

BETWEEN THE VOICES OF THE STATE AND THE HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENT: NEVER AGAIN AND THE MEMORIES OF THE DISAPPEARED IN ARGENTINA

By Emilio Crenzel

National Council of Scientific Research (CONICET)
and University of Buenos Aires

This paper analyzes the *Nunca Más* (Never Again) report issued by the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP), created by constitutional President Raúl Alfonsín in 1983 to investigate the thousands of forced disappearances perpetrated in Argentina. *Nunca Más* provided a new interpretation of the country's recent violent past, which combined Alfonsín's intention to bring the perpetrators of political violence to trial with the humanitarian narrative forged by victims of the disappeared during the dictatorship. In doing so, the Report denounced the political repression, redefined the magnitude of the disappearances, and held the Armed Forces officially responsible for the human rights violations.

CONADEP's investigation and the *Nunca Más* report had a significant impact worldwide. As the first truth commission and report to expose human rights violations in the context of Latin America's democratization processes, governments and human rights organizations viewed them as models for exposing the political violence suffered by these societies in the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, 'truth commissions' and their reports became the main vehicles for the construction of historical truth in several countries across the continent—many of them even using the title "Never Again"—and the production of transitional justice policies.¹

But the case of Argentina differs from the rest in that the evidence collected by CONADEP was channeled into the justice system. In fact, the Report was the prosecution's key resource during the trial that led to the conviction of the military juntas. *Nunca Más* also became an unprecedented bestseller and an authoritative text on human rights violations. Translated into English, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese, and German, it had sold 503,830 copies by 2008 as well as being incorporated into school curricula to give new generations an enhanced understanding of this period.² *Nunca Más* has since become an object of study, with scholars initially examining its impact on transitional justice³ and then focusing on understanding certain aspects of the thinking on human rights violations it prompted.⁴ However, there has not yet been a comprehensive analysis of the Report that simultaneously accounts for both its interpretative and narrative aspects and analyses the internal tensions within it. Moreover, previous studies of *Nunca Más* have only considered it as the official interpretation of the period of political violence by the Alfonsín government. This paper offers a new and more complex perspective, showing how the Report combined the interpretation of political violence made by the Alfonsín administration with the narrative articulated by

human rights organizations to denounce crimes committed during the dictatorship. This conclusion enables hegemonic memories to be conceived as the result of the integration of different accounts of the past by actors who, from various positions of power and through struggles and negotiations, composed a shared interpretation and account of the past.

Disappearances and Political Violence

The systematic disappearance of persons following the March 1976 coup d'état signified two changes with respect to Argentina's intense history of political violence in the 20th century: it objectified a decision within the State to carry out a deliberate extermination, and it entailed the clandestine practice of political assassinations. CONADEP recorded 8,960 disappearances, 92% of which occurred during the dictatorship.⁵ However, such disappearances were not something completely new in the country's political history. As early as 1930, broad sectors of society accepted military interventionism in politics as something natural, and Catholic Fundamentalism strongly influenced cultural life.⁶ At the height of the Cold War and in the wake of the Cuban Revolution, Argentina's armed forces looked to France's experiences in Indochina and Algeria for inspiration and adopted the Doctrine of National Security, which saw 'the enemy' as potentially situated in any social sphere, and identified every conflict as an attack on national safety. Starting in the 1960s, allegations of political repression created support for a class-struggle of political activists as their comrades were imprisoned and murdered, which in turn vindicated their calls for the use of violence to change the social order.

While there is evidence of isolated cases before 1975, it was only after the constitutional government of María Estela Martínez de Perón authorized the armed forces to "execute any military operations necessary to neutralize and / or annihilate the actions of subversive elements" that forced disappearances became a regular practice: of the total number of disappearances, 8% occurred in 1975.⁷ After the coup, disappearances became the backbone of the anti-subversive war, with the military regime portraying the disappeared as guerrilla members who had either run away or died in combat, denying the military's responsibility for any disappearances, questioning their existence or justifying them as isolated "excesses" incurred as part of the "war against subversion." The allegations made by the families of the disappeared attracted international attention, and both Amnesty International, in 1976, and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, in 1979, visited the country after receiving thousands of reports. The dictatorship, however, was able to neutralize the dissemination of these reports and other similar accusations.⁸

The fact that disappearances involved both public and covert moments meant that they did not seem to create a coherent and completed sequence of events. Abductions generally occurred in front of witnesses, while captivity, torture, and murder were clandestine.⁹ This made it even slower and harder to piece together the sequence of events, to identify the State's responsibility in this practice and to come to terms—even for those reporting the crime—with the fact that the sequence ended in murder.¹⁰ At the same time, a new and homogeneous pattern emerged in the filing of the reports. Prior to the coup, the language used to denounce political repression had a revolutionary tone to it. During the dicta-

torship this language was replaced by the discourse of international human rights networks, which had been adopted by local human rights organizations and political exiles who established links with these networks in their efforts to report the crimes. This discourse was characterized by a humanitarian narrative that called for empathy with the victims as a moral imperative, placing the crimes outside history, privileging the factual description of the violations and the prisons as well as the accurate identification of the victims and the perpetrators. The disappeared were no longer presented as activists, but rather as individuals, each with a personal identity, described by means of basic information such as their age or sex, or comprehensive categories, like their occupation. This way of framing the identity of the disappeared emphasized their innocence and the indiscriminate nature of State violence.¹¹

Upon taking office in December 1983, President Raúl Alfonsín—candidate of the Radical Party—ordered the prosecution of both guerrilla leaders and the military juntas. This decision came to be known as the “theory of the two evils,” for it limited accountability for the country’s political violence to two leaderships, and explained State violence as a response to guerilla violence. It also established a convention that while those who issued the illegal orders to repress, and those who committed excesses in the fulfillment of the orders would be prosecuted, while those who had simply carried out the orders would not be held accountable. In other words, it presumed that the hierarchical structure of the military prevented them from disobeying.¹² Lastly, Alfonsín invited prominent civil society figures—including members of human rights organizations—to form CONADEP, mandating it to receive disappearance reports, refer them to the Judiciary, investigate the fate of the disappeared and issue a final report (National Executive Branch Order 187, 15 December 1983). CONADEP gathered and centralized all the reports filed in the country and abroad during the dictatorship, received thousands of new ones and referred them to the Judiciary, inspected the “Clandestine Detention Centers” where the disappeared were secretly held captive, and, in November 1984, published *Nunca Más*.

A New Look at the Political Violence: *Nunca Más*

Nunca Más begins by evoking an initial moment dominated by political violence caused by ideological extremism. No historical account of this violence is given, and neither is there a historical explanation of what caused it. *Nunca Más* does not present any institutional and economic causes for the 1976 coup and the changes the dictatorship produced in the country’s power relations.¹³ Far from looking for its roots in the country’s history, the coup is presented as a phenomenon transcending local boundaries.¹⁴ The report repudiates the violence prior to the coup but emphasizes the form that the State’s “response” took from 1976 on. It presents a sequence of violence that inverts the view held in the revolutionary imaginary—which justified “popular violence” as a response to “the system’s violence”—and validates the military’s claim that the State acted to combat the guerilla. However, at the same time it counters this perspective by establishing a qualitative difference between insurgent violence and the disappearances, and in so doing, it places the responsibility for the latter on the dictatorship. Similarly, it defines the practice of forced disappearances as a specific crime, while confirming the military regime’s definition of “terrorism.”¹⁵

In this way, *Nunca Más* reproduces the underlying assumption of Alfonsín's orders calling for the prosecution of the guerrilla and the military leaderships, an assumption that limited accountability for the exercise of political violence to these actors. By laying the responsibility for the disappearances at the feet of the military government, the Report defines its object: the actions of the armed forces following the 1976 coup. Although the body of the Report mentions cases of disappearance that occurred in 1975 under the María Estela Martínez de Perón administration, such cases are excluded from the prologue. Thus it proposes an institutional timeline for the violence, based on a democracy-dictatorship dichotomy which ignores the Peronist administration's political and moral responsibilities for the disappearances occurring before the coup. The disappearances are instead presented as a product of the dictatorial State. Society as a whole is depicted as assuming a dual position, which is nonetheless always innocent: it is the potential victim in a "witch hunt," or an external observer which only justifies the horror—when it justifies it at all—because of the prevailing terror.¹⁶ The prologue of *Nunca Más*, then, proposes a "we" that took no part in the exercise of violence or State terror, a community of citizens that did not participate in the confrontations that marked Argentine society.

Despite these assertions in the prologue, the body of the Report points to a shared responsibility between the perpetrators of the disappearances and other social groups. In particular, it highlights the Judiciary's complicity with the armed forces alongside the complicity of educational authorities, factory supervisors, managers and even companies.¹⁷ However, except in the case of the Judiciary, the responsibility of other actors is always presented in individual terms, it is never identified with the institution they represent. When describing the Catholic Church's role, for example, the Report emphasizes the institutional stance taken by the Episcopate, which "repeatedly condemned the repression" while it regrets "the participation of some members of the clergy who—with their presence, their silence, and even their justificatory words—consented to or validated those very actions".¹⁸ The Report says nothing about the institutional stance taken by political and labor leaders. Perhaps because of the particular profile of the "we" constructed by *Nunca Más*, the Report never raises the question of what made the horror possible. This absence is complemented by the lack of an attempt to explain mass violation of human rights under the dictatorship through references to some sort of continuity with the authoritarian practices of the second half of the 20th Century. Instead, the key question posed by *Nunca Más* is forward-looking: how can we prevent this from ever happening again? This hope rests on the continuity of the restored democratic order.¹⁹

Nunca Más describes a vast and random universe of potential victims, as the decision of who would be disappeared ultimately depended on the assessment of the victimizers. It notes that in their "semantic delusion," "anything was possible." Thus the Report presents the disappeared as a heterogeneous and inclusive group, although confined within certain boundaries. The group included those who fought against injustice, participated in labor struggles, opposed the dictatorship, or sought to change the social order, but also "the friends of these people, and the friends of their friends, plus others who were reported purely for reasons of personal revenge, or whose names were given under torture by other victims." In spite of this vastness, they all had one thing in common: they had nothing to do with guerrilla groups.²⁰ This boundary, announced in the prologue, is later reconfigured in the body of the

Report to include political activists. In the passages containing testimonies, most (64%) give only the names of the victims; 16% simply describe them as "individuals or human beings;" another 16% refers to them as the "kidnapped, detained, disappeared, captives, or prisoners;" and only 3% mention their activism, which is always unrelated to any insurgent activities.²¹ The Report restores the personal identity of the disappeared, by including their names and last names in the testimonies. If upon arriving at the clandestine detention centers they were stripped of their names, and identified with a number, *Nunca Más* rescues them from that state of forced anonymity by restoring their basic identification information. The Report also classifies the disappeared according to age and gender, revealing that they were predominantly young men. Almost 82% were between the ages of 16 and 35 and the vast majority (70%) was male. It also sorts them according to profession or occupation, highlighting the preponderance of "workers" (30%), "students" (21%), "employees" (18%), and "professionals" (11%). Lists are only given for three specific occupations: journalists, members of the clergy, and lawyers.²²

The broad scope of persons encompassed by the universe of the disappeared and the delimitation established with respect to their level of political commitment are also reflected in the body of the Report. The second chapter, entitled "Victims," includes subsections with titles such as "Disappearances of Children and Pregnant Women," "Adolescents," "The Family Victimized," and "The Repression Spared Neither the Disabled nor the Injured." This reinforces the image of vast diversity of the victims targeted for forced disappearance. By describing them in these terms, and taking up the narrative of human rights organizations, the Report locates the disappeared as innocent victims who were not involved with guerrilla groups and politics. Thus, its denunciation rests on the moral status of the disappeared, rather than on the universal and inalienable character of their rights. As *Nunca Más* restores the *humanity* of the disappeared, this restitution takes on the shape of an *abstract humanization*, presenting their generic lives, and blurring their conditions as concrete historical beings and their political lives, which are precisely those aspects that underscored the confrontations that divided Argentine society. Thus, the Report gives a *new political significance* to the identity of the disappeared with respect to the dictatorial government's perspective, which identified them as guerrilla members. At the same time, it renders them *apolitical* by presenting them as innocent victims and by effectively excluding their ideological commitments.

The identity of the perpetrators, on the other hand, is recorded in the testimonies, which list over four hundred names. In six out of ten cases, their membership of the police or the armed forces is made explicit. The Report shows the repressive coordination between the different dictatorships that ruled the Southern Cone, and, towards the end, it devotes a few pages to the explanation of the doctrine that guided these regimes. Because of this expository approach, political reasons are subordinated to a purely descriptive account of the violations, and emerge as their corollary, as opposed to their pre-condition. In spite of this, the Report defines the scope and severity of the abuses by declaring that the disappearances constituted a "crime against humanity," or amounted to "genocide," and it uses the metaphors of hell to describe the victims' experiences. In making these judgments, the Report highlights the violation of the religious and political principles upheld by the Western civilization, and the very humanity of the individual. This interpretation of the violations discredits, from within their own discourse, the military's claim

that they were justified in their actions by their defense of “Western and Christian” values.²³

Victims, Perpetrators and the Presentation of the Truth

Nunca Más seeks to restore the materiality of crimes that were repeatedly denied by their perpetrators. The facts are reconstructed through an expository strategy that combines the revelation of the existence of an institutionalized system of disappearances, and the description of the practices it involved. To this end, the account is structured so as to follow the same sequence of events as the disappearances: abduction, torture, clandestine captivity, and execution. Thus, the public and clandestine moments of the crime are joined in a single narrative. The veracity of the account is sustained by a realistic and detailed description that draws on testimonies from various actors and a range of primary sources. The Report constantly counters the explanations given by the military for the disappearances. It describes the abductions, locates them temporally and spatially, and details the different forms of violence inflicted on individuals. It establishes the involvement of both military and police officers in the “task forces” that perpetrated the disappearances, and exposes the material existence of the Clandestine Detention Centers, giving their location and characteristics. Thus, it restores the temporal and spatial coordinates of the facts, socializes the topography of horror, and lifts the cloak of secrecy and its resulting social normalization.

Nunca Más describes the systematic nature and multiple forms of torture, and confirms the existence of children and babies who were disappeared along with their parents or were born in captivity, the forging of fake identities for these children, and their appropriation by families of the military or the police. It also confirms the widespread physical elimination of the disappeared, which took on various forms of extermination, contradicting the military’s version by revealing that murders were often passed off as resulting from “inexistent confrontations or attempted escapes.”²⁴

Nunca Más also sheds light on a quantitative dimension of the repression that was still ignored in 1984. It estimates that the disappeared numbered at least 8,960, a figure that is, moreover, given provisionally; as the authors warn that “many disappearances have not been reported because the victims have no relatives, their families prefer not to report them, or they live far away from urban centers.”²⁵ It also reports the existence of at least 340 Clandestine Detention Centers, a figure that until then was unknown even to humanitarian organizations. This information reconstructs the magnitude and national scope of the clandestine system. Until then, there were only partial descriptions of some of the most notorious clandestine centers.²⁶

The fragmented character of the public and clandestine dimension of the crimes, the division of tasks among perpetrators, the use of “war names” to conceal their identities, the deliberate destruction of files and buildings... all of this posed a new challenge to the reconstruction of the crimes. Only a narration that combined testimonies with documents, and was constructed collectively and from inside would be able to recreate the actual events and their protagonists with enough emotional and argumentative strength. The Report exposes the truth about the disappearances by including multiple testimonies and documents from different sources. The narrative prioritizes the reports filed by survivors and relatives of the

disappeared. Of the approximately 379 testimonies included, 60% correspond to survivors, 15% to relatives of the disappeared, and 5% to friends or acquaintances.²⁷

CONADEP breaks each specific testimony down into testimonial fragments, to achieve a narrative that provides a general equivalency among the different cases, incorporating the particularities of each while showing their similarities. Relatives start their account of the disappearance with the abduction, describing its impact on themselves and their homes, and continue by telling of their fruitless search and the reports filed with the authorities. Many of the survivors reconstruct their experience from a corporeal memory, evoking sounds, smells, sights, or tactile impressions. They describe their abduction, the tortures they suffered, the spaces they were held captive in as well as the names of the perpetrators and their fellow captives. Again, the repeated references to places, dates, circumstances, and names in the testimonies establishes important frameworks for evocation,²⁸ restoring the reality and veracity of the crimes, and recomposing the spatiality and temporality of these events, as well as the identity of the victims. The fragments of testimonies, mediated by CONADEP, become an inter-subjective narrative of great emotional significance and complexity. These testimonies are an objectification of an extreme situation; they embody the violence suffered by the disappeared, which is reiterated in the Report, in an almost monotonous tone, as a single narrative. The iterative effect alters the individual character of the testimonies, leading them to break away from their singularity, thus opening up the possibility of their becoming part of a public memory.

The voices of the families and survivors occupy a position grounded in an otherness that is cognitively and emotionally committed and by no means neutral or lacking in values. In spite of this, and unlike the tone of the denunciations before the coup, no desire for revenge emerges, and neither are there any references to specific political commitments. Even the word “*compañero*” (mate), a term commonly employed by activists in Argentina to refer to one another, is only used by survivors to refer to fellow prisoners. The language that prevails in their testimonies is referential, devoid of digressions, and evoking the assaults suffered, without expressing feelings of hate or taking on an epic tone, all of which were typical of denunciations prior to the coup.²⁹

By becoming key pieces in the account, these testimonies introduce the narrative of denunciation prevailing among those affected by the disappearances, thus assigning a status of truth to that narrative by making it part of a text created by a State commission. This is not only markedly original with respect to the place that testimonies as a genre had traditionally occupied in Argentine narrative—as an expression of marginal or counter-cultural perspectives—but also as regards the specific treatment of these voices by the dictatorship, which categorically discredited them. In this way, *Nunca Más* installs the condition of victim as a symbolic “realm of memory.”³⁰ I use this concept because, in the face of a crime in which bodies and evidence were eliminated, the struggle of the relatives of the disappeared and the survivors have charged the condition of victimhood with intense emotional significance and have given it an indisputably symbolic and political legitimacy in Argentina. The testimonies of victims condense a portion of lost history and lived history; they operate as a bond between the past and the present, and between the dead and the living. Unlike other places of memory, the victims and their voices are like “remains” or “traces” that evoke, not their disappearance, but an incan-

descent memory. Their testimonies have gained an undisputed presence in public debates about the past, even monopolizing the authority of the word, prevailing over other interventions, such as those of academics, which are not grounded on the direct experience of suffering. Inevitably, appropriations of memory are now at the centre of many critical debates about Argentina's past and present.³¹ At the same time, the realistic style of the testimonies, the proliferation of details, and the assertive way in which they are structured exclude any suspicion of fiction or fantasy, instead investing them with a truthfulness that counters any skepticism that could be prompted by the revelation of such cruelty and horror. CONADEP also assumes the role of spokesperson for a testimony based on "what we have heard, read, and recorded in the course of the investigation," thus standing as a meta-witness, with the authority conferred by its official character.³²

However, *Nunca Más* not only incorporates these voices, it also includes the testimonies of the perpetrators. They do not emerge through the accusations of the victims and their relatives. Neither do they constitute an independent narrative, but rather perpetrator testimonies are integrated into a single narration, on equal footing with other voices. Although they account for only 2% of the testimonies, their words confirm the truthfulness of the testimonies of relatives and survivors.³³ The report also includes testimonies of people who were "involuntary witnesses" to one or more stages of the disappearances: neighbors that witnessed abductions, people who lived near the camps and heard gunshots or screams, or civilians that helped materialize the disappearances, like a group of morgue workers who participated in clandestine burials.³⁴

The variety of statements thus constitute a new product within 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 others. This chorus presents a series of images whose structure would be unintelligible without its parts, but whose force transcends the sum of the parts, achieving a unitary representation of the disappearances. This choral game reveals the systematic nature of the disappearances and the fact that they were a collective process that took on national proportions, and instills the notion that what happened was in no way due to the reasons adduced by the military, or to specific or random events, but that it was part of an atrocious, widespread, and concealed "normality."

The Report also presents other forms of validating the facts, which confirm and complement the testimonies. For instance, it incorporates scientific knowledge, which possesses a social validation and legitimacy that is independent of the facts, and by documenting the narrative, it ratifies the veracity of direct experience. This knowledge is contributed by different professionals: architects who accompanied the survivors in the inspection of the clandestine centers and mapped them out; photographers who documented these inspections; and lawyers who organized the evidence. The body of knowledge is also contributed indirectly by the inclusion of charts commonly used in scientific research; and it is present through the use of a computerized system used to record the cases, and physiognomy software to identify the abducted children, through genetic tests to determine kinship, or forensic anthropology techniques used to identify remains. The international science institutions that are cited in the text as validating the use of these techniques further strengthen their legitimacy.³⁵ Truthfulness is also established through the inclusion of data from military sources. The documents, such as military draft records, refute the military's claims that conscripts reported as disappeared had actually escaped

or deserted. Others reveal instructions issued by the military to crush labor demonstrations, censor the press or simply order abductions. These are complemented with statements from military commanders justifying their actions or denying the existence of the disappeared, which are later contrasted with the evidence gathered to expose their fallacy.³⁶

Lastly, CONADEP participates directly in ascribing truth to the narrative. On the one hand, its voice operates as a prologue to the testimonies, and mediates them without resorting to artifices. In general, it is assertive in its descriptions, but at the same time, if certain events appear doubtful, it qualifies the description by observing that it is based on indications or conjectures. Through conclusive assertions and rhetorical questions it establishes a relationship with the reader, promising that it will claim nothing for which it has no proof, and that it will allow for consideration of the reader's doubts with respect to the events. It also seeks to validate the narrative by presenting a detailed account of its work, the interviews it conducted, the visits to clandestine centers, cemeteries, morgues, and hospitals, the trips it made to gather reports, and the cases it brought before the courts. This link between the construction of truth and the legal evidence is evidenced throughout the text with the presentation of testimonies and documents accompanied by a file number. Through the articulation of the voices of the State and the human rights movement, *Nunca Más* offers a new "emblematic memory" of the past marked by political violence. The notion of "emblematic memory" refers to configurations which provide interpretative meaning to reflect on and evoke the past, integrating personal memories and concrete experiences, and which, backed by legitimate spokespersons, resonate in the public sphere.³⁷ In presenting, through testimonies and documents, the stages involved in the disappearances, and in describing them in detail, revealing the systematic nature of their practice, *Nunca Más* becomes an integrated narration that debunks the interpretative monopoly exercised until then by the perpetrators of the disappearances.

The Judicial Perspective and the Responsibilities

In *Nunca Más*, CONADEP clarifies that its mandate did not include determining criminal responsibilities, but the Report allows for two different readings in this respect. On the one hand, it establishes the responsibilities of the military juntas in the planning of these crimes. On the other, it highlights that,

anyone within the armed forces and the security forces showing any sign of discrepancy with the methods used to detain and eliminate individuals was brutally punished (...), any attempt to escape the repressive structure, internally referred to as the 'blood pact,' could mean persecution, and even elimination.³⁸

These considerations might imply that the Report reflects the distinction supported by President Alfonsín regarding the various levels of responsibility. That approach suffered a serious blow in the February 1984 Senate debate, when legislators called for the authors of "atrocious and abhorrent actions" to be excluded from the exemption of due obedience.³⁹ However, *Nunca Más* challenges the official distinction, which limited the bringing of criminal action against perpetrators to those who had committed excesses, by warning that "the cases transcribed are not considered excesses, for there was no such thing, if we understand excesses to

mean the occurrence of isolated and especially abhorrent actions (...), because the abhorrent was a common and widespread practice, and the 'especially atrocious actions number in the thousands.' They are the 'normal' actions." With this very assertion, it renders the Senate's amendment meaningless, and it further strengthens this view by stating that it is "essential to carry out legal inquiries to determine how the task forces were integrated in the repressive structure," thereby extending legal action to include the middle and lower ranks of the armed forces, which the government sought to exclude.⁴⁰ *Nunca Más* thus favors those who demanded that a wider range of perpetrators be held responsible, opposing the official strategy of limiting legal action under the theory of due obedience.⁴¹

Receptions and Interpretations of *Nunca Más*

On its publication in 1984, *Nunca Más* became an immediate bestseller. Initially, it was considered in light of its efficiency in the prosecution of the perpetrators, as the trial of the military juntas began in April 1985. CONADEP provided the courts with the body of evidence it had gathered, which the prosecution used to make its case against the juntas. The prosecutor applied the same narrative strategy as the Report, even closing his final arguments with the words "*Nunca Más*." However, while most human rights organizations saw *Nunca Más* as the legal evidence that made it possible to convict the members of the military juntas and hundreds of perpetrators, for *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, *Nunca Más* contained a "limited and biased selection" of testimonies, and by not including a list of repressors, their crimes were left unpunished. The sectors that supported the military considered that the Report was based on testimonies of affected parties, and thus there was no "control over their veracity," and also claimed that it sought to "convict the armed forces before they were even tried," and failed to mention that the repression had originated under the government of María Estela Martínez de Perón.⁴²

In the mid 1990s, after the impunity laws blocked the possibility of continuing with the trials, *Nunca Más* was no longer regarded as a legal instrument and came to be seen as a place of memory and a vehicle for its transmission. As such, the Report was included in school curricula and used by different social groups which edited the original Report to incorporate their own interpretations of the country's political violence. These interpretations, in short, attributed the abuses to a certain defense of Christian values, connected them with the economic order advocated by the dictatorship, and pointed to the existence of economic and political continuities between the dictatorship and democracy, all of which were absent from the original *Nunca Más* or were even in stark opposition to it.⁴³ Such interpretations emerged again in 2006, but this time from an official perspective. That year, on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the military coup, *Nunca Más* was reprinted with a new prologue by the National Secretary of Human Rights. The new prologue is critical of the explanation for the political violence given in the original prologue and calls for *Never Again* not only for the crimes, but also for social injustice.⁴⁴ However, the new prologue fails to place the country's past political violence in historical context. It does not establish civil and political responsibilities for the violence. It excludes guerilla and political activists from the universe of the disappeared and speaks of the thirty-year struggle of the "people" for "truth, justice, and memory," thus conveying an image that was

the exact opposite of the conflict-free and homogeneous society that CONADEP proposed for Argentina.

Conclusions

This essay has shown how *Nunca Más* proposed a new reading of Argentina's recent past of political violence, a reading very different to both the revolutionary narrative prevailing before the coup, and the dictatorship's justification or denial of their crimes. This foundational reading combined the Alfonsín administration's objective of attributing responsibilities for the political violence, on the one hand, with the humanitarian narrative forged during the dictatorship to report human rights violations, on the other. The Report posited the disappearances as a violation of Western religious and political principles, presented the disappeared as subjects of the law, condemned violence as a way of solving political conflicts and pointed to the democracy as the guarantee for preventing the horror from being repeated. In this way, it placed the past within the general principles of the political order that was restored in 1983. However, it emphasized the lack of connection of the disappeared with insurgent movements and politics in general, inferring from this disconnection the condition of innocent victims of the disappeared. This aspect exposes the limitations that the foundational narrative of restored democracy has for the universal defense of civil and political rights. In line with the Presidential orders to prosecute both guerrilla and military heads, *Nunca Más* established a periodization of the political violence, positing insurgent violence as a precedent to State violence and the disappearances as the exclusive responsibility of the dictatorship, but omitting the responsibilities of political and civil society in either. Lastly, it privileged the inclusion of testimonies of relatives and survivors in its narrative, as a way of reconstructing the materiality of the disappearances. Thus, it officially established the validity of the humanitarian narrative forged by these actors during the dictatorship, placing it within a new reading of the past.

The strength of the constellation of meaning structured by the Report is revealed through three key dimensions. Firstly, before *Nunca Más*, the dictatorship's perspective had not been challenged by an integrated narrative with emotional, argumentative and symbolic strength, backed by the weight of testimonies and official accounts. Through an unprecedented success in sales and numerous presentations throughout the country, the Report installed a new official truth, a shared sense and a body of knowledge of the nature, dimensions, characteristics and perpetrators of the disappearances, countering the military's denial, justification, and relativization of these crimes. Secondly, *Nunca Más* would immediately turn into an instrument of justice by becoming the key input of evidence in the 1985 trials against the military juntas. Also, more recently, in 2006 and 2007, in trials against perpetrators such as police officer Miguel Etchecolatz and clergyman Christian Von Wernich, the body of evidence gathered by CONADEP was used to lay criminal charges. Thirdly, the Report would become the canonic reference for the collective memory of the disappearances through its incorporation into school curricula. In this way, *Nunca Más* became a vehicle for establishing an ethical and intergenerational commitment regarding Argentina's past political violence and dictatorship. In this context, the Report was taken up by social groups and a new government, which reproduced it literally but at the same time, included their own readings of this past, often in contradiction with the original inter-

pretation of the Report. Thus, the changes in interpretations and uses of *Nunca Más* reveal the transformations in the way political violence and the dictatorship are represented in Argentina's social memory. The continuities evidence the difficulties that, even twenty years after the first publication of *Never Again*, hinder Argentine society's capacity to reflect critically on its past and to include it in a historical account; as well as registering the concrete humanity of the victims of disappearances while affirming the universal nature of human rights.

Buenos Aires, Argentina

ENDNOTES

1. Kathryn Sikkink, "From Pariah State to Global Protagonist: Argentina and the Struggle for International Human Rights," *Latin American Politics and Society* 50 (2008): 1-29.
2. Emilio Crenzel, *La historia política del Nunca Más. La memoria de las desapariciones en Argentina*, (Buenos Aires, 2008).
3. Priscilla Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths. Confronting State Terror and Atrocity*, (New York, 2001); Alexandra Barahona de Brito, "Truth, Justice, Memory and Democratization in the Southern Cone," Paloma Aguilar et al eds., *The Politics of Memory: Three Decades of Transitional Truth and Justice* (Oxford and New York: 2001): 119-160; Greg Grandin, "The Instruction of Great Catastrophe: Truth Commissions, National History, and State Formation in Argentina, Chile and Guatemala," *American Historical Review* 110 (2005): 46-67.
4. Teresa Basile, "Aproximaciones al 'testimonio sobre la desaparición de personas' durante la dictadura militar y la democracia argentines," *Cuadernos Angers 2* (1989): 45-63; Inés González Bombal, "Nunca Más. El juicio más allá de los estrados," Carlos Acuña et al eds., *Juicio, castigos y memorias. Derechos Humanos y justicia en la política Argentina* (Buenos Aires, 1995): 193-216; Hugo Vezzetti, *Pasado y presente. Guerra, dictadura y sociedad en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: 2002).
5. Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (CONADEP), *Nunca Más. Informe de la Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas*, (Buenos Aires, 1984).
6. Luis Romero, *Breve historia contemporánea de la Argentina* (Buenos Aires, 2001).
7. Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, *Nunca Más*.
8. Amnesty International, *Informe de una misión de Amnistía Internacional a la República Argentina* (Barcelona, 1977); Inter American Commission on Human Rights, *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Argentina* (Washington, 1980).
9. Emilio Mignone, *Derechos humanos y sociedad: el caso argentino* (Buenos Aires, 1991), 67-68.
10. Author's interview with Graciela Fernández Mejjide, Human Rights Permanent Assembly member and CONADEP Deposition Secretary, Buenos Aires, 26 August 2004; Inés Rojkind, "La revista controversia: Reflexión y polémica entre los argentinos exiliados en México," Pablo Yankelevich, ed., *Represión y destierro. Itinerarios del exilio argentino* (La Plata, 2004), 239-243.
11. Laqueur, Thomas. "Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative," *The New Cultural History*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989): 176-204.
12. National Executive Branch Orders 157-58, 13 December 1983.
13. Greg Grandin, "The Instruction of Great Catastrophe," 8-9.

14. Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, *Nunca Más*, 7.

15. "...The Armed Forces responded to the crimes committed by terrorists with a terrorism that was far worse than the one they combated, and after 24 March 1976 they drew on the power and impunity afforded by an absolute State, misusing it to abduct, torture, and kill thousands of human beings." (CONADEP 1984, 7). "We have been accused of partiality, for denouncing only one side of the tragic events that shook our nation in recent years, and of remaining silent with respect to the terrorism prior to March 1976, or even of excusing it. On the contrary, our Commission has always repudiated that terror, and we are glad to have this opportunity to do so again. It was not our task to look into the crimes committed by those terrorists, but simply to investigate the fate of the disappeared, whoever they were and regardless of which side of the violence they were on. None of the relatives of the victims of that earlier terror approached us, because those victims were killed, rather than 'disappeared.' Also, Argentines have had access to numerous television programs, countless newspaper and magazine accounts, and even an entire book published by the military government, where those acts of terrorism were listed, described, and condemned, in minute detail." (CONADEP 1984, 10-1)

16. "A feeling of complete vulnerability spread across Argentine society, coupled with the fear that anyone, however innocent, might fall victim to the endless witch-hunt. Some people reacted with alarm. Others tended, consciously or unconsciously, to justify the horror. 'They must've done something,' they would whisper, as though trying to propitiate formidable and inscrutable gods, regarding the children or parents of the disappeared as plague-bearers." (CONADEP 1984, 9).

17. Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, *Nunca Más*, 379 and 397.

18. Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, *Nunca Más*, 259.

19. Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, *Nunca Más*, 9 and 15.

20. Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, *Nunca Más*, 9 and 10.

21. Juan Corralini et al., *Políticas de memoria: El Nunca Más*, 2003, unpublished.

22. Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, *Nunca Más*, 294-6 and 375.

23. Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, *Nunca Más*, 7, 8, 9, 11, 15, 247, 347-9.

24. Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, *Nunca Más*, 63, 137, 224-226, 234-246, 303, and 480.

25. Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, *Nunca Más*, 293 and 479.

26. Eduardo Duhalde, *El Estado terrorista argentino* (Buenos Aires, 1983), 96-102 and 163-6.

27. Juan Corralini et al., *Políticas de memoria*.

28. Maurice Halbwachs, *Los marcos sociales de la memoria* (Barcelona, 2004).

29. Teresa Basile, "Aproximaciones al 'testimonio sobre la desaparición de personas,'" 48.

30. Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French past* (New York, 1998).

31. For a more detailed explanation of the concept of the place of memory in recent history, see Al-lier Montaña, Eugenia, "Lugar de memoria: ¿un concepto para el análisis de las luchas memoriales? El caso de Uruguay y su pasado reciente." *Cuadernos del CLACHE* 96-97 (2008): 87-109. For an analysis with respect to the category of victim in Argentina, see Jelin, Elizabeth, "La política de la memoria: el movimiento de Derechos Humanos y la construcción de la democracia en Argentina." *Juicio, castigos y memorias. Derechos Humanos y justicia en la política Argentina*, 101-146.

32. Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, *Nunca Más*, 7, 160, and 161.

33. Juan Corralini et al., *Políticas de memoria*.
34. Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, *Nunca Más*, 167, 225, 244, 245, and 316.
35. Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, *Nunca Más*, 25, 29, 184, 293-298, 300, and 322.
36. Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, *Nunca Más*, 55, 275-9, 361-7, 474-5.
37. Steve Stern, *Remembering Pinochet's Chile. On the eve of London 1998* (Los Angeles: 2004).
38. Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, *Nunca Más*, 8, 253-259, and 300.
39. Senate Minutes, 9 February 1984, 318.
40. Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, *Nunca Más*, 15, 16, 223, 256, and 481.
41. Author's interviews with Alberto Mansur, CONADEP Legal Affairs Secretary, Eduardo Rabossi, CONADEP member, and Graciela Fernández Meijide, Deposition Secretary, Buenos Aires, 1 September, 19 August, and 20 October 2004, respectively.
42. Emilio Crenzel, *La historia política del Nunca Más*, 134-135.
43. Emilio Crenzel, *La historia política del Nunca Más*, 178-179.
44. "It is unacceptable to try to justify state terrorism as the result of the violent interaction of two opposing sides, as if symmetry could be established to justify the actions of individuals amidst a departure from the inherent purposes of the nation and the state, which cannot be renounced."... "The *Never Again* proclaimed by the Argentine state and by its society must be directed both to the crimes of state terrorism forced disappearances, seizing of children, assassinations and tortured to social injustices, which are an affront to human dignity." (CONADEP 2006, 8-9)