes a general pattern that incorporates each single case as long as it is similar to the next. In spite of this instrumental use and the de-structuring of the testimonies as narrative units, these voices manage to put forward a heart-wrenching drama, which would not have been the case in an encyclopedic approach to the extermination.

Families start their narrative with the abduction, revealing its impact on their bodies and their homes, and tell of their fruitless search and accusations made before the authorities. The survivors reconstruct, in many cases, their experience from bodily memory. Through the evocation of sounds, smells, sights or tactile impressions, they describe their abduction, the tortures they went through, the spaces where they were held captive, the names of the perpetrators and other fellow captives (CONADEP, 1984: 60–61). Their role in this reconstruction is also revealed by the inclusion of maps and photographs depicting the camps recognised by them and CONADEP, which by virtue of that same act, become visual evidence that supports their statements and the report itself (CONADEP, 1984: 73, 76, 82, 85, 88, 91, 94, 109, 112, 115, 121, 124, 127, 133, 141, 153, 156, 168, 171, 174 (maps); 70, 79, 97, 100, 103, 106, 118, 130, 138, 144, 147, 150, 159, 162, 165, 177 (pictures)).

Also, the repeated references to places, dates, circumstances and names in the testimonies restore the reality and truthfulness of what came to pass, and they recompose the spatiality and temporality of these occurrences as well as the identity of those affected (Sarlo, 2002: 151; Halbwachs, [1925] 2004). However, in their testimony, the survivors also reveal the complexity of their own situation and their uniqueness with respect to their peers in other

experiences of the kind; in almost all of the cases, the survivors were freed by their own captors and faced, as has been pointed out, not only guilty feelings for having survived, the imprints of horror in their bodies and consciences, the stigmatisation of the regime, or the rejection of a society that could not, or did not want to, listen to them. They were also the object of suspicion and anathema from others reporting the crime. However, *Nunca Más* never presents their ethical dilemmas or passes judgment on their attitudes during their captivity.

The fragments of testimonies, mediated by CONADEP, become a collective and inter-subjective narrative of high emotional weight and great narrative complexity. They express the objectification of an extreme reality; they embody the violence suffered by the disappeared by reiterating, in a quasi monophonic tone, a single narrative. The iterative effect alters the individual character of the testimony. At that moment, the testimonies become estranged and deprived from their uniqueness and become part of a public memory. The voices of the families and survivors occupy a position grounded on an otherness that is cognitively and emotionally affected by the impact of the violence exercised by the state. In spite of this, unlike the denouncing tone exhibited before the 1976 coup, no desire for revenge becomes apparent in the report, nor does it reveal any kind of singular political commitment. Even the word *compañero* (comrade), commonly used in Argentina to refer to leftist activism, is only mentioned by the survivors to refer to those who shared the work, study or captivity with them, and in only a few cases, union activism. The language that prevails in their testimonies, on the contrary, is frequently referential, containing few digressions. They become integrated in the public space evoking the assaults they went through without expressing hate, resentment or an epical tone, all of which were typical characteristics of the accusations before the coup (Basile, 1989: 48).

The testimonies of those directly affected by the disappearances – key pieces of the narrative of the report – convey the same accusatory narrative tone prevailing amongst those affected by the disappearances; the testimonies acquire a truth value in a text created by a state commission. This is not only markedly original with respect to the place that testimony as a genre used to occupy in Argentine narrative, as an expression of marginal or counter-cultural outlooks, but also with respect to the specific disparagement of and disregard for these voices under the dictatorship. At the same time, the experiential character and the realistic style of the testimonies, the proliferation of details, and their assertive structure exclude fiction or fantasy from the narrative, investing it with verisimilitude in the face of a generalised disbelief about the possibility of planning and execution of cruelty and horror (CONADEP, 1984: 15). Besides, CONADEP takes on the role of spokesperson, based on ‘that which we have heard, read and recorded in the course of

the research', proposing itself as a meta-witness of the testimonies, with its authority guaranteed by its official character (CONADEP, 1984: 7, 160, 161).

However, *Nunca Más* is not limited to incorporating these voices. It also includes the testimonies of the perpetrators of the disappearances. Rather than emerging as a result of the accusations of those affected, their narratives become integrated, on an equal basis, with other voices, as part of one single narration. Although the perpetrators represent only 2 percent of the testimonies, their words confirm the truthfulness of the testimonies of families and survivors (CONADEP, 1984: 132, 164–166, 175, 197–199, 202, 203, 214, 216–217, 228, 238, 253–259; Corralini, Di Iorio, Lobo and Pigliapochi, 2003). Likewise, the report includes testimonies of 'involuntary witnesses' to one or more stages of the disappearances: neighbours who witnessed abductions, the appropriation of the disappeared's goods; people who lived near the camps and heard gunshots and screams of horror, or saw corpses leaving the location, as well as maimed human remains inside bags; or civilians that helped to realise the disappearances, such as a group of mortuary workers who received corpses with evident signs of torture and participated in their clandestine burial in the city of Córdoba (CONADEP, 1984: 167, 225, 244, 245, 316; with letter to Videla, analysed in Crenzel, 2004).

In this way, the variety of statements produces a new product inside the text, a chorus of testimonies that transcends the partiality of personal experience, and at the same time, confirms its truthfulness through the voice of the others. This chorus presents a series of images whose structure would be unintelligible without its parts, but whose force transcends the sum of them, managing to propose a 'unitary representation' of the disappearances (Basile, 1989: 50). This choral game shows the systematic character of the disappearances, their stance as a collective process of national scope. This inter-subjective network creates the notion that what happened was not due to the reasons put forward by the military, or to eventual or random events, but that it was part of an atrocious, regular and hidden 'normality'.

The report reveals still other mechanisms for validating the facts that confirm and complement the testimonies. On the one hand, it incorporates scientific knowledge, whose neutrality before the occurrences places it beyond all doubt, and whose social validation and legitimacy is prior and independent. This technical rationality, this professional knowledge and its controllable, verifiable and renewable operations guarantees the truthfulness of direct experiences in documenting the narrative and sets it apart, through these restrictions, from literary narration. This scientific knowledge is implied by the mention of the architects who inspected the camps with the survivors and drew maps of them; the photographers who documented these inspections; the lawyers who organised the evidence, and, indirectly, through the inclusion of graphs of various kinds, pie-charts and bar charts of the type

frequently used in scientific research (CONADEP, 1984: 25, 29, 294, 295, 296, 297, 298 and 300). It is also manifest in the manipulation of knowledge that was then cutting-edge in the country: the use of an information technology system to record the disappeared and detect changes in the physiognomy of children; genetic tests to determine their descent, and forensic anthropology techniques used to identify the corpses found. The mention of the international science institutions that validated their use further strengthened the legitimacy of these techniques (CONADEP, 1984: 184, 293 and 322).

On the other hand, truthfulness is established through the inclusion of data from military sources themselves. These documents, such as the books recording duties for the military service or entrances and exits, refute the military's arguments about the escape or desertion of the conscripts reported as disappeared. Others reveal the orders issued by the dictatorship to face grassroots protests, censor the press or simply order the abductions (*ibidem*: 275–279, 322, 361, 365, 367, 375). Complementing this, the report includes statements by military chiefs that justified their actions, or denied the existence of disappeared persons. Thus, it shows their fallacy when faced with the evidence that had been gathered (CONADEP, 1984: 55, 56, 402, 474 and 475).

Finally, CONADEP plays a part in the construction of the sense of truth of the narrative. On the one hand, its voice is descriptive and didactic. It operates as a prologue to the testimonies and mediates them without resorting to artifices. In general, it asserts when describing, but it includes an indication or a conjecture when faced with uncertainty amidst certain developments. The conclusive assertion and the rhetorical interrogation propose a pact to the reader: nothing that is not proven will be ascertained, and doubts about the occurrences will be taken into consideration. In fact, CONADEP did not include in the report certain facts mentioned in the testimonies that, if judged, could arouse public disbelief, such as the skinning of live captives or the rape, after her murder, of a captive woman by tens of soldiers (Aragón interview, 2003; Mansur interview, 2004). The report also proposes the validation of the narrative by presenting its work in detail, the interviews held, the visits to the camps, the cemeteries, the mortuaries and the hospitals, the trips made to hear the reports, and the cases it took to court. This link between the construction of truth and legal proof is reproduced throughout the text by presenting the testimonies and the documents with a file number (CONADEP, 1984: 447–450 and 451–459).

## **The Ties Between Truth and Justice**

CONADEP clarifies in *Nunca Más* that its mission is not to determine criminal responsibilities, but the report proposes two dissimilar readings on this issue. On the one hand, it establishes the military Juntas' responsibilities for the



planning of the disappearances (CONADEP, 1984: 8). On the other hand, it presents the list of camps by each of the forces under their control and the distribution of the disappeared by military jurisdiction, suggesting the responsibilities of its chiefs. Finally, the report highlights that 'all signs of dissatisfaction inside the armed forces and the security forces with the methods used for the detention and elimination of people were brutally punished [. . .]; any attempt to escape the repressive structure, which the participants called the "blood pact" would mean persecution or even elimination' (CONADEP, 1984: 253–239, 300).

These considerations might imply that the book's view reproduces the distinction supported by President Alfonsín regarding the various levels of responsibility. That strategy had been seriously questioned in the debate in the Senate, in February 1984, when Elias Sapag, from the Movimiento Popular Neuquino, proposed that the authors of 'atrocious and aberrant actions' be excluded from the claim to due obedience (Senate Minutes, 9 February 1984: 318). However, *Nunca Más* confronts the official distinction that proposed to restrict criminal action to those who committed excesses by warning that 'the cases transcribed are not those that constitute excesses, for such excesses did not exist if we understand by that the incurrence of isolated actions, especially aberrant [. . .] [for] the aberrant was common and widespread practice. The [supposedly] "especially atrocious actions can be counted by the thousand," so they are the "normal actions"" instead' (CONADEP, 1984: 15, 16 and 481). In turn, by this very assertion, the report denies Sapag's argument, proposing that only egregious and heinous acts could not be justified on the basis of the argument of obedience to authority. The report elaborates on that position with the statement that it is necessary 'to carry out legal research into the integration of the task forces in the repressive structure' thereby expanding legal action onto the middle and lower ranks of the armed forces, which the government attempted to exclude from the legal inquiry (CONADEP, 1984: 16, 223, 256, 481).

*Nunca Más* was quickly projected into the public sphere and found echo in society, awakened dormant public sensibilities and 'shocked' the population with its revelations. The 40,000 copies of its first edition, issued in November 1984, were sold out in just two days. Between that date and April 1985, when the trial of the members of the military juntas started, 190,000 copies were sold. The readers of the report vividly recall the actual moment when they bought the book and how they showed it proudly to friends and acquaintances. That action changed the way in which some of them, in particular professionals, reacted to the information they had about the disappearances. This experience took place within intimate circles, as knowledge of the disappearances was considered dangerous and it was not something that was openly talked about. As Michèle Petit (2001: 48) notes, in certain cases a text has the effect of

liberating something that was held silently by its readers. A different group found in the report an integrated account of the repression of which until then they had only had a fragmented knowledge. A very small number read the book as a way of challenging their own denial or justifications of the crimes.

But no matter what their profile was or how much of the report they read, none of the readers recall having doubted the truth of the account. This was so even among those who considered that it 'omitted a condemnation of guerrilla violence'. Most found it revealing, in particular in terms of the scope of the disappearances and the systematic nature of their practice, and, therefore, they claimed that it reconfigured their perspective on the subject and led them to believe in the need for the state to prosecute the perpetrators. The severity of the crime and the systematic targeting of 'innocent' people who were defenceless thwarted in their opinion any justification given for these practices. The respondents also recall that reading the report heightened their rejection of all forms of violence.

It could be held that, in contrast to what occurred in other extreme experiences, the report entailed an immediate political intervention that prevented the events of the past from being silenced or forgotten, and that it confronted the dictatorship's discourse, which denied, relativised or justified the existence of disappeared people. Despite differences, the act of reading the report reconfigured, to various extents, the knowledge and interpretation of state violence and the identity of the disappeared, gave a sense of shared knowledge to information that had been kept silent, or revealed a scarcely or partially known universe, while promoting practices aimed at regulating private and public actions, the demand for justice and the repudiation of political violence.

In the same way, the influence of *Nunca Más* was evident in the trial of the military juntas. The prosecutor, Strassera, went on to condemn both guerrilla organisations (calling them terrorists) and 'state terrorism'. The ruling handed down in the trial, based on the evidence of *Nunca Más*, condemned guerrillas and found that the members of the juntas ignored the legal instruments that they had at their disposal and conducted instead an illegal repression through clandestine procedures. Item 30 of the ruling extended the scope of criminal action to include superior officers who commanded the military zones and sub-zones into which the country had been divided for repressive purposes, and any who had orchestrated kidnapping operations or committed abhorrent acts. This item, then, echoed the *Nunca Más* call to expand the investigation to members of the 'task groups'. In sum, the report changed individual and social perceptions about political violence and revealed the emergence of a new sensibility in public and private spheres, in Norbert Elías's words, a correspondence between psychogenesis and sociogenesis in the development of social processes (Elías, 1987).

## Conclusions

This chapter has shown how *Nunca Más* proposed a new reading of the past of political violence in Argentina that is distinct from the revolutionary narrative prior to the coup and the dictatorship's justification or denial of their crimes. CONADEP's foundational reading combined the premises of Alfonsín's administration to have the exercise of political violence stand on trial, with the discourse of human rights organisations forged during the dictatorship to report violations to human rights.

The report considered the disappearances as a violation of the moral, religious and political principles of the Western world. It presented the disappeared as subjects of the law, rejected violence as a way to solve political conflicts and imagined democracy as the guarantee that horror would not be repeated. The report's recommendations demanded from the state the redress to the affected, the repeal of repressive laws, the materialisation of justice, the establishment of the disappearances as crimes and a guarantee that human rights would be respected (CONADEP, 1984: 477 and 478). In this way, the report included the past within the general principles of the political order restored in the country in 1983. However, it put forward the 'foreignness' of the disappeared with respect to politics and insurgence, deriving their innocence from that. This aspect reveals the limitations of this foundational narrative of restored democracy, relative to the universal defence of civil rights. At the same time, the omission of the responsibility incurred by political parties shows the difficulties of Argentine society, which are still undeniably present, to reflect upon these sorrowful events in complex terms.

In keeping with the presidential orders to prosecute guerrilla and military chiefs, *Nunca Más* established a periodisation of political violence, positing insurgent violence as a precedent to state violence and the disappearances as the exclusive responsibility of the dictatorship. The report proposed the 'foreignness' of civil and political society with respect to both. Finally, it incorporated into its narrative, in a privileged position, the testimonies of families and survivors, in order to reconstruct the materiality of the disappearances, and to integrate their public and hidden stages. Thus, it officially consecrated the humanitarian narrative forged by these actors during the dictatorship, setting it in the framework of a new reading of the past.

Through the articulation of the Executive's premises and the humanitarian narrative forged during the dictatorship, *Nunca Más* proposed a new 'emblematic memory' of the past of political violence, to be acknowledged and to be deployed in the public scene. This notion refers to the configurations that, in the public arena, provide interpretative sense to think of, and evoke,

the past, integrating personal memories and concrete experiences, and that, backed by legitimate spokespeople, resonate in the society (Stern, 2000).

The strength of the constellation of meaning that the report combined is revealed in three key dimensions. First, before *Nunca Más*, the dictatorship's perspective had not been denied by an integrated narrative, with emotional, argumentative and symbolic strength, supported by the weight of the testimonies and the official word. The report installed a new public truth about the disappearances confronting the denial, justification and relativisation of the crime by the military.

Second, *Nunca Más* would soon turn into an instrument of justice by becoming the key evidentiary corpus in the trial of the military Juntas in 1985.

Third, the report became an unprecedented publishing success and the canon for the collective memory about the disappearances. By 2010, *Nunca Más* had sold 515,330 copies and had been translated into English, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese and German, and was incorporated into schools to transmit this past to the new generations.

Finally, *Nunca Más* would acquire outstanding importance in the politics of justice during transitions from authoritarian to democratic regimes when imagined by governments and human rights organisations, as a vehicle for navigating the political violence that these societies went through in the 1970s and 1980s. Even the reports of several truth commissions created in the Southern Cone had as a title 'Never Again' (Sikkink, 2008). The phrase 'Never Again' was, and is, used as a symbol of commitment to the truth; it connotes justice and memory and it is proposed as the name for a future museum dedicated to this period. Nevertheless, the phrase also acquired a different meaning. Political and social groups reproduced it in a literal way, but simultaneously deployed it with an exemplary meaning, derived from their own readings of this past of political violence and dictatorship.