

The Terrorist State and its Margins: The Repressive Experience of Subordinate Personnel in the Armed and Security Forces in Operation Independence, Tucumán, Argentina, 1975-1977

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Abstract: In this article, I will analyse a seldom-heard voice in the recent history of the Southern Cone: testimonies from soldiers and former gendarmes who witnessed state crimes and, years later, found the courage to share their experiences in court. This is an unusual approach in Argentina to the study of perpetrators, which so far has prioritised public statements, official memories, and the experiences of career personnel in the Armed Forces. Instead, this research aligns with those works that seek to (re)think political disappearance from the margins and focuses on Operation Independence (*Operativo Independencia*), a military campaign carried out between 1975 and 1977 in the province of Tucumán. During this Operation, an institutional policy of forced disappearance of persons and of clandestine detention centres was put into practice for the first time; after the military government took power on March 24, 1976, it would spread to the rest of the country. I will examine an intermediate category between victims and perpetrators, namely the low-ranking personnel that occupied auxiliary functions, and argue that such stories from the margins of the terrorist State will allow us to access key aspects of the use of violence in that military campaign.

Keywords: memory, terrorist state, Tucumán, Argentina, perpetrators

Introduction

In 2008, when I began an investigation into conscripts who participated in Operation Independence, I remember that several human rights activists openly questioned my topic: ‘How can you study those who were killing our comrades?’. At that moment, I tried to explain to them that I considered those fulfilling their mandatory military service not to be genocidal perpetrators (*genocidas*) and perpetrators of crimes against humanity as they were often called after the last dictatorship in Argentina (1976-1983). Positioned in an ambiguous space between civilians and military, these soldiers - aged

between 18 and 20 - had been forced¹ to go to the southern region of Tucumán to combat a rural guerrilla front of the Revolutionary Workers' Party - People's Revolutionary Army or PRT-ERP (*Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores-Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo*). If they refused, they risked being considered deserters, facing harsh punishments that could even cost them their lives.²

The testimonies of these former soldiers resemble what the sociologist Michael Pollak has called 'subterranean memories':

Opposing the most official of collective memories, national memory, these memories are transmitted [orally] within the framework of the family, associations, networks of affective and/or political sociability. These prohibited memories(...), unspeakable(...), or shameful memories (...), are zealously guarded within informal communication structures and go unnoticed by society at large. (...) The boundary that separates what can be said from what cannot be said, what can be confessed from what cannot be confessed, separates, in our examples, an underground collective memory of the dominated civil society or specific groups, from an organized collective memory that reflects the image that a majority society or the State wishes to transmit and impose.³

These private memories about military service (expressed by former soldiers in their everyday lives and informal spaces) have remained in the shadows and under tension due to a public, official, and national memory of the recent dictatorial past. Added to this was the strong indoctrination they suffered from their superiors, who were career officers, to maintain a strict silence about the military operations they had witnessed.

To break this widespread silence, in 2010, the Secretary of Human Rights launched the advertising campaign 'Military service is no longer mandatory; neither is silence'. The spot added, 'Perhaps you saw things you would have preferred not to see,' and encouraged them to contribute their testimony to the search for the truth about state terrorism.

- 1 Compulsory military service was mandated by law from 1902 until President Carlos Menem abolished it in 1994, following the murder of soldier Omar Carrasco in Zapala. From that moment onwards, a voluntary system was adopted.
- 2 There were over one hundred conscripts who went missing during the last Argentine dictatorship, and they were concealed by the authorities under the pretext of being deserters, fifteen of whom in Operation Independence. See: José Luis D'Andrea Mohr, *El escuadrón perdido* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1998).
- 3 Michael Pollak, *Memoria, olvido, silencio* (La Plata: Al Margen, 2006), p. 24 (my translation).

This decision coincided with the policy of the Public Prosecutor's Office not to charge ex-soldiers but, instead, to invite them to testify as witnesses in trials for crimes against humanity. This memory policy, following the reopening of trials for crimes against humanity in 2006, undoubtedly influenced the social conditions for listening to the soldiers' experiences. They were able to speak in court without the risk of being prosecuted, unlike the majority of the military career personnel.

All of this aligned with my initial working hypothesis: 'having been there' did not necessarily imply being socially and/or legally considered a perpetrator. Furthermore, the frameworks for listening have changed since 1983, although they did not break the pact of silence that prevailed among the career personnel, with some exceptions, such as the case of the two gendarmes that will be analysed later.

Based on my expertise in studying the memories of conscripts, I was invited to participate in a project on the public statements of perpetrators, led by Claudia Feld and Valentina Salvi. I must admit that once again, I focused on a case that was hard to situate in the realm of perpetration. In relation to the Operation Independence, there were two former gendarmes, Omar Torres and Antonio Cruz, who since the return of democracy had provided testimonies about human rights violations committed in Tucumán Province. Neither the justice system in 1985 nor the human rights movement considered them perpetrators due to the position from which they spoke: they presented themselves as guards who had merely witnessed the events, they were of lower rank, and had no possibility of preventing or reporting criminal acts during the dictatorship.⁴

In what follows, I will analyse a series of testimonies from former soldiers and gendarmes deployed to Operation Independence, a counterinsurgency campaign conducted between February 1975 and December 1977 in Tucumán, a province located in northwestern Argentina. It was there that a state policy of forced disappearances was first implemented, and the initial clandestine detention centers operated. This modality would later spread throughout the country after the military government took over on March 24, 1976.⁵

After the repressive actions carried out by the Federal Police and the Army in 1974, on February 9, 1975, the military authorities deployed a large-scale repressive operation in Tucumán Province with the ex-

4 Carolina Varsky, 'El testimonio como prueba en procesos penales por delitos de lesa humanidad', in *Hacer justicia*, ed. by CELS (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2011), pp. 49-77 (p. 68).

5 Pilar Calveiro, *Poder y desaparición* (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 1998).

PLICIT goal of destroying the Ramón Rosa Jiménez Mountain Company, a rural guerrilla front created a year earlier by the PRT-ERP, one of the main left-wing political-military organizations operating in Argentina since 1970.⁶ On February 5, 1975, Argentine president María Estela Martínez de Perón ordered that the 'General Command of the Army shall proceed to execute the necessary military operations to neutralise and/or annihilate the actions of subversive elements operating in the province of Tucumán.⁷ This decree marked an operational zone in the so-called fight against subversion, which encompassed both the southern region of the province and its capital, San Miguel de Tucumán. Thousands of soldiers, officers, and non-commissioned officers from the Army across the country were mobilized, and the other Armed Forces (Navy and Air Force) and Security Forces (Gendarmerie, Coast Guard, and Police) were ordered to subordinate themselves to the Army's operational command. During this initial stage, Adel Vilas, commander of the V Infantry Brigade based in Tucumán Province, led the operations. Vilas was replaced in December 1975 by General Antonio Domingo Bussi.

About Operation Independence, we have more documentation and testimonies than of any other repressive mission conducted in Argentina. This may be due to the fact that Operation Independence was staged and presented as a conventional theater of operations, unlike the situation in the clandestine centers where thousands of detainees-disappeared were tortured and remained captive. From February 1975 onwards and throughout the entire period of the dictatorship, the military authorities constructed the Tucumán jungle as the space where they waged decisive battle in the so-called fight against subversion.⁸

Unlike these official memories, this article will add a rarely heard voice in the recent history of the Southern Cone: unpublished testimonies of conscript soldiers who participated in the repression and gendarmes who witnessed state crimes and who, years later, dared to share their experiences in court. Between 2009 and 2019, I conducted archi-

6 Vera Carnovale, *Los combatientes* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2011).

7 Secret National Executive Power Decree No. 261, dated 2/5/1975. In: *Boletín Oficial de la República Argentina*, 4-9- 2013, p. 5.

8 See *Círculo Militar, Homenaje del Círculo Militar a los camaradas caídos en la Lucha contra la Subversión* (Buenos Aires: Círculo Militar, 1976); Gobierno de Tucumán, *Tucumán, cuna de la independencia, sepulcro de la subversión* (Tucumán: PEN de Tucumán, 1977); Adel Vilas, *Tucumán: el hecho histórico* (Buenos Aires: mimeograph, 1977); FAMUS, *Operación Independencia* (Buenos Aires: FAMUS, 1988); Eusebio González Breard, *La guerrilla en Tucumán* (Buenos Aires: Círculo Militar, 1999); José Luis Bussi, *Mi padre, el General. Biografía de Antonio Domingo Bussi* (Tucumán: author's edition, 2011).

val work and in-depth interviews as part of nine anthropological field trips during which I inquired about the experiences of Operation Independence: six trips to the province of Tucumán and three to the Buenos Aires metropolitan area. From the findings of this long-term research, I have selected for this article those documentary and ethnographic materials that I consider to be most illuminating as a contribution to the broader field of perpetrator studies. All interviews were conducted in Spanish and translated for the purposes of this publication. The same is true of the archival documents. This article contributes to efforts in the field to highlight the complexity of mass crimes and the way in which the figure of the perpetrator is socially constructed and politicized,⁹ as well as the epistemological, ethical and emotional challenges involved in this type of research.¹⁰

This is not the usual approach in Argentina to the study of perpetrators, which has privileged public statements,¹¹ official memories,¹² and the experiences of career personnel in the Armed Forces.¹³ We also have ethnographies on the trials of crimes against humanity, which analyse the activism of relatives of perpetrators,¹⁴ and the differences and similarities in the emotional and moral experience of justice between the victims of the last dictatorship and human rights activists, on the one hand, and the accused military and their relatives, on the other hand.¹⁵ By highlighting the blurred boundaries of the victim/perpetrator dichotomy, this article will examine an intermediate category which has been much less explored: the low-ranking personnel that had served

9 *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020).

10 Antonius C. G. M. Robben and Alexander Laban Hinton, *Perpetrators: Encountering Humanity's Dark Side* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023).

11 Claudia Feld and Valentina Salvi, *Las voces de la represión. Declaraciones de perpetradores de la dictadura argentina* (Buenos Aires: Miño y Dávila, 2019).

12 Antonius C. G. M. Robben, *Pegar donde más duele. Violencia política y trauma social en Argentina* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 2008); Máximo Badaró, *Militares o ciudadanos. La formación de los oficiales del Ejército Argentino* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2009); Valentina Salvi, *De vencedores a víctimas. Memorias militares sobre el pasado reciente en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2012).

13 See also *Represión estatal y violencia paraestatal en la historia reciente argentina*, ed. by Gabriela Águila and others (La Plata: FAHCE, 2016); *La represión como política de Estado*, ed. by Gabriela Águila and others (Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi, 2020).

14 Analía Goldentul, "Doblegar la bronca y aprender". Activismo de la agrupación Hijos y Nietos de Presos Políticos en un entramado político-cultural de los derechos humanos en disputa (2008-2017) (unpublished PhD thesis, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 2021).

15 Eva van Roekel, *Phenomenal Justice: Violence and Morality in Argentina* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020).

in auxiliary roles in the repressive apparatus —guards at the premises, drivers, or those who provided logistic support in operations—but who were at the same time potential victims if they helped captives or were labeled as collaborators of these so-called subversives.¹⁶ My research aligns with those works that seek to (re)think political disappearance ‘from the edges’, from those subjects and memories less dominant, ‘from the “unspeakable”’.¹⁷

How do the experiences of conscript soldiers studied in this article differ from those of the career officers who were convicted of crimes against humanity? The majority of the military memories of Operation Independence are characterized by pride, vindication, and a strict silence about the crimes. Here, I will analyse narratives that explicitly refer to and discuss extreme acts of state violence. First, I will address the testimony of two former conscripts who testified in court about crimes committed in Tucumán Province. Next, I will examine the accusations raised in 1984 by the former gendarmes Cruz and Torres, two of the few members of the Security Forces who recounted their experiences during that military campaign. From 1983 onwards, the two gendarmes not only became key witnesses in the judicial proceedings but also received an explicit assurance from the prosecutor that their valuable information would not be held against them. Their legal immunity was also intended to encourage repentant others to come forward, but nobody did, which makes their testimony unique.

Soldiers before Justice

Since the famous Trial of the Military Juntas (1985) that ruled the last Argentine dictatorship,¹⁸ most of the witness testimonies have come from survivors of clandestine detention centers and relatives of the disappeared. With the reopening of criminal proceedings, when the

16 See Santiago Garaño, ‘Entre el cuartel y el monte. Soldados, militantes y militares durante el Operativo Independencia (Tucumán, 1975-1977)’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 2012).

17 Mariana Tello ‘Historias de (des)aparecidos. Un abordaje antropológico sobre los fantasmas en torno a los lugares donde se ejerció la represión’, *EAS*, 1 (2016), 33-49, (p. 20) <https://static.ides.org.ar/archivo/cas/2016/07/EAS_V1N1NS_04Al_tel.pdf> [accessed 10 July 2023].

18 On December 9, 1985, the *Cámara Nacional de Apelaciones en lo Criminal y Correccional Federal de la Capital Federal* [Federal Chamber of Appeals in Criminal and Correctional Matters] of Buenos Aires delivered its verdict in this trial, confirming that the Juntas executed a systematic plan of political extermination, which led to the testimony of thousands of witnesses.

so-called impunity laws were declared unconstitutional in 2005,¹⁹ some former conscript soldiers who had served in the mandatory military service began testifying in court.

Regarding the events in Tucumán Province, one of the most widely publicized testimonies in the media was that of former conscript Domingo Jerez, given in 2008. Between 1976 and 1977, he had been assigned to the 19th Infantry Regiment and later to the Service Company as a driver. Initially, he was taken to the military base located in a former workshop at the Santa Lucía Sugar Mill, one of the main mills functioning in southern Tucumán. His role as a driver allowed him to become familiar with the repressive network that connected the various clandestine detention centers during Operation Independence. For example, he learned about a clandestine center that operated at the Armory Company (Compañía de Arsenales) to which detainees were often brought, even though he could not enter the place.

Jerez's account confirms what was already known about the actions of the Army's death squads, namely that they operated at night, and comprised an elite group of certain officers and non-commissioned officers. Jerez stated, 'before carrying out the kidnappings, they would drink whisky in such a way that they were intoxicated. Upon arriving at a residence, they broke down the doors, entered, took the people outside, and took them detained to the base' [antes de ir a realizar los secuestros, tomaban whisky de tal manera que iban alcoholizados. Al llegar a un domicilio rompían las puertas, entraban, sacaban a la gente y la llevaban detenida a la Base].²⁰ Through a small opening in a door, he witnessed how General Antonio Domingo Bussi beat two people to death, accusing them of smuggling cigarettes. The military power was staged, dramatized, and the soldiers were a privileged audience witnessing the performance of the role of their Commander in the repression. Those serving in the military could see, even if only through a small opening, as Foucault and Agamben have argued, the exercise of

19 Starting with the enactment of the Final Stop (1986) and Due Obedience (1987) laws, and the presidential pardons that benefited convicted military personnel and former guerrilla combatants in 1989 and 1990, the path of criminal prosecution of those responsible for crimes against humanity was closed. These laws were declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of Justice in 2005, which marked the beginning of a new cycle of criminal prosecution. In: Leonardo Filippini, 'La persecución penal en la búsqueda de justicia', in *Hacer justicia*, ed. by CELS (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2011), pp. 19-47.

20 Testimony of Jerez, on October 1, 2008, in the case 'Amid José Gabriel s/ Privación ilegítima de la libertad y otros delitos'. Expte. N° 400.897/08, p. 2, Federal Prosecutor's Office No. 1 of Tucumán.

sovereign power over life and death by the highest authority responsible for Operation Independence. On another occasion, Jerez witnessed the execution of two individuals. Soldiers were forced by their superiors to dig a grave, dispose of the bodies, set them on fire, cover them with dirt, and wash away the bloodstains remaining in the truck. 'Because of these events, the military told the conscripts not to tell anyone what was happening when they were on leave because it was dangerous' [Por estos hechos, los militares les decían a los conscriptos que cuando salgan de franco no cuenten a nadie lo que pasaba porque era peligroso], explained the former soldier Domingo Jerez.²¹ He also recalled how the forms of repression had a clear gendered/sexualized dimension: Jerez had witnessed the abduction and torture of a pregnant woman in her thirties, and he learned that a non-commissioned officer had raped a woman in her home.

In the trial of the crimes committed in Operation Independence, which took place between 2016 and 2017, another detailed testimony was heard from the former conscript Rubén Juárez who had completed his military service in 1975 at the Military Hospital of Tucumán. As an ambulance driver, he had transported dead and injured individuals on several occasions from the health post located in the town of Famaillá to the capital San Miguel de Tucumán. In that town were located the Tactical Advance Command (Comando Táctico de Avanzada) of Operation Independence and La Escuelita, known as the first clandestine detention centre to operate in Argentina.²² Similarly to the previous case of Domingo Jerez, the military authorities encouraged strict secrecy: 'we were absolutely prohibited from saying anything about those people [nos tenían prohibidísimo abrir la boca con esa gente].'²³

As we have seen in Jerez's account, the former soldier could not enter the clandestine detention centers. When asked by the prosecutor if he had seen detainees, Rubén Juárez responded, 'I didn't see, but they told me about the famous *Escuelita* in Famaillá, which was near the railway. We couldn't enter there. The Gendarmerie was there, the conscripts, nobody entered. (...) It was said that prisoners were taken there, yes.' [Yo no he visto, pero me decían de la famosa Escuelita de Famaillá, que era a la orilla de la vía. Ahí no entrábamos. Estaba la Gendarmería ahí, de los conscriptos, no entraba nadie. (...) Se decía que ahí llevaban los

21 Ibid, p. 3.

22 Transcript of the hearing on May 26, 2016, Tribunal Oral in the Criminal Federal de Tucumán [Federal Criminal Oral Court of Tucumán].

23 Ibid.

prisioneros, sí].²⁴ The soldiers only knew a part of the entire repressive machinery: they were the ones who transported and cleaned the bodies but not the ones responsible for the final fate: the disappearance of the bodies, a task surrounded by mystery and rumors. Juárez recalled once transporting many corpses:

I once carried 13 or 14 bodies together. There was a confrontation at a place they named Las Mesadas, and they called us at a certain time of the night because it was a nocturnal battle (...). We had never participated in combat ourselves. They always sent us when everything [was finished], to retrieve the wounded and the dead. (...) First, we went to the Command [of the Fifth Brigade of the Army](...) and there the chief, lieutenant, colonel, captain would see them, they supervised the dead, and then we would take them back to the Military Hospital. (...) And sometimes, I would... the dead bodies I brought from there (...) sometimes they were infested with maggots, emitting a foul odor, we couldn't even touch them. And at the Military Hospital, at the vehicle ramp, they told us to put them there, to undress them first, we hosed them down. They became clean. The medical officers would come and take photographs of the wounded. Then we would place them on stretchers and carry them by hand because the Morgue of the Military Hospital was a hundred meters away. We never transported any dead bodies anywhere else. And then the fire truck would come and take them from the Morgue of the Military Hospital.

Prosecutor: Do you know where they were taken?

Juárez: No, no, we never found out, no one told us. We never heard any rumors either. There were rumors that they were burned. Where, how? I never knew. Those rumors were heard in the barracks.

[He llegado a cargar 13 o 14 juntos. Ha habido un enfrentamiento en el lugar que le llamaban Las Mesadas y nos llaman a cierta hora de la noche, porque fue un combate por la noche (...). Jamás habíamos participado de combate nosotros. Siempre nos mandaban cuando ya estaba todo [terminado], a buscar los heridos y muertos. (...) Primero fuimos al Comando [de la V Brigada del Ejército](...) y ahí los veía el jefe, el teniente, el coronel, el capitán, supervisaban los muertos y ahí los volvíamos a

24 Ibid.

llevar al Hospital Militar. (...) Y, a veces, yo hice..., los muertos que yo traía de allá, (...) a veces venían engusanados, hediondos, que no se los podía ni tocar. Y el Hospital Militar en la rampa para los vehículos, nos decían que los pongamos ahí, que los desnudemos primero, los manguareábamos. Quedaban bien limpitos. Venían los jefes médicos y les sacaban fotografías a los heridos. De ahí, los acomodábamos en camillas y los llevábamos a pulso, porque estaban a cien metros la Morgue del Hospital Militar. Nosotros nunca hemos traslado a ningún otro lado a ningún muerto. Y luego iban el camión de los bomberos y los retiraba de la Morgue del Hospital Militar.

Fiscal: ¿Y sabe dónde iba?

Juárez: No, no, nunca nos hemos enterado, no nos han contado. Ni rumores hemos escuchado. Se escuchaban rumores de que los quemaba. ¿Dónde, cómo? Nunca supe yo. Esos rumores se escuchaban en el cuartel.²⁵

Juárez stated that the medical officers had never attempted to identify those bodies or perform autopsies on them, nor were the dead delivered to their families, not even to those who desperately approached military bases seeking information about their disappeared relatives.

Juárez's testimony also revealed the existence of specific forms of gendered/sexualized violence. On one occasion, they were taken to a military camp located behind the former sugar mill Fronterita (*Ingenio Fronterita*), where they had to attend to a woman who was supposedly a guerrilla:

Supposedly because they, the group that had her, a group from Tartagal, I don't know where the group was from, they had her as a prisoner, she was [seriously] injured. She was hospitalized in Famaillá. They moved her to a smaller room with three or four guards. (...) She was naked, covered with a white cloth. (...) From what I could see, because I acted as a sort of nurse for a medical lieutenant, (...) I managed to see that she was bleeding, a loss of blood from the vagina. She was more dead than alive, but she recovered, I believe, well.

25 Ibid.

[Supuestamente porque ellos, el grupo que la tenía, un grupo de Tartagal, no sé de donde era el grupo del campamento que estaba ahí, y la tenían prisionera, estaba [herida] muy grave esa mujer. Ella quedó internada en Famaillá. La derivaron a otra pieza más chica con tres o cuatro custodios. (...) Estaba desnuda, tapada con un trapo blanco. (...) Supuestamente lo que yo he llegado a ver, porque yo era como medio enfermero de un teniente médico, (...) he logrado ver que tenía como una hemorragia, como pérdida de sangre por la vagina. Estaba más muerta que viva, pero se recuperó, creo, bien.]²⁶

She was tied up in a place that was ‘like a pigsty’ [como un chiquero de chanchos], which once again highlights the dehumanization and contempt towards someone considered a guerrilla. When asked if she was the only detained person they had transported naked, Juárez confirmed that she was. When questioned about witnessing signs of torture, he responded that the only case he had seen was that of this female detainee, who had ‘marks, wounds, and bruises’ [marcas, heridas y moretones], especially on her vagina and nipples.

In that same military zone, he witnessed another incident that remained engraved in their memory:

Those [bodies] were not in the pigsty. They were covered with small tarps about 50 centimeters above their bodies. There were five people. They made me reverse the ambulance. Supposedly, it was my first task [as a soldier]: to pick up dead bodies. And the smell and flies were unbearable. The [five dead] guys were in a bad state. They were wearing the same clothes as us soldiers. They just didn’t have boots (...). ‘Load them up. Worthless recruits, what do we want? Men?’ (...). Then he [the official] throws me on top of the dead bodies: ‘What do we want? Men, *machos*?’ And I froze, I didn’t want to touch the dead bodies. He was impatient, in the sense that he wanted it done quickly, quickly [removing the bodies]. But I tell [the Prosecutor] that the smell on my hands, that guy, it stayed in my mind until I finished my military service. The [dead] guys were in a very bad state, and you couldn’t touch them [the bodies].

[Ésos no estaban en el chiquero. Estaban tapados con unas carpitas a 50 centímetros el cuerpo. Eran cinco personas. Me hacen poner la ambulancia marcha atrás. Supuestamente, era el primer trabajo mío

26 Ibid.

[como soldado]: levantar muertos. Y era insoportable el olor y las moscas. Estaban mal los tipos. Ellos tenían la misma ropa que nosotros, los soldados. Solo no tenían borceguíes (...). 'Cárguenlos. Reclutas de mierda, ¿qué queremos? ¿Hombres?' (...). Ahí me tira encima de los muertos: '¿Qué queremos? ¿Hombres, machos?'. Y yo he quedado así [duro], por no tocarlos a los muertos. Él, malo, en el sentido que quería rápido, rápido [sacar los cuerpos]. Pero le digo [al Fiscal] que ese olor en las manos, ese tipo, hasta que salí de la colimba lo tenía en la mente. Los tipos estaban en muy mal estado y no se los podía tocar.'²⁷

If the repression took sexualized forms, we also observed that within the military there were displays of gendered traces, indicators, and mandates: the exercise of extreme violence was masculinized as an activity characteristic of 'real men.' Collaborating in the disposal of the corpses was a way to initiate oneself into the exercise of extreme violence, to become men and soldiers. And those who refused or were visibly affected by the macabre sight of a pile of dead bodies were reprimanded and humiliated for not having the strength required of male recruits.

The case of the two gendarmes

Most of the military and police that had served in Tucumán Province preferred to reminisce about their combat experiences. In this way, they could present themselves as warriors who had fought a "holy war" (*guerra santa*) or a masculinized struggle as "a man's thing" (*cosa de hombres*)²⁸ rather than as perpetrators of crimes against humanity. Testimonies from members of the Armed and Security Forces who have acknowledged the torture and forced disappearance of people that characterized Operation Independence are scarce. Only two former gendarmes, Antonio Cruz and Omar Torres, have come forward since 1984 to testify about the crimes they witnessed during Operation Independence. Both provided much more information about the illegal repression than the afore mentioned former conscripts, as the latter were not able to access the clandestine detention centers. These testimonies were given in 1984 during the democratic transition, and

27 Ibid.

28 See: Héctor Simeoni, *iAniquilen al ERP!* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Cosmos, 1985).

they present a vivid and detailed account of the horror. However, these testimonies are much more influenced by counterinsurgency language than the accounts of the ex-soldiers analysed in the previous section. The former conscripts testified at the reopening of the trials in 2006, more than twenty years later. They had a much more comprehensive understanding of the systematic plan of state terrorism and spoke at a time when a humanitarian language prevailed over a military one.

On July 6, 1984, former gendarme Antonio Cruz appeared before the Service for Peace and Justice, a human rights organization led by the Argentine Nobel Peace Prize laureate Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, and later before the National Commission on the Disappeared (CONADEP). CONADEP was a commission of notable figures created by President Raúl Alfonsín upon the restoration of democracy in December 1983 to gather information about the fate of the dictatorship's victims.²⁹ Cruz's account reconstructed in great detail his involvement in Operation Independence as a member of Gendarmerie's Mobile Unit 2, based in the city of Jesús María, in the province of Córdoba.³⁰ He recalled that three Mobile Gendarmerie Units had been created as riot police forces to prevent disturbances in large cities. The three units were composed of personnel from squadrons across the country, and those men selected were sent to Tucumán Province as a sanction for past misconduct. In his case, he was a member of Mobile Unit 2 and was sent there for refusing a training required to be promoted to the rank of corporal.

In December 1975, the order to transfer to Operation Independence arrived. Prior to that, the gendarmes had received instruction on how to combat the guerrillas, instilling in them the belief that 'all guerrillas were our enemies, which included a significant portion of the civilian population, as military laws considered "the majority to be subversives"' [todos los guerrilleros eran nuestros enemigos' y eso abarcaba gran parte de la gente civil, ya que según las leyes militares "la mayoría eran subversivos"].³¹ Cruz was assigned to Famaillá, where the Tactical Command [*Commando Táctico*] led by General Vilas was located. Later, a contingent of thirty people was sent to a LRD (*Lugar de Reunión de Detenidos* [Place of Detainee Meeting] - or Clandestine Detention Camp)

29 On the CONADEP, see: Emilio Crenzel, *La historia política del Nunca Más* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2008).

30 CONADEP file No. 4636, in the National Archive of Remembrance (*Archivo Nacional de la Memoria*), p. 3 (my translation).

31 *Ibid.*, p. 2 back page.

called *La Escuelita* in the city of Famaillá.³² Cruz described the spatial layout of that clandestine center, its location in the city center, the names of those in charge he was able to remember (especially the gendarmes), the conditions of detention, and the torture methods. From the little that was known, most detainees 'were taken out to be executed' [salían para ser ejecutados] and he witnessed at least two executions at the premises of the Armory Company.³³ 'If a detainee died, as happened on some occasions, they would wait for nightfall, and then, after wrapping them in an Army blanket, one of the passenger cars would take them away to an unknown destination' [Si algún detenido fallecía, como ocurrió en alguna oportunidad, se esperaba la llegada de la noche y, luego de envolverlo en una manta del Ejército, uno de los coches civiles se los llevaba con rumbo desconocido], added Cruz.³⁴

Cruz recalled that about fifteen gendarmes were assigned as external guards to the premises (including himself), while the rest were responsible for guarding the detainees. As he was in charge of delivering food, he had the opportunity to have contact with some prisoners who were 'seriously injured from the torture they underwent during interrogations' [muy lastimados por las torturas de los interrogatorios a los que eran sometidos].³⁵ He also indicated that the interrogations were carried out by Army officers who came in civilian clothing, 'in the morning, leaving in the afternoon for lunch. They returned in the late afternoon and left at night' [a la mañana, retirándose a la tarde para almorzar. Volvían a la tardecita, retirándose a la noche].³⁶ Since they used *noms de guerre* he neither knew their real names nor the identities of the detainees because the military 'gave them nicknames or pseudonyms that they would answer to after their arrival' [se encargaban de ponerles un apodo o seudónimo que a partir de su entrada contestarían por ese llamado].³⁷

Among the most impactful cases, Cruz recalled the case of an alleged guerrilla leader whom he had to accompany to the bathroom, 'with tremendous fear as he was very dangerous' [con un temor grandísimo ya que era muy peligroso].³⁸ When he noticed that the detainee was uri-

32 Ibid, p. 2 back page.

33 Ibid, p. 4.

34 Ibid, p. 3.

35 Ibid, pp. 4 back page and p. 5.

36 Ibid, p. 2 back page.

37 Ibid, p. 4.

38 Ibid, p. 5 back page.

nating blood because of internal injuries, he informed his superiors, who downplayed the situation. This detainee died as a result of being so ‘brutally hung that he couldn’t bear it. When they came back to interrogate him, I informed them, and the only regret they expressed was that they hadn’t been able to obtain any accurate information’ [fue tan duramente colgado que no resistió, cuando llegaron de nuevo para interrogarlo, se los comunicó, y lo único que lamentaron fue que no habían podido obtener información precisa].³⁹

Regarding the gendered/sexualized forms of repression, Antonio Cruz remembered that during his time at *La Escuelita* he had never seen the male detainees being bathed. Instead, once a week, he would take the women to a special bathroom by turns: ‘there, they were made to undress, and without removing their blindfolds, we made them bathe with a hose and cold water...’ The door was left open: ‘With the men, there were no issues, but with the women, many times they would urinate on themselves to avoid being seen naked or to lower their underpants [and risk being raped]’ [allí se las hacía desnudar y sin sacarles las vendas de los ojos, las hacíamos bañar con una manguera y con agua fría...]. Se les dejaba la puerta abierta: ‘En el caso de los varones no había problemas, pero con las mujeres muchas veces se orinaban encima para que evitar que sean vistas desnudas o en su intimidad].⁴⁰ With respect to a pregnant woman, he recounted that she was condemned to death, and the military were only waiting for her to give birth before executing her.

Cruz specified that the clandestine center *La Escuelita* was closed on December 20, 1975, because it was rumored that a human rights commission would be visiting Tucumán Province. Some detainees were taken to the Motel, another clandestine center located across from the premises of the Armory Company. General Antonio Domingo Bussi had taken over the counterinsurgency operation, going to the Governor’s Office in the morning and to the Army’s 5th Infantry Brigade in the afternoon. Cruz also described two other clandestine detention centres: in 1976, he was transferred to a place located in downtown San Miguel de Tucumán called The Reformatory (*El Reformatorio*), and later to a warehouse in the Armory Company, which he described as a true “concentration camp”.⁴¹

39 Ibid, p. 5 back page.

40 Ibid, p. 5 back page and p. 6.

41 Ibid, p. 10. He estimated the number of detainees he was able to see: a hundred detainees in *La Escuelita* in Famaillá; 150 in the Motel; 200 in The Reformatory; and around 600 in the Armory Company. Only two detainees were released.

Another key witness was former gendarme Omar Torres, who has been testifying systematically since 1983.⁴² Torres was sent to Operation Independence on three occasions, between May 1976 and June 1977. In the interview in 2016 I conducted as part of my fieldwork, he recalled the following:

Torres: Every time we came to Tucumán, they would give us lectures. You had to use a *nom de guerre*, not talk or say anything about what you had seen. Then, they would read us the Military Justice Code and tell us what would happen to us if we revealed a state secret: more or less execution. They created a situation where you would say, 'damn, you can't do anything because they will shoot you at any moment.' The enemy was the people, everyone who looked at you. (...)

Santiago: And then, were you assigned to the clandestine centre?

Torres: No, they didn't tell you that there was a clandestine centre there. No, they told you that you were going to fulfill a certain mission in a certain place. But they didn't tell you that there were detainees. When I arrived there, at the Arsenal, the next day, I found out about the detainees, and what I had to do. But supposedly, if they didn't see you as a warrior type, they would send you to take care of Bussi's children; another one would go cook, another one would go chop firewood. And the guys who had more temper, who seemed tougher, those were the ones to guard the detainees inside.

[Torres: Cada vez que veníamos a Tucumán, te daban charlas. Tenías que usar apodo, no comentar ni decir nada de lo que habías visto. Después, nos leían el Código de Justicia Militar y nos decían lo que nos iba a pasar si revelabas un secreto de Estado: fusilamiento más o menos. Te creaban una situación donde vos decías: 'la puta, no podés hacer nada porque te van a cagar a tiros en cualquier momento'. El enemigo era el pueblo, toda la gente que te miraba. (...)]

Santiago: Y después, ¿estaban asignados al centro clandestino?

42 On Torres' testimonial trajectory and the methodological challenges involved in interviewing him, see: Santiago Garaño, 'Sobre los itinerarios testimoniales: El proceso histórico de construcción de un exgendarme como testigo del Operativo Independencia (Tucumán, Argentina, 1975-1977)', *Disparidades. Revista de Antropología*, 2, 75 (2020), 1-15.

Torres: No, no te decían que ahí había un centro clandestino. No, te decían que ahí ibas a cumplir tal misión en tal lugar. Pero no te decían que había detenidos. Yo cuando llegue ahí, al Arsenal, al otro día me encuentro con los detenidos, y qué es lo que tenía que hacer. Pero, ya más o menos supuestamente al que no le veían cara de guerrero, lo mandaban a cuidar a los hijos de Bussi; el otro que vaya a cocinar, el otro que vaya a cortar leña. Y los tipos que tenían más temperamento, que se los veían más duros, éstos eran para cuidar a los detenidos adentro.]⁴³

When I asked him about the reasons for his assignment to Operation Independence, he replied:

And I said, 'What's going on? What are they doing?' And they wouldn't tell you anything. And they would come back with a suntan. Everything was a mystery... So I wanted to find out. 'Do you really want to go?' [his superior asked]. 'Yes, why can't I if practically everyone else has gone?' [Torres replied]. 'Alright, next month you'll go.'

[Y yo digo: '¿qué es lo que pasa? ¿qué es lo que hacen?'. Y no te decían nada. Y volvían bronceados. Todo era misterio... Entonces me quería sacar la duda. '¿En serio que querés ir?', [le dijo su superior]. 'Sí, ¿y por qué no puedo si prácticamente han ido todos', [contestó Torres]. 'Bueno, el mes que viene te vas.']*⁴⁴

As can be seen, the clandestine detention centres were opaque centres of military power, upon which uniformed personnel projected fantasies and desires. However, upon arriving in Tucumán Province, they were directly confronted with the exercise of extreme forms of violence.

Torres recalled the atmosphere of terror that surrounded the personnel sent to Operation Independence:

When you boarded the plane, they would search your pockets, make you take off your shoes to see what you were carrying. They did it to everyone equally, so there was no way [to gather information]. I had a list of the people who had passed through [the clandestine detention centre], and I had to tear it up from the sweat and fear that gripped me... I had two colleagues who were killed for sending letters from the Armory Company's base to the relatives [of the disappeared].

⁴³ Interview conducted by the author on October 19, 2016, in San Miguel de Tucumán (author's translation).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

[Cuando subías al avión te revisaban los bolsillos, te hacían sacar el calzado, a ver qué llevabas. A todos por igual, entonces no había forma [de sacar información]. Yo tenía una lista de las personas que habían pasado y la tuve que romper de la transpiración y del cagazo que te agarra. ... Yo tuve dos compañeros que lo han matado por sacar cartas de Arsenales a los familiares [de desaparecidos].]⁴⁵

The constant reference Omar Torres made in all his testimonies to the disappearance of these two gendarmes, surnamed Ríos and Paiva, is an indication of the atmosphere of terror that affected not only the inhabitants of southern Tucumán but also the subordinate personnel. In Tucumán Province, there was a climate of generalized suspicion, where anyone perceived as a potential subversive or collaborator could be disappeared with impunity; even members of the military and police.

On July 26, 1984, Torres appeared before CONADEP and testified about his experience as a member of a contingent sent to Tucumán Province from the National Gendarmerie Mobile Squadron (*Escuadrón Móvil de Gendarmería Nacional*) No. 1, based at the Campo de Mayo military base in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires.⁴⁶ The Gendarmerie personnel was sent to Tucumán Province for periods of forty-five to fifty days, then returned to Campo de Mayo for a period of ninety days before returning again to Operation Independence.⁴⁷ He specified that he was assigned to a warehouse located behind Armory Battalion No. 5, a place that was referred to as the LRD (Place of Detainees' Meeting [*Lugar de Reunión de Detenidos*]).⁴⁸ In previous testimony we referenced, he summed up his time at the clandestine detention centre that was operated in the Armory Company Miguel de Azcuénaga, the conditions of detention, and the methods of torture. In addition to these aspects, his testimony also included indications of gendered/sexualized repression. The centre's space was divided into two parts: on one side, women and 'those who did not pose a danger' [los que no ofrecían peligrosidad], with their hands handcuffed in front and blindfolded; and on the other side, a more dangerous group – the vast majority male – chained to the walls.⁴⁹

45 Ibid.

46 CONADEP file No. 6667, in the National Archive of Remembrance (*Archivo Nacional de la Memoria*).

47 During that time, they were replaced by the Movil 2, with its base in Córdoba, and later by the Movil 3, from Rosario.

48 CONADEP file No. 6667, p. 1.

49 Ibid, p. 1. Torres also mentioned his knowledge of the clandestine centre that operated in the former Nueva Baviera sugar mill.

Army, Federal Police, and Provincial Police dressed in civilian clothes, while the Gendarmerie wore uniforms. The Gendarmerie contingent was divided into three groups for twenty-four hours on, forty-eight hours off shifts, while the torturers rotated every fifteen days. Omar Torres identified the names of some of the Gendarmerie officers sent to Tucumán Province. With respect to the Army, he mentioned the names of some officers and non-commissioned officers, although he clarified that it was difficult to identify them because they used pseudonyms.

He emphasized that no detainee ever escaped, but he 'could observe that some detainees left the camp well-dressed and told him that they were going to regain their freedom' [pudo observar que algunos detenidos salían del campo bien vestidos comentándole que iban a recuperar la Libertad].⁵⁰ He estimated that every fifteen days, between fifteen and twenty people were executed by a firing squad, always at night, and he identified possible burial sites. On two occasions, he witnessed Bussi firing the first shot and then involving all the officers. This confirms that, in addition to commanding the campaign, General Bussi was personally staging his sovereign power and involving the other officers in the direct exercise of repression.

Conclusion

In a foundational book within the field of perpetrator studies, Susanne Knittel and Zachary Goldberg ask: 'Who or what is a perpetrator? Who decides? How is such a label applied and by whom? How do such labels evolve? What are the means and ends of perpetration?'⁵¹ They also inquire about what we can learn from studying perpetrators and perpetration that cannot be learned by focusing on the victims of genocide and mass violence. Both the testimonies of ex-soldiers and 'the case of the two gendarmes', as it is known in Tucumán Province, are valuable for a reflection on the figure of the perpetrator and on the ways in which local criteria of inclusion/exclusion operated the intermediate category of perpetrators. The testimonies analysed in this article show us that not all those who were part of the repressive apparatus were considered by the justice system as perpetrators, a social category in which human rights organizations have tended to classify military personnel.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵¹ *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne Knittel and Zachary Goldberg (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 3.

What is the importance of looking at repression from these subterranean memories, from testimonies that do not align with the hegemonic memories of both the human rights movement and the military?⁵² What can these types of witnesses, who were not necessarily direct victims of state terrorism but were part of the repressive system from the margins, tell us? Positioned on the fringes of the repressive apparatus, these ex-soldiers and ex-gendarmes were privileged witnesses of the exercise of political repression and forced disappearances, which were first tested in Operation Independence. Unlike the survivors (who were blindfolded and gagged), they have crucial information about state terrorism and the material perpetrators of crimes against humanity, and possessed an almost ethnographic detail of how the repressive apparatus operated.

It is important to highlight that the testimonies chosen for this article were delivered in different moments in time. This influenced what the gendarmes or conscripts were able to say. The accounts of Torres and Cruz were given in the early days of democracy when the memory of the crimes was very fresh and contained numerous echoes of counterinsurgency language. In contrast, the statements of the soldiers were much more recent and were given after the reopening of trials in 2006. Not only did they bear many more traces of the social knowledge consolidated through the decades of transitional justice, but they also resulted from new social conditions of listening, as a result of a campaign by the Secretariat of Human Rights and of the deliberate decision of prosecutors not to charge them. Furthermore, while the number of conscripts willing to speak is increasing, the two gendarmes were and continue to be anomalous witnesses: despite hope aroused by the accounts of Torres and Cruz in 1984, the vast majority of state agents have not fulfilled one of the demands of human rights organizations: providing information about the ultimate fate of the disappeared. Their testimonies are as valuable as they are exceptional, as very few former members of the Armed and Security Forces have broken the almost unbreakable pact of silence that prevails among them.

Breaking this pact and daring to tell – and to listen – are two fundamental challenges to expand our knowledge of the logic of state terrorism. To do so, a dichotomous victim/perpetrator perspective can obscure the ambiguous position of conscript soldiers, drivers, and guards that were indispensable to carry out the crimes against humanity but

52 See: *Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, 2020; *Researching Perpetrators*, 2020; *Perpetrators: Encountering Humanity's Dark Side*, 2023.

do not fit neatly into the perpetrator category. Instead of automatically placing them among the convicted perpetrators, it is necessary to rely on attentive and receptive judicial functionaries, activists, and researchers who can account for this ambiguous and uncomfortable position. The auxiliary state agents made the repressive system possible, although on its margins, and as its potential victims in case they collaborated with detainees or were labeled as subversive, troublesome, conflicting, or dysfunctional by the Armed and Security Forces. It is not for nothing that so many cases of disappeared soldiers were registered as deserters. As Torres constantly reminds us, there were tragic fates like those of Paiva and Ríos, two gendarmes who were killed for transmitting information about the detainees to their families, showing that even in the most extreme situations, there is always room for choice and ethical decisions.⁵³

What do these types of accounts tell us that is new? While they didn't have a complete understanding of what the terrorist State was, they had more knowledge than the ex-conscripts, as they were career personnel in the National Gendarmerie and had access to the premises of the principal clandestine detention centers in Tucumán Province.

They dared to denounce the operation of *La Escuelita* – located within the urban area of Famaillá – and the centre operated in a hidden shed on the premises of the Armory Company, as well as others such as the Motel, The Reformatory (*El Reformatorio*), and the military bases that operated in the former sugar mills of Santa Lucía, Fronterita, and Nueva Baviera. Furthermore, they revealed the names of those responsible for these crimes and collaborated in locating the clandestine graves where the bodies of the disappeared were buried. They provided privileged access to the opaque world of perpetrators, that we still need to investigate further, because they were there with them, lived with them, knew them face to face, and witnessed their actions without blindfolds, and without barriers.

There are two novel elements I understood in the testimonies of Torres and Cruz. On the one hand, and paraphrasing Michael Taussig's text on the fetishization of the State,⁵⁴ part of the terrifying power of that terrorist State lies in the fantasies projected by the marginalized (or those not initiated into the terror) onto that opaque centre of military power. This mystification was intensified by prohibiting access to

53 On this topic, see Tzvetan Todorov, *Frente al límite* (México DF: Siglo XXI, 2009).

54 Michael Taussig, 'Maleficium. El estado como fetiche', in *Un gigante en convulsiones* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 2006).

those clandestine and secret spaces and protecting information about what happened there, while also hinting at the existence of something truly significant taking place inside. This interplay of display and concealment in these centres heightened the political power of this repressive apparatus, of the terrorist State with a capital "S". It is no wonder that when I asked the former gendarme Torres why he volunteered for Operation Independence, he recalled his desire to go to Tucumán Province, an experience surrounded by mysteries and secrets, but also desire.

On the other hand, as Antonius Robben and Alexander Hinton have shown, the figure and the public word of the perpetrators become an entry point to analyse the institutional processes of perpetration of these crimes on a large scale: 'We regard them also as perpetrators, rather than criminals, because they committed violence as members of respectively a state institution and a formal organization. Perpetrators of mass violence, in other words, are embedded in institutions, associations, or networks'.⁵⁵ In this sense, the memories of the former conscripts and gendarmes shed light on a gendered/sexualized division of repressive work: how the toughest men or the most *macho* warriors were assigned to the most terrible actions, while the rest were given less compromising tasks associated with the feminine or the weak (cooking, guarding the perimeter, feeding, gathering firewood). In turn, women accused of being guerrillas or suspected of collaborating with non-state armed organizations suffered specific forms of violence: forced nudity, torture in the most sensitive areas of their bodies, sexual violence and rape, theft of their children born in captivity. The accounts analysed allow us to reconstruct forms of direct repression that are strongly gendered/sexualised: counterinsurgency was a masculine activity, seen as a manly business. Male conscript soldiers had to be spectators and participate in the anti-subversive struggle as a way of becoming true soldiers and true men within the institutional system of state terrorism.

55 *Researching Perpetrators*, p. 7.

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