

# Observing *Memories*

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# *Once victors, now victims.*

## How do the Argentine military remember their recent past?

Valentina Salvi

CIS-CONICET / IDES, University Tres de Febrero

**D**uring the military dictatorship (1976–1983), the Argentine armed forces implemented a repressive policy of clandestine and illegal type throughout the country, previously tested by the Army in the province of Tucumán in 1975. With the aim to eliminate the groups and people classified as “subversive” (armed organization members, trade unionists, political activists, student or professional union members, artists among others who might be labelled as suspicious), the armed forces imposed a policy of terror that involved kidnapping, torture, illegal arrests, disappearance of people, abduction of boys and girls born during their mothers’ captivity resulting in tens of thousands persons disappeared, murdered or exiled.

Despite the silence and concealment that surrounded this systematic policy of disappearance of persons in Argentina, both the Army and its retired and active cadres remember the years of repression; that is to say, they construct and reproduce versions of that past. An unstable balance between memory and oblivion, evocation and negation, selection and vindication is established in these versions. This irregular balance discloses that the military memories around the illegal repression reflects the weight of the shared traditions and identities as well as the persistence of certain narrative frameworks in addition to the ups and downs of the political and legal situations or the tensions existing with other competing memories.

Indeed, the military institution and its officials play an active role in building memories around the recent past. Looking inside the military community, tensions and conflicts around what to remember and how to remember result in the construction of an edifying memory that reinforces the sense of belonging and self-assessment of the cadres, while boosting the intergenerational transmission with a solid emotional bond. Looking outside, the memories of the army come into conflict with the memory of the disappeared



1. Operativo Independencia to dismantle the ERP. Tucumán, Argentina (1975) | Public domain

2. Final session of the Trial of the Juntas, 1985. Video available on [www.europeanmemories.eu/magazine](http://www.europeanmemories.eu/magazine)

3. Ernesto Sábató delivers to President Raúl Alfonsín the report on the Disappeared, known as 'Nunca más'. AGN\_DDF / Inv: 346314. September 20, 1984 | Archivo General de la Nación

and with the message of the human right institutions with which they compete for the sense and truth about the recent past. At the same time, these memories swing between the demands to the state to be acknowledged and the search of support and legitimacy in a civil society that, depending on the political and memorial situation, tends to reproduce the legacy of the last military dictatorship, while mainly rejecting and questioning it.

During the 1980s, in the early years after the dictatorship, the new army authorities refused to reposition their place within the democratic life by questioning the legacy of the recent past and, in particular, the fact that they had “defeated the subversion”. On the contrary, far from taking distance from the past, the present of the institution was a result from it. The armed forces clung to notions such as “war”, “subversion” and “anti-subversive war”, since they were categories of practice referred to the experience, training and ideology of a generation of officers who had been involved in the “fight against subversion”. In turn, they worked as political and moral categories that made a radical difference between them as the

“saviours of the fatherland” and their enemies: the “subversives”. At that time, the illegal repression was publicly considered by the military through a tone of triumphalism and denial. In other words, the denied the clandestine and systematic nature of the disappearance of persons and the very existence of the disappeared, while they reinforced an interpretation in terms of war and under the prerogatives of the victors.

Within the military bodies, the military continued to identify the figure of the combatant of the “fight against subversion” with the ideal of the soldier to be followed in the speeches given by the senior officers to the junior cadres at military events. The “combatants” of the “fight against subversion” and also their majors - who were held accountable in the trial of the juntas (1985) during that time - were honoured and constituted the *proper actor* proposed as a model for the assertion of the vocation and the soldier’s agenda for the new generations of officers (Guber: 2007). The war narratives referring to the “fight against subversion” were a source of exemplary events worthy of being transmitted and imitated between generations of soldiers. On the



Campo de Mayo - Buenos Aires, 2006 | Juan Manuel Gienini - Wikimedia Commons



Ramón Díaz Bessone, Argentine military, November 1976 | Magazine Panorama no 6 November 1976 Author Unknown - Wikimedia Commons

other hand, out of the military bodies, there was a definitive disagreement between the victorious story told by the military about their actions as “victors” of the “fight against subversion” and the sense of challenge and rejection that the civil society attributed to the violence perpetrated by the armed forces during the military dictatorship. For the military, those who were definitely recognised as *disappeared* by the middle of the 1980’s in Argentina, that is, as human persons who had been kidnapped and tortured in clandestine detention centres, were considered “subversives”, and what was socially called State terrorism was defined by them as “war against subversion”.

The 80’s was a context where the military view was more and more adversely interpreted and felt. The military version regarding the “war” and the “victors” was finally eroded as a result of the claims made by the relatives of the illegal repression victims, the strengthening of the human right perspective among the public, the increasing importance within the society given to the victims’ words, the symbolic importance of the report drafted by the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP) (1984), and the sentence of the trial of the juntas (1985). Thus, the armed forces had to do something that was definitely against their interests: the demonization of their actions and the humanization of their victims. As soon as



"New executions of Peronists, a few days of the massacre of La Plata. Beckerman, 19 years old, is dismissed by his colleagues from the Union of Secondary Students (UES) | *Diario Noticias*, Year I number 263. Buenos Aires, Saturday, August 24, 1974.



Monument to Colonel Don Argentino del Valle Larrabure during a tribute ceremony | V. Salvi

the war discourse lost its social value, only victims and perpetrators were left behind, and the violence perpetrated ended up being perceived socially as a deviation from all legal, moral and cultural codes.

In this context, it became widespread the so-called "theory of the two demons", whose two-fold rhetoric opposing and equating the violence exercised by the armed organisations with the state terror carried out by the armed forces, and this would also have implications for the future reconfiguration of the military narrative. This interpretation of the facts was rejected by the military forces, who did not agree to be equated with those they had fought against and defeated (the "subversive criminals"), nor to have their commanders judged and their responsibilities equated with those of the guerrilla armed forces leaders. Notwithstanding this stance, the bipolarization of violence and the equalization derived from it will permeate the military narrative, attributing a new significance to the notion of war and giving it a new base for the fights for memory.

The figure of the "victors of the subversive war" that defended the careers of the former Commander of the Junta or the middle cadres who had participated in the repression was central to the military memories during the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. However, there were many reasons for the military memories to turn to the figure of

the "victims of terrorism". Nevertheless, it should be made clear that the figure of the "killed by their subversion" is not new, it dates from the wakes and burials of the officers killed during the first half of the 1970s (Garaño and Pontoriero, 2018), from the propagandist activity in support of the military regime (Lorenz, 2005), and especially from the masses that FAMUS convened in connection with the CONADEP investigation and the military court cases of the 1980s (Salvi, 2012). However, in those years, the military victims were not the emblematic figure from which to frame the memory and defend the "fight against subversion".

Around 1995, two events occurred that were markedly significant for the memories of the armed forces and their cadres. In March, the lieutenant commander (R), Adolfo Scilingo, and the former junior staff officer in the Army, Víctor Ibáñez, reported on television that the so-called "death flights" were throwing into the sea alive people who were being held hostage in the clandestine detention centres of the Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA) and Campo de Mayo. A month later, in April 1995, the Army chief, General Martín Balza, also gave a speech before the television cameras in which he admitted the torture and murder executed by men from the Army without giving further details about the responsibilities of the institution.



Oath of Jorge Rafael Videla as President of Argentina. 29 March 1976 | Author unknown, Wikimedia Commons



Pedro Eugenio Aramburu visiting Oberá in 1965 | "Reseña histórica de Oberá". Gualdoni Vigo, Enrique. Municipalidad de Oberá, 1987. Wikimedia Commons

The personal account of two direct perpetrators and the institutional recognition of the violence perpetrated by the Army understood from these public statements definitely left the military without any chance to present themselves before the public opinion as the **“saviours of the fatherland from the Marxist thread”** or as the **“victors of a fair war against the subversive enemy”** (Badaró, 2009: 311).

Paradoxically, the generation of officers contemporary to the illegal repression, gathered in the Military Circle were the main promoters of the shift towards the memory of the military victims. Among them, the former head of the Second Army

Corps and former Minister of Military Regime Planning, Major General (R) Ramón Díaz Bessone, became the main promoters of this memory with the publication of the book *In Memoriam*, considered by the military as the counterpart of the *Nunca Más* (Never more) published by CONADEP in 1984. His three volumes describe the circumstances in which members of the armed and security forces, their relatives and civilians were killed by armed organizations during the 1970s, but above all it provides a narrative from which to re-interpret the past and take up a stance regarding the debates and questionings of the present.

Indeed, the book lays the foundation for a new narrative about the past to be strengthened: *The Complete Memory*. This is a mirroring and reactive memory opposed to as much as reflected in the memory of the disappeared and the socially legitimated category of victim of State terrorism. On the one hand, this shift towards the memory of the victims can be understood as a symptom of an era in which the foundation of a collective identity in a traumatic event represents a sufficient basis for promoting claims and disputing different meanings in the public arena; and, on the other hand, as part of a mournful memory resulting in an active effect of unity and adhesion based on a common painful memory. However, it can also be understood as an expression of the little space found by the victims of the guerrilla in the memory of the activists and the human rights organizations, and for the State.



Roberto Viola | Revista Panorama nro 4 septiembre 1976. Wikimedia Commons



Cover page of the first issue of the magazine B1 "Vitamin for the memory of the war in the '70s", 2006 | V. Salvi

The book describes how the payroll of the officers and their relatives murdered by the armed forces was published and it begun with the murder of a 4 years old girl, Guillermina Cabrera, an army captain's daughter, which took place in March 1960. The fact that a little girl is the protagonist of the kidnapping and assassination of General Pedro Eugenio Aramburu in 1970 carried out by the Montoneros organization, which had always occupied the leading position in the memory of the military, proves that the rewriting of the military memory around the figure of the victim seeks to conform to the socially accepted and recognized stereotype of the innocent victim. Aramburu's career is too contradictory; on the one hand, it is strongly affected by the disputes between Peronists and anti-Peronists; and on the other hand, it is closely linked to the army's coup d'état and anti-democratic image to still be considered the first and foremost "victim of terrorism". In turn, Aramburu represented a problematic figure in the construction of the respectable and virtuous image of the army officers who "died for the fatherland and fighting against subversion".

However, which are the criteria defining the quality of "victim of terrorism"? Although, both the civilians and the military who were killed by terrorist attacks, attacks on the army barracks as well as in confrontations, were considered victims, the paradigmatic figure of the "terrorist victim" is the officer murdered after months of kidnapping

executed by armed organizations. Placing the focus on the kidnapped military is not a coincidence and responds, on the one hand, to the need to compete with the figure of the "detainee-disappeared" and, on the other hand, to the intention of making the image of the armed forces officers sacred. Major Julio Argentino del Valle Larrabure and Lieutenant Colonel Jorge Ibarzábal who were killed after months of kidnapping, allow us to build a figure of "ideal victim of terrorism". These officers were remembered as martyrs who "died defending their fatherland" and have also replaced the generals of the National Reorganisation Process as memorable soldiers such as Jorge Videla, Roberto Viola, Leopoldo Galtieri or Luciano Menéndez, who were a symbolic obstacle to the construction of the army as a victim of the "subversive terrorist" violence. The crystallisation of the military memory in the figure of the victims places the focus on certain features of the officers while keeping silent other features with the aim to strengthen the idea that the military do not kill to "save the fatherland - but die for it" (Portelli, 2003).

The consequences of this shift towards the figure of military victims are many and conflicting, especially since the reactivation, in 2006, of the trials for crimes against humanity. With this new discourse, the Army intended to get out of the closed space involved by the corporate memory to go into the public arena with a realistic discourse and compete for the meanings of the past that were

materialised around the memory of the disappeared. However, the Army also intended to renew their damaged image with new justifications and reasoning about the actions carried out with the aim to suggest a strengthening of the military memory. By focusing on the figure of the officers killed by the armed organizations, we can construct a selection of facts, persons and periods and also hide, minimize and disguise others, particularly, we can erase from the horizon of their memories the events and the officers who carried out the coup d'état on March 24, 1976 and the crimes committed during the illegal repression.

Although the *Complete Memory* does not deny the existence of disappeared persons nor the actions of the army during the illegal repression, there is an equation effect similar to the so-called “two-demon theory”. It, therefore, equates officers killed by armed organizations with those who have disappeared and also equates insurgent actions committed by the armed organizations with the illegal and clandestine violence perpetrated by the State during the military dictatorship.

The *Complete Memory* replaces the triumphalist and glorifying account of the “**victory in the anti-subversive war**” with a dramatic account of the suffering and pain of the officers and their families as victims of a “**fratricidal war**”.

With notions such as “internal war”, “fratricidal war” or “war between Argentines”, the *Complete Memory* seeks to introduce an argumentative line that equates all victims and makes up for the suffering and violence. Unlike the

claiming speech widespread in the early years of democracy that intended to differentiate the “victors of the anti-subversive war” from the “subversives”, the *Complete Memory* places the focus on the human losses, unifying all the victims around its “common denominator”, that is suffering.

The *Complete Memory* erases from the memories of the military the actions carried out by the officers and the institution during the illegal repression, concealing and fading away the legal, political and moral responsibilities that are incumbent on the officers and the armed and security forces for the illegal repression. Therefore, it takes place a kind of transition in which the rule of “everybody” is replaced by the rule of “nobody”. In the words of Arendt (2007: 151) the saying of collective guilt that holds “where everybody is guilty, nobody is guilty” is superseded by another equally exculpatory one claiming: “where everybody is victim, nobody is guilty”. While the figure of guilt conceals the responsibilities by attributing universal complicity (Arendt, 2007), the collective victimization arouses feelings of solidarity and compassion with the aim of equalizing suffering as well as behaviour. Both help to exonerate officers at a moral and legal level, and the armed institutions at a political level.

Having said that, the *Complete Memory* bases its argument on traumatic events that, while documented and of true value, do not achieve any social or state recognition. Nevertheless, how is a memory that presents itself as “complete” and “overcoming” regarding other memories accused of being “partial and sectarian”? Memory is “complete” when it is based on the idea that “we are all victims”. In other words, it is connected to all Argentines through a common pain, to the dead, but also to their mothers, children, grandchildren, grandparents and siblings “from one side or the other”, confronted in the past for the violence, while currently confronted for political ideologies. The setting-up of a national community of victims is possible as long as the bonds of consanguinity between those “killed by the subversion” and their relatives are extended to the “other” victims and their relatives and, in this way, the “other” victims



are also recognised with the purpose of being acknowledged by other competing memories. Nevertheless, in accordance with the *Complete Memory* view, the distinguishing element between the two competing memories is the political actions carried out by the human rights organizations and their search for criminal prosecution of the military and police accused by the commission of crimes against humanity. The *Complete Memory* is placed beyond divisions, biases or disputes, i.e. beyond the politics and fights for memory, to bring all Argentines together in a “complete” memory of the recent past around “all victims”.

Over the past 35 years, the Army has experienced both a continue and changing line of thinking in its memory as a result of the negotiations and confrontations between the institution and a claiming view in response to the “fight against subversion” and the questioning of a society that demands answers for the crimes committed. Therefore, the military use the slogan *Complete Memory* and the memory of the officers killed by the armed organizations during the 70s to recall the recent past given the need to find a place in this adverse society, but also to maintain and recover their values and institutional traditions. The virtues of the good officer (the heroic officer) - whose symbolic weight is fundamental to the military ethos - are based on the martyrology of the officers who “died defending the fatherland from the subversion”. This shifting from the living to the dead, from the “combatants” to the “military victims”, reinforces the image of the Army as a victim of the violence during the 1970s and fades away its responsibility as the perpetrator of state and clandestine violence unparalleled in the history of Argentina. As a legacy for the future, for the military new generations, the act of remembering not only means hiding those responsible and their actions from their memories, but also erasing the responsibilities of the institution from the future interrogations and reflections on the past that they have received.



“Soldier, don’t apologize for defending the homeland” | V. Salvi

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