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The Journal of Perpetrator Research (JPR) is an inter-disciplinary, peer-reviewed, open access journal committed to promoting the scholarly study of perpetrators of mass killings, political violence, and genocide.

The journal fosters scholarly discussions about perpetrators and perpetratorship across the broader continuum of political violence. JPR does not confine its attention to any particular region or period. Instead, its mission is to provide a forum for analysis of perpetrators of genocide, mass killing and political violence via research taking place within the fields of history, criminology, law, forensics, cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, memory studies, psychology, politics, literature, film studies and education. In providing this interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary space the journal moves academic research on this topic beyond, and between, disciplinary boundaries to provide a forum in which robust and interrogative research and cross-curricular discourse can stimulate lively intellectual engagement with perpetrators.

JPR thus not only addresses issues related to perpetrators in the past but also responds to present challenges. The fundamental questions informing the journal include: how do we define, understand and encounter the figure of the perpetrator of political violence? What can we discern about their motivations, and how can that help society and policy-makers in countering and preventing such occurrences? How are perpetrators represented in a variety of memory spaces including art, film, literature, television, theatre, commemorative culture and education?

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# Journal of Perpetrator Research

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## Editorial

Susanne C. Knittel

**I**t gives us great pleasure to share the latest issue of *JPR* with you. This issue has a dual focus, on the one hand perpetrator studies in Latin America, and specifically Argentina, and on the other, a thematic and methodological focus on interviewing perpetrators and working with perpetrator testimonies.

The bulk of the issue is taken up by a special section on *Perpetrators in Argentina*, guest edited by Antonius C. G. M. Robben and Valentina Salvi. This special section is the result of two online workshops held in the fall of 2021 by the *Utrecht Forum for Memory Studies* (Utrecht, Netherlands) and the *Nucleus of Memory Studies* (Núcleo de Estudios sobre Memoria) of the *Institute of Economic and Social Development* (IDES) in Buenos Aires in Argentina. The workshops were organized by Daniele Salerno (Utrecht) and Soledad Catoggio (Buenos Aires). The aim was to bring into conversation researchers from Latin America and Europe across linguistic, economic, and geographical barriers and revolved around two themes: the figure and discourse of/on the perpetrators of mass violence and the memory-activism nexus. Another, more practical, aim of the workshops was to experiment with best practices for working in a multilingual context. Out of these workshops came the idea to make accessible in English the work of the Argentinian scholars to the broad international and interdisciplinary audience of *JPR*.

The special section consists of an introduction by the guest editors and four articles. The introduction provides an overview of the historical and memory-political context of the military dictatorship in Argentina after the coup d'état of 1976 and Argentina's efforts since then to hold perpetrators accountable. Furthermore, the introduction situates research in and about Argentine perpetrators within the field of perpetrator studies more broadly, opening up new avenues of inquiry and potential comparative and cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary comparative work. The four articles that follow, all translated for this issue by Daniele Salerno and Antonius Robben, reflect on the specific parameters and modalities of conducting perpetrator research in Argentina as well as the challenges researchers face, particularly wanting to interview and interact with convicted perpetrators. Valentina Salvi and Analía Goldentul describe in their articles the incomprehension and critique they faced from colleagues for engaging in dialogue with these perpetrators. Meanwhile, in their interviews, the perpetrators themselves are defiant, presenting themselves as victims and political prisoners or patriots and heroes. The mechanisms and discursive formations that construct the figure of the perpetrator come into view the articles by Claudia Feld and Santiago Garaño. Feld explores the role of the media and specifically the circulation of images, which she refers to as visibility *dispositifs* in making visible and

knowable the identities of perpetrators of the forced disappearances. Garaño details the fluidity and ambiguity of the categories of perpetrator and accomplice, witness and implicated subject.

The special section is followed by Raya Morag's article on documentary films about the Cambodian genocide and the Chinese Maoist Revolution, and here, too, the focus is on perpetrator interviews. Morag theorizes two novel genres of encounter, which she calls the Duel and the Quiet Interview. Arguing that Western scholarship has failed to consider the position of South-East-Asian atrocities and the discourses around them in what has come to be known as the Age of Testimony, Morag seeks to expand the conceptual boundaries of fields such as trauma studies, cinema studies, and perpetrator studies.

The issue concludes with two book reviews, Erin Jessee's review of Eva van Roekel's monograph *Phenomenal Justice: Violence and Morality in Argentina* (Rutgers University Press, 2020), and Catharine Aretakis's review of Doris L. Bergen's monograph *Between God and Hitler: Military Chaplains in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

This issue has been several years in the making, and we are delighted to be able to send it out into the world. We would like to thank the authors, guest editors, translators, peer reviewers, copy-editors, and typesetters for their hard work in bringing this issue together.

It has been a very difficult year in many respects for many of us. Let us hope for better and more peaceful times in the year ahead.

On behalf of the editorial team,

Susanne C. Knittel

JPR

SPECIAL SECTION:  
PERPETRATORS IN ARGENTINA





## Special Section on Perpetrators in Argentina: Introduction

Antonius C. G. M. Robben and Valentina Salvi

A large crowd assembled on 24 March 2023 at the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires on the *Day of Remembrance for Truth and Justice* to commemorate the coup d'état of 1976.<sup>1</sup> The Argentine armed forces had shut down the country and unleashed a state terrorism that disappeared, tortured, and assassinated tens of thousands of Argentine citizens who were either guerrilla insurgents that pursued a social revolution or members of a broad political movement that sought social change by nonviolent means. This heterogeneous opposition had gained force during the first half of the 1970s and was faced with an increasingly violent repression by the Argentine military and police. The Argentine regime fell from power in December 1983.<sup>2</sup> The ensuing forty years of democracy saw persistent efforts to find the truth about the disappeared, keep the memory of state terrorism alive, and bring the perpetrators to court. Argentina's pursuit of justice was a seesaw of prosecution, incarceration, amnesties and presidential pardons, and eventually a successful retrial of the perpetrators. This undulating transitional justice is not specific to Argentina but has occurred in many countries that held political actors accountable for war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity.<sup>3</sup>

This set of articles has come out of two online workshops held in 2021 by the *Utrecht Forum for Memory Studies* of *Utrecht University* in the Netherlands and the *Nucleus of Memory Studies* (Núcleo de Estudios sobre Memoria) of the *Institute of Economic and Social Development* (IDES) in Argentina. We thank Daniele Salerno and Soledad Catoggio for organizing the events. We also express our gratitude to eight anonymous reviewers for their constructive observations on the original Spanish texts. The translation of the rewritten texts from Spanish to English was done by Daniele Salerno and Antonius Robben.

- 1 Luciana Bertoia, '24 de Marzo: Una Plaza llena para pedir más memoria, verdad, justicia y mejor democracia', *Página/12*, 25 March 2023 <<https://www.pagina12.com.ar/534859-24-de-marzo-una-plaza-llena-para-pedir-mas-memoria-verdad-ju>> [accessed 5 December 2023].
- 2 See the following key studies in English about Argentina's military dictatorship: Juan E. Corradi, *The Fitful Republic: Economy, Society, and Politics in Argentina* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985); Donald C. Hodges, *Argentina's "Dirty War": An Intellectual Biography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991); Gerardo L. Munck, *Authoritarianism and Democratization: Soldiers and Workers in Argentina, 1976-1983* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988); and Antonius C. G. M. Robben, *Political Violence and Trauma in Argentina* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).
- 3 Marcos Zunino, *Justice Framed: A Genealogy of Transitional Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

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This special section about Argentina confirms the general assumption of perpetrator studies that the term perpetrator is not a fixed but flexible social category that plays itself out in local circumstances, as we will show further below about Argentina.<sup>4</sup> Who counts as a perpetrator depends on the historical, political, and legal circumstances in each situation because of shifting national power relations, changing international laws, and different opinions about the political violence. Perpetrators are paradoxical figures of whom several contradictory images may coexist or whose classification can change through time when one face dissolves and another comes into being. What may be regarded as the justified use of force may later be designated as unjust violence that demands prosecution, as has been shown in studies about South Africa, Indonesia, Cambodia, Brazil, and Rwanda.<sup>5</sup> In the case of Argentina, the articles by Santiago Garaño and Claudia Feld in this special section demonstrate that the categorization of perpetrators is not restricted to these larger contexts but depends also on the degree of their involvement in crimes against humanity and how their visual images circulate in the news media. Valentina Salvi and Analía Goldentul, in turn, show how Argentine perpetrators are paradoxical figures who, despite their conviction in court and condemnation by most Argentines, consider themselves heroes, patriots, victims, and political prisoners.

Argentina's efforts, official as well as grassroots, to hold perpetrators accountable were periodically thwarted because of radical swings between punitive and restorative justice, and between the government's desire for retribution or reconciliation. Such oscillations are not limited to post-authoritarian states but exist also in democratic countries, such as India and the United States, where police violence is

4 Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee, 'Introduction', in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 3-22; and *Interrogating the Perpetrator: Violation, Culpability, and Human Rights*, ed. by Cathy J. Schlund-Vials and Samuel Martínez (London: Routledge, 2017).

5 Richard A. Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Elizabeth F. Drexler, *Aceh, Indonesia: Securing the Insecure State* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Alexander Laban Hinton, *The Justice Facade: Trials of Transition in Cambodia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Martha K. Huggins, Mika Haritos-Fatouros, and Philip G. Zimbaro, *Violence Workers: Police Torturers and Murderers Reconstruct Brazilian Atrocities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); and Bert Ingelaere, *Inside Rwanda's Gacaca Courts: Seeking Justice after Genocide* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016).

condoned when the maintenance of public order is a priority and sanctioned when the protection of civil rights becomes primary.<sup>6</sup>

The changing classification of perpetrators poses methodological challenges because the interaction with beneficiaries of amnesties differs from dealing with incarcerated perpetrators. Like Rwandan perpetrators, the Argentine perpetrators examined in this special section denied or dissociated themselves from the atrocious acts committed during the dictatorship.<sup>7</sup> They presented a positive self-image and defended the military repression as justified under the country's extraordinary political circumstances. Such self-presentation forces researchers to construct positionalities that do not jeopardize the research relationship. The strategies of the Argentine authors of the contributions in this special section align with the methodological recommendations made by other perpetrator researchers. They negotiated gender, age, class, upbringing, and political views during face-to-face encounters with perpetrators, and dealt with the fears of becoming contaminated with their political and moral views.<sup>8</sup> Just like other perpetrator researchers, the Argentine authors were conscious of the power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee as well as with the gatekeepers who arranged the encounters. They cultivated a rapport to gain trust, yet shied away from becoming too personally involved.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, perpetrators may maintain a degree of power as former state officials and as keepers of knowledge that the researcher desires, but they may also be in an inferior position because of their incarceration and the researcher's power to construct narratives they do not agree with.<sup>10</sup>

6 Beatrice Jauregui, *Provisional Authority: Police, Order, and Security in India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); and Joanna Schwartz, *Shielded: How the Police Became Untouchable* (New York: Viking, 2023).

7 Kjell Anderson, 'The Perpetrator Imaginary: Representing Perpetrators of Genocide', in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 23-48.

8 Antonius C. G. M. Robben and Alexander Laban Hinton, *Perpetrators: Encountering Humanity's Dark Side* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023), pp. 210-213.

9 Erin Jessee and Kjell Anderson, 'Conclusion: Toward a Code of Practice for Qualitative Research among Perpetrators', in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 199-220.

10 Chandra Lekha Sriram, 'Perpetrators, Fieldwork, and Ethical Concerns', in *Perpetrators of International Crimes: Theories, Methods, and Evidence*, ed. by Alette Smeulers, Maartje Weerdsteijn, and Barbara Holá (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 57-71.

Finally, the articles in this special section show the difficulty of conducting perpetrator research in one's own country. The fieldwork projects of Ivana Maček, who studied everyday life in the besieged city of Sarajevo during the war in the former Yugoslavia, and Joseba Zulaika who tried to study political violence in his native Basque Country, are instructive. Maček struggled with her position as an inside outsider who underwent the shelling and sniper fire during the siege of Sarajevo together with the local population but encountered great difficulty in establishing a good rapport with them because of her being a Catholic Croat.<sup>11</sup> Zulaika approached ETA to conduct participant observation in its politico-military branch. His request was turned down because of the risk of exposing ETA operatives to the Spanish police.<sup>12</sup> These opposite research outcomes resonate with the experiences of two contributors to this section. Salvi overcame the suspicion of her interlocutors and created good working relations, whereas Goldentul failed to collect the desired data but nevertheless succeeded in making an insightful analysis of her troubled interview situation. In addition, the political convictions and activism of local perpetrator researchers may clash with the rigorous demands of empirical research, especially when professional colleagues accuse them of sympathizing with the perpetrators, of giving them a public podium and accepting their self-serving justifications at face value. These tensions were particularly pressing for the Argentine contributors because they conducted their research during the ongoing trials against perpetrators. Their work shows that methodological choices and scholarly publications have a political significance that confronts local perpetrator researchers with potential conflicts between their social identity as scholars and citizens. How did the classification of Argentine perpetrators change during forty years of democracy, and when did they become research subjects for Argentine scholars?

The first portrayal of Argentine perpetrators appeared in testimonies and *testimonios* of witnesses and victim-survivors of state terrorism. Testimonies about abductions and torture by the Argentine military and police were given by former captives and relatives of the disappeared to fact-finding missions of international NGOs and at human rights meetings held abroad during the dictatorship. Argentina's

11 Ivana Maček, *Sarajevo under Siege: Anthropology in Wartime* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), pp. 13-19.

12 Joseba Zulaika, *Basque Violence: Metaphor and Sacrament* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1988), p. xxvii.

first *testimonio* about the military repression was published in France in 1979, under the title *Le diable dans le soleil* (The Devil in the Sun), and republished in Argentina in 1983, only weeks before the turn to democracy.<sup>13</sup> *Testimonios* are resistance narratives that appeared first in Latin America, of which *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* is the most well-known.<sup>14</sup> The most acclaimed and internationally known Argentine *testimonio* is *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*, written by the newspaper editor Jacobo Timerman, who had been disappeared for four days in 1977 and was eventually deported to Israel in 1979.<sup>15</sup> Many *testimonios* appeared in the mid-1980s. They were gruesome accounts about torture and the fruitless search by relatives for their disappeared loved ones.<sup>16</sup>

Although the *testimonio* literature is by definition restricted to victim and resistance accounts, the Argentine military also published personal narratives that narrated their actions and operations, with titles such as *Memorias de un Ex-Torturador (Memories of an Ex-Torturer)* and *Yo secuestré, maté y vi torturar en la Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada (I Abducted, Killed, and Saw People Being Tortured at the Navy Mechanics School)*.<sup>17</sup> These accounts are generally one-sided, apologetic, or false but nevertheless provide some insight into the military's perspectives.

Many perpetrators of Argentina's dictatorship were identified by former disappeared persons and human rights organizations when the military regime collapsed in 1983, but they could not be indicted because the departing junta had awarded them immunity from criminal prosecution. The derogation of this amnesty in December 1983 was the first act of the democratically elected Congress. Immediately, the government ordered the military supreme court to prosecute the

13 Carlos Gabetta, *Todos somos subversivos* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Bruquera, 1984).

14 Rigoberta Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, trans. by Ann Wright (London: Verso, 1984).

15 Jacobo Timerman, *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*, trans. by Toby Talbot (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981).

16 Arturo Vázquez and Inés Vázquez, *Con vida los llevaron: 12 historias del tiempo de violencia* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones La Campana, 1984); Luis José Bondone, *Con mis hijos en las cárceles del "proceso"* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Anteo, 1985); Matilde Herrera, *José* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Contrapunto, 1987); Alicia Kozameh, *Pasos bajo el agua* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Contrapunto, 1987); and Blanca Buda, *Cuerpo I - Zona IV: el infierno de Suárez Mason* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Contrapunto, 1988).

17 Hugo García Rivas, *Memorias de un Ex-Torturador* (Buenos Aires: El Cid Editor, 1984); Raul Vilariño, *Yo secuestré, maté y vi torturar en la Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada* (Buenos Aires: Perfil, 1984); see also Rodolfo Peregrino Fernández, *Autocrítica policial* (Buenos Aires: El Cid Editor, 1983); and Héctor Vergez, *Yo fui Vargas: el antiterrorismo por dentro* (Buenos Aires: author's edition, 1995).

junta commanders and created the National Commission on the Disappeared or CONADEP (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas) to investigate the fate of the disappeared.

The CONADEP truth commission published its findings in September 1984. The commission identified and classified the perpetrators according to their actions in different military units and police stations. It did not publish a systematic record of suspected perpetrators, which exceeded its mandate, but the detailed description of the most important secret detention centers helped to identify their commanders.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, a list of 1351 suspected perpetrators appeared unofficially in a weekly magazine two months later.<sup>19</sup> In the meantime, the military court did not succeed in sentencing the junta commanders, and the government passed the trial to the Buenos Aires Federal Court of Criminal Appeals. Its prosecutors built their indictment on the best documented cases of the CONADEP report. The images of the accused junta commanders, the officers, and victim-survivors called to testify, were reproduced in a nationally distributed weekly (*El Diario del Juicio*) that transcribed the court testimonies. The appeals court convicted five junta members in December 1985 for organizing a criminal plan to abduct, torture, disappear, and assassinate Argentine civilians. Four members were acquitted.<sup>20</sup>

Argentina's Trial of the Juntas had opened the way for the indictment and public exposure of hundreds of high- and middle-ranking officers. Combining the location of secret detention centers with the military's command structure and the country's territorial defense organization into zones, subzones, areas, and subareas yielded the names of the commanding officers and other suspected perpetrators. A survivor opportunely handed the CONADEP and the courts a set of photos that he had managed to take of the secret detention center located at the Navy Mechanics School (ESMA) in Buenos Aires, which allowed the identification of the perpetrators who had operated there.<sup>21</sup> A retired army captain further documented the organization of the

18 CONADEP, *Nunca Más: The Report of the Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1986).

19 'Los nombres de la infamia', *El Periodista de Buenos Aires* (1.8), November 1984.

20 Americas Watch, *Truth and Partial Justice in Argentina: An Update* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1991); Antonius C. G. M. Robben, *Argentina Betrayed: Memory, Mourning, and Accountability* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), pp. 153-162.

21 Claudia Feld, '¿Hacer visible la desaparición?: las fotografías de detenidos-desaparecidos de la ESMA en el testimonio de Basterra', *Clepsidra*, 1 (2014), 28-51 <<https://ojs.ides.org.ar/index.php/Clepsidra/article/view/473/291>> [accessed 11 July 2023].

military repression and revealed the principal officers by name and image.<sup>22</sup> In addition, an Argentine human rights organization issued a report with the names of 692 members of the armed and security forces that were considered responsible for the secret detention centers.<sup>23</sup> The perpetrators correspond to the following comprehensive definition: 'Perpetrators are active participants in state institutions and repressive organizations or informal associations and networks who carry out genocide, mass killings, or violent acts for the presumed greater good of the state, a people, or an ideology'.<sup>24</sup>

A shifting power balance of the government and the armed forces, after exactly three years of democracy, resulted in a reassessment of the status of indicted and convicted perpetrators. Fearing the destabilization of Argentina's democracy and trying to appease the growing military resentment against the trials, the government passed the Full Stop Law in December 1986 and the Due Obedience Law in June 1987 that brought the trials to a standstill. Human rights organizations drew up the balance sheet of these so-called impunity laws with detailed profiles of the beneficiaries. Their aim was to contribute to people's social memory and ostracize the amnestied perpetrators from Argentine society.<sup>25</sup>

The persistent demand for the truth by the dictatorship's victims gave rise to the so-called Truth Trials (*Juicios por la Verdad*), in which dozens of military and police officers of middle and lower ranks had to appear in court as witnesses, not as defendants. They had to declare under oath, and risked being tried for perjury if they didn't tell the truth. In these non-punitive trials, a vast amount of information about the perpetrators of clandestine detention centers was collected at a time when the impunity laws were still in place.

It would take two decades before the impunity laws were derogated by Argentina's Supreme Court. The trials began again in 2006, but by that time the number of suspects of human rights violations had extended considerably beyond those identified in the years following the fall of the military dictatorship because of a redefinition of who was considered a perpetrator. By June 2023, 1,136 defendants had been

22 Federico Mittelbach, *Punto 30: Informe sobre Desaparecidos* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Urraca, 1986).

23 CELS, *Terrorismo de estado: 692 responsables* (Buenos Aires: Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales, 1986).

24 Robben and Hinton, p. 6.

25 Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo and others, *Culpables para la sociedad, impunes por la ley* (Buenos Aires: Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales, 1988).

convicted, 171 had been acquitted, and 485 were under trial. A total of 1501 accused had died before appearing in court.<sup>26</sup> The convicted and accused included clergymen, physicians, judges, attorneys, notaries, a journalist, and businessmen. Who was suspected of being a perpetrator expanded from members of the armed and security forces that had ordered or carried out the crimes against humanity to include persons who had facilitated those crimes. Michael Rothberg has given thought to this expanded group with the term *implicated subject*. He does not reject perpetrator as an analytical category but wants to examine people who are enmeshed in harm they did not order or commit. Implicated subjects are ‘people who are entangled in injustices that fall outside the purview of the law’, because ‘perpetration is often facilitated by a network of implicated subjects (co-workers, friends, family members, lobbyists, politicians, etc.).’<sup>27</sup> The analytical category *implicated subject* shows that the boundaries between perpetrators and accomplices, and perpetrators and victims, are not drawn easily. With respect to the latter, child soldiers in Africa were regarded legally but not morally accountable for their horrendous crimes because of their forced recruitment.<sup>28</sup> In Argentina, the few cases of detainees who participated with perpetrators in torture sessions were not formally charged because they were considered victims too. Concerning the former, the increasing number of convicted Argentine defendants who were not material authors of perpetration but collaborators, accomplices, and auxiliaries of the armed and security forces shows that the definition of who is classified as a perpetrator is variable.

The answer to the question of what defined the perpetrators in Argentina was broader during the human rights trials in 2006 than in 1986 when the prosecution and many Argentines considered the military and the police as the sole culprits of the crimes against humanity. Furthermore, investigative journalists and Argentine scholars, many of whom knew victim-survivors and disappeared captives personally,

26 Procuraduría de Crímenes contra la Humanidad, *Estado actual del proceso de juzgamiento de crímenes contra la humanidad* (Buenos Aires: Ministerio Público Fiscal, 2023) <[https://www.fiscales.gob.ar/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/01.-LESA-infografia-junio\\_2023.pdf](https://www.fiscales.gob.ar/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/01.-LESA-infografia-junio_2023.pdf)> [accessed 10 December 2023].

27 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 8 and p. 12; see also the special section on Rothberg's book in Susanne Knittel and Sofia Forchieri (eds.), ‘Special Section on Michael Rothberg's *The Implicated Subject*’, *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 3.1 (2020), 3-66 <<https://jpr.winchesterniversitypress.org/4/volume/3/issue/1/>> [accessed 7 December 2023].

28 Alcinda Honwana, *Child Soldiers in Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), pp. 54-74.



were uninterested or afraid to study perpetrators. Mainly, it was politically controversial to approach the universe of the perpetrators because it aroused the suspicion of complicity or could be perceived as a way to disavow the political struggle of the victims and their relatives. Identified perpetrators were regarded by the human rights movement as members of the armed and security forces that were collectively guilty of state terrorism, whereas the military and police saw themselves as either victors or victims.<sup>29</sup> However, they were not victims, but persons with agency, albeit acting within an atrocity-producing dictatorship. Perpetrators are not one-dimensional evildoers but complex individuals with different personalities, statuses, and social backgrounds. These multiple components enter into their violent acts in service of an ideology, a nation, or a state.<sup>30</sup>

Nearly half a century has passed since the Argentine armed forces grabbed power through a military coup and installed a state terrorism that caused the crimes against humanity for which the perpetrators were convicted. Many perpetrators have died since then, and just as many are in prison or under house detention. They have lost their aura of absolute power and no longer pose a threat. The reluctance of Argentine scholars to study perpetrators has therefore worn off. The first scholarly studies about Argentine perpetrators were influenced by the Holocaust literature. Perpetrators tended to be understood in the late-1990s as amoral *bureaucrats*<sup>31</sup> or fanatic *crusaders*.<sup>32</sup> The former were thought of as part of a machinery of disappearance and the latter as adherents of the counterinsurgency doctrine and catholic integralism. Towards the new millennium, the approach to perpetrators was carried out in two growing fields of study in Argentina: Memory Studies and Repression Studies. They developed an innovative methodology for local research that included interviews, participant observation, focus groups, and the study of recently declassified intelligence archives and judicial sources. A wide corpus of social research emerged that investigated the problem of the subjectivity and agency of the perpe-

29 Valentina Salvi, "We're All Victims": Changes in the Narrative of "National Reconciliation" in Argentina, *Latin American Perspectives*, 42.3 (2015), 39-51 <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0094582X15570890>> [accessed 11 July 2023].

30 Robben and Hinton, pp. 10-14.

31 Pilar Calveiro, *Poder y desaparición: Los campos de concentración en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 1998); Héctor Schmucler, 'El olvido del Mal: La construcción técnica de la desaparición en Argentina', *Artefacto*, 3 (1999), 157-170.

32 Hugo Vezzetti, *Pasado y presente: Guerra, dictadura y sociedad en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2002).

trators, their beliefs and worldviews,<sup>33</sup> the discourses and narratives with which they justified, vindicated, denied, or — on the contrary — retrospectively admitted the acts committed,<sup>34</sup> and the memories and commemorative practices with which the perpetrators disputed their interpretations of Argentina's past.<sup>35</sup>

This special section consists of four articles. Claudia Feld examines the visibility of perpetrators, in particular how photographs of Frigate Lieutenant Alfredo Astiz put a face on Argentina's forced disappearances and gave him a public exposure that eventually led to life imprisonment. Astiz came to represent the cruelty and deviousness of Argentine perpetrators. Whereas the junta commanders and high-ranking officers were often in the news media during the dictatorship, the low-ranking military and police who carried out the state terrorism were not. Feld makes creative use of Gilles Deleuze's concept *dispositif* to analyze how the social construction of Astiz as a perpetrator was fashioned from the interlinkages of news photos, captions, print formats, accompanying texts, and media circulation.

Astiz became known by name as a perpetrator in October 1979 after the testimonies of three former disappeared persons made in the French parliament. They revealed that he had infiltrated meetings of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, had presented false identity papers, and pretended to be searching for his disappeared brother. He was remembered by the mothers as tall, blonde, and handsome. The undercover operation resulted in the disappearance of twelve persons, including two French nuns who assisted the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in their search. Astiz was also linked to a failed attempt to infiltrate a group of Argentine exiles living in France, and for being the naval attaché in South Africa. Months later, he was denounced for killing a Swedish-Argentine teenager in Buenos Aires. Feld shows how the accusations, identification, and physical description intertwined with several photographs that appeared in the South African press in October 1981 and February 1982. Another picture was published in European

33 Santiago Garaño, *Deseo de combate y muerte: El terrorismo de Estado como casa de hombres* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica Argentina, 2023); Valentina Salvi, 'Autonomía, contrainteligencia y política: Un estudio sobre el Grupo de Tareas 3.3 de la ESMA (1976-1978)', *Contemporánea: historia y problemas del siglo XX*, 16 (2022), 136-154 <<https://ojs.fhce.edu.uy/index.php/cont/article/view/1665/2095>> [accessed 10 October 2023].

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

35 Valentina Salvi, *De vencedores a víctimas: Memorias castrenses sobre el pasado reciente en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2012).

newspapers in May 1982. Astiz is seen signing his rendition to British naval officers after an unsuccessful undercover operation on the South Georgia Islands. Rather than describing him as the protagonist of a botched mission during the Falklands/Malvinas War, his image was associated with his earlier reputation as a brutal torturer. Feld shows how the identification of Frigate Lieutenant Alfredo Astiz as a perpetrator was a convoluted process in which the photographs became symbolic representations of his crimes and those of the military dictatorship.

The process of knowing perpetrators is not only historical, political, and judicial but also epistemological and methodological. Valentina Salvi describes how her fieldwork among retired army officers was met with disbelief by her professional colleagues. They considered perpetrators as abject human beings and untrustworthy informants, and implicitly shed doubt on her ethics and moral compass, tacitly suggesting that she was somehow taking sides. These critical remarks influenced Salvi's understanding of perpetrators, and how to study them.

Salvi interviewed officers who had participated in a major counterinsurgency campaign (1975–1977) against the Marxist People's Revolutionary Army or ERP (*Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo*) in the northwest of Argentina that tried to create a liberated zone in the mountainous jungle of Tucumán Province. The military's offensive operations were complemented by state terrorism in urban areas where workers, teachers, activists, and others accused of aiding the guerrillas were disappeared. This dual strategy complicated the question of who could be regarded as a perpetrator. Had the retired officers also been involved in the disappearances, and if so, would that require a different approach to the interviews? As a young woman, Salvi created a neutral physical appearance and crafted a biography that would make her more acceptable to her interviewees. Her presentation influenced the tone, style, openness, and content of the meetings, and affected the dynamics of her relationship with the retired officers. Her fieldwork exposed them as manipulative and secretive individuals who highlighted their victimhood, esprit de corps, and heroism. They made it clear that the Argentine military had sacrificed their lives to defend the country's Christian faith and Western culture. The officers boasted about their contribution to the counterinsurgency campaign in Tucumán Province against the Marxist guerrillas but were less forthcoming about their possible participation in state terrorism, and distanced themselves from sadistic torture and covert assassinations to distinguish themselves as warriors from the perpetrators of crimes against humanity.

Salvi's presentation of her research findings at a professional meeting evoked a criticism that reiterated the reservations expressed earlier by her colleagues. Instead of discouraging her, these dismissive commentaries convinced her to shift her analysis from the content to the form of the military narratives, and made her aware of the military's concerted efforts to influence her understanding. They wanted her to see them as combatants and victims instead of perpetrators. This projected image also served their self-perception as heroes by dissociating themselves from the crimes against humanity for which they were blamed by most Argentines.

The attributes that distinguish perpetrators from accomplices are questioned in Santiago Garaño's article. Having participated in the army during the dictatorship as a private or guard does not necessarily mean being considered a perpetrator, as Garaño shows in relation to two specific cases of conscripts and gendarmes. Between February 1975 and December 1977, both groups participated in Operation Independence (Operativo Independencia), a counterinsurgency campaign against rural guerrillas in the jungle of Tucumán Province under the command of army officers; some of whom had been studied by Valentina Salvi. Conscripts were forced to go to the southern region of Tucumán Province. They could not refuse, as they could be considered deserters and face legal and personal consequences. The gendarmerie was mobilized to provide logistical support to the army in its repressive actions, and some of its members took up posts as guards, drivers, or cooks.

The fluid position of soldiers and gendarmes on the spectrum between material authors of violence and implicated subjects, between perpetrators and accomplices, was revealed when both groups testified about what they had seen. Some testimonies were given to the CONADEP truth commission (1984), others during trials for crimes against humanity (2006). In their statements, ex-soldiers and ex-gendarmes gave crucial details of what they had seen as privileged witnesses of the repressive apparatus and its forced disappearances. They also described the strict rules through which information was compartmentalized and concealed, and silence was imposed under threat on the low-ranking members of the repressive system. Garaño shows how a climate of generalized suspicion — in which gendarmes and soldiers were perceived by officers as potential subversives or collaborators of the guerrillas — transformed them into potential victims. This article

provides ethnographic insights into the problematic schemas and conceptual boundaries that separate perpetrators from victims.

The overlap or correspondence between an extended social representation of perpetrators, and the repeated accounts of Argentine officers convicted of crimes against humanity, is the unexpected starting point of Analía Goldentul's reflection. Between 2015 and 2017, Goldentul visited various federal prisons in the province of Buenos Aires and had regular contact with convicted officers who had held lower ranks during the dictatorship. It was not easy to gain access to the 'crimes against humanity pavilions' (*pabellones de lesa humanidad*) and get in contact with imprisoned officers. One of Rothberg's implicated subjects, the son of an officer serving a life sentence and an active member of organizations advocating freedom for the detainees, helped Goldentul to visit his father. During the interviews conducted in prison, the father and other convicted officers repeated time and again the same justifications of the so-called fight against subversion. At the time, Goldentul felt that her fieldwork was a complete failure and did not provide the expected material for a convincing analysis.

Goldentul's article rethinks this apparent failure and delves into unexpected aspects of the ethnographic interaction with perpetrators. It considers, on the one hand, the sensations experienced during the interviews, such as boredom and getting used to listening to monotheistic justifications and, on the other hand, reflects on the consequences of being in contact with officers who lost their privileged social status. In prison, the 'lords of life and death', as they were called in the clandestine detention centers, or 'the moral reserve of the nation', as they used to see themselves, became marginalized individuals degraded in their position by the social and legal condemnation. In response to that situation, the officers developed strategies to counteract their loss of status and tried to manipulate the interviews. The conditions of their confinement and the difficulties to access healthcare were recurring topics of conversation. Using the humanitarian language they used to reject during the dictatorship, the perpetrators presented themselves as victims who provoked an uncomfortable empathy that Goldentul problematizes. The encounters also revealed a persistent social order in which the interaction between a young female researcher and older male officers became opportunities to enact traditional gender hierarchies. In sum, this article considers the inseparable relation between past and present, and between what perpetrators were and what they have become.

Naming someone publicly a perpetrator is a serious matter that is generally brought before a court of law where the evidence is weighed, and a verdict is pronounced. However, the four articles in this section show that people do not become perpetrators once they are sentenced in court but when the perpetration begins, and victims and witnesses are made. Perpetration is a process whose meanings and consequences are shaped and reshaped in dynamic contexts, to such an extent that Argentine perpetrators convicted for crimes against humanity consider themselves as being political prisoners and even victims. Not the act of perpetration, but its temporality construes when perpetrators become known, how they are known and why they are known. The articles in this special section demonstrate that the predicament of perpetrators is subject to national and international developments that may hold them accountable for their deeds but may also free them from prosecution when national reconciliation and restorative justice are believed to heal the nation. Such changing circumstances, often unexpected, demand a great conceptual and methodological versatility from perpetrator researchers. They need to work with concepts and theories that can accommodate the changing political contexts and classifications of perpetrators. Perpetrator researchers therefore need to cultivate the art of improvisation and master a wide array of research methods to adapt their research project to new developments because the data are constructed in interaction with the perpetrators. The social classification and scholarly interpretation of these paradoxical figures depends on the dynamic context and the researcher's subjectivity and positionality, as is shown in an exemplary fashion by the contributors to this special section about Argentina.

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**Antonius C. G. M. Robben** is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. His most recent book (co-authored with Alex Hinton) is *Perpetrators: Encountering Humanity’s Dark Side* (Stanford University Press, 2023).

**Valentina Salvi** is a Researcher at the National Council of Scientific Research (CONICET) in Argentina. She is the author of *Vencedores a víctimas: Memorias militares sobre el pasado reciente en la Argentina* (Biblos, 2012), and edited with Claudia Feld, *Las voces de la represión: Las declaraciones de los perpetradores de la dictadura argentina* (Miño y Dávila, 2019).

## How do Perpetrators Become Visible?

### Photographs and Visibility *Dispositifs* in the Identification of a Perpetrator During the Argentine Dictatorship

Claudia Feld

**Abstract:** This article examines the connections between forced disappearances in Argentina, the public visibility of perpetrators, and the role of photographic images. It focuses on Alfredo Astiz, who was identified during the dictatorship for his involvement in two internationally renowned abduction cases: the disappearance of the Swedish teenager Dagmar Hagelin and the abduction of the French nuns Alice Domon and Léonie Duquet, who were taken to the Navy Mechanics School or ESMA (Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada). By analysing two series of photographs of Astiz that were published during the dictatorship, along with the accompanying texts and paratexts circulating at the time, and within the contexts, settings, and media that facilitated the identification and visibility of this perpetrator, this article sheds light on the dynamics, limitations, tensions, and opportunities presented by images of the figure of the perpetrator. The article proposes to understand visibility *dispositifs* as specific tools for investigating the visual representation of perpetrators and the complex processes involved in constructing meanings around perpetration over time. In the more specific field of forced disappearance studies, this text aims to discuss the role of images in making perpetrators visible, thus shifting the research focus away from the photographs of victims, which have been extensively examined in previous work. Its uniqueness also lies in considering this issue within a dictatorial rather than a transitional or post-conflict context.

**Keywords:** photography, visibility *dispositif*, perpetrators, dictatorship, ESMA, Argentina, Astiz

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## Introduction

**F**rigate Lieutenant Alfredo Astiz was one of the perpetrators at the clandestine detention centre (*centro clandestino de detención*, CCD) located in the Navy School of Mechanics (*Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada*, ESMA) in Argentina.<sup>1</sup> His infiltration into the human rights movement of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo to facilitate the kidnapping of a group of them and two French nuns in December 1977, as well as his involvement in the abduction of the Swedish teenager Dagmar Hagelin, brought him early attention in the public eye and through international denunciations. During the dictatorship (1976–83), when information about the CCDs was still scarce, Astiz was one of the few perpetrators, despite not holding a high-ranking position, who was denounced as being responsible for heinous crimes. Over time, he became one of the emblematic figures of the Argentine dictatorship.

Why was Astiz identified so early and how did he become known internationally? How was his visibility achieved, and what role did the publicly circulating photographs of Astiz play in this process? This article examines the social construction of the figure of the perpetrator, focusing on the links between forced disappearances, the public visibility of perpetrators, and the role of photographic images.

As a means of repression, forced disappearances sought to conceal the violence exerted, the victims, and the perpetrators from public view. Hundreds of CCDs spread throughout the country, allowing abductions, torture, and mass killings to occur clandestinely. The lack of information for the relatives of the disappeared, the denial of facts, systematic dictatorial propaganda, secrecy, and terror in addition to the perpetrators' use of aliases and *noms de guerre* during operations all contributed to the concealment of the perpetrators. In this context, the relatives of the victims and the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo attempted to 'make visible' the disappeared in order to break the silence. Their public actions were extensive, early, and ongoing. Over time, a significant portion of commemorative activity in Argentina focused on the identification and visibility of the victims; initiatives that have been exten-

1 This CCD operated in the city of Buenos Aires between 1976 and 1983, under the command of the Argentine Navy. It is estimated that approximately 5000 detainees passed through there, and less than 300 survived. For a history of this CCD and its operation, see *ESMA: Represión y poder en el centro clandestino de detención más emblemático de la última dictadura argentina*, ed. by Marina Franco and Claudia Feld (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2022).

sively studied.<sup>2</sup> However, little research has been conducted on how the perpetrators were identified and made publicly visible through images, especially during the military regime.<sup>3</sup> This article seeks to broaden the perspective on the use of images in the construction of narratives about forced disappearances and proposes to focus on the public visibility of the perpetrators, assuming that the few images of perpetrators that could be seen during the dictatorship complemented the denunciations and increased the public awareness of these crimes.

To accomplish this, I will analyse the visibility *dispositifs* that allowed the social construction of Astiz as a perpetrator during the dictatorship. I will examine two series of photographs that circulated in 1982, paying attention to the context of their production and circulation, the accompanying discourses, and media spaces. The notion of the 'visibility *dispositif*', which I borrow from Jacques Rancière,<sup>4</sup> captures the interrelation of these heterogeneous elements and enables an understanding of their specific combination at particular times to 'make visible' and give meaning to the construction of the perpetrator as a social category. According to Gilles Deleuze,<sup>5</sup> this combination, with its own 'regime of light' and 'regime of enunciation', is not a construction made deliberately by someone (an individual or a social actor) with a specific purpose. It is an array of components that allow

- 2 Among the many works that analyse political and aesthetic strategies to achieve visibility of the disappeared in public space, especially through photographic images, see Ludmila Da Silva Catela, 'Lo invisible revelado: El uso de fotografías como (re) presentación de la desaparición de personas en la Argentina', in *Independencia*, ed. by Claudia Feld and Jessica Stites Mor (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2009), pp. 337-361; Ana Longoni, 'Fotos y siluetas: dos estrategias contrastantes en la representación de los desaparecidos', in *Los desaparecidos en Argentina: Memorias, representaciones e ideas (1983-2008)*, ed. by Emilio Crenzel (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2010), pp. 43-63; Gabriel Gatti, *El detenido-desaparecido: Narrativas posibles para una catástrofe de la identidad* (Montevideo: Trilce, 2008); and Vikki Bell, *The Art of Post-dictatorship: Ethics and Aesthetics in Transitional Argentina* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
- 3 Some significant works study the image of perpetrators in transitional or post-conflict stages, but not in contexts of mass violence or dictatorship. See Susanne C. Knittel, *The Historical Uncanny: Disability, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Holocaust Memory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015); and Michelle E. Anderson, 'Perpetrator Trauma, Empathic Unsettlement, and the Uncanny: Conceptualizations of Perpetrators in South Africa's Truth Commission Special Report', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 2.1 (2018), 95-118 <<https://jpr.winchesteruniversitypress.org/articles/10.21039/jpr.2.1.17>> [accessed 12 July 2023].
- 4 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009), p. 102. The term *dispositif* is often translated as 'apparatus' in English-language publications. I prefer to keep the word *dispositif* in French, as I believe it captures better the relationships between the different elements it is composed of and the dynamic and changing quality of these relationships.
- 5 Gilles Deleuze, 'What Is a *dispositif*?', in *Michel Foucault: Philosopher*, ed. by François Ewald, trans. by Timothy J. Armstrong (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 160.

for the visibility of that object, endowing it with characteristics of legibility and intelligibility. In Deleuze's conception:

These apparatuses [*dispositifs*], then, are composed of the following elements: lines of visibility and enunciation, lines of force, lines of subjectification, lines of splitting, breakage, fracture, all of which criss-cross and mingle together, some lines reproducing or giving rise to others, by means of variations or even changes in the way they are grouped.<sup>6</sup>

It is not my intention to discuss here the category of the *dispositif*, introduced and developed in the 1970s by Michel Foucault<sup>7</sup> and then adopted in various studies and reflections, to the point that, as Óscar Moro Abadía writes, it has become a 'container concept'<sup>8</sup> that can be applied to multiple perspectives and research objects. Rather, I am interested in understanding its potential to investigate and interrogate different modalities of visibility. In this sense, the notion of 'visibility *dispositif*' (*dispositif de visibilité*), allows us to emphasize what Deleuze calls 'lines of visibility', without neglecting the relations of the visible with the utterable, the multiple temporalities that a *dispositif* combines, and the lines of force between the different elements (images, texts, and arrangement of bodies, etc.). Faced with the vast controversies that have confronted the value of the testimonial word with the value of documentary images to account for the Nazi extermination,<sup>9</sup> Rancière responds by saying that it would be a mistake to separate the image from the word, that both 'mediums' are part of the same visibility *dispositif* that 'creates a certain sense of reality, a certain common sense.'<sup>10</sup>

In this respect, the *dispositif*, as has already been pointed out in various works,<sup>11</sup> does not refer to individual elements (in our case, the photos of Astiz, the discourses that accompanied them, the information that circulated, and the accumulated knowledge about the disappearances up to that moment, etc.) but to the mesh or network that unites

6 Ibid., p. 162.

7 Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

8 Óscar Moro Abadía, '¿Qué es un dispositivo?', *Empiria: Revista de Metodología de Ciencias Sociales*, 6 (2003), 29-46 (p. 31) <<https://revistas.uned.es/index.php/empiria/article/view/933>> [accessed 16 October 2023].

9 This controversy is developed by, among others, Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2003).

10 Rancière, p. 102.

11 See, among others, Deleuze, 'What is a dispositif?'; and Giorgio Agamben, '¿Qué es un dispositivo?', *Sociológica*, 26.73 (2011), 249-264.

them: the system of relationships that allows them to be understood together. These relations do not obey a prior hierarchy and do not condense a definitive meaning. According to Rancière, the processes of figuration are at once processes of condensation and displacement.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the condensations of meaning are provisional, and the trajectories are more significant than the points of departure or arrival. This quality of constant movement does not prevent moments of collision or coincidence, in which images — within the framework of the visibility *dispositif* — produce strong figures or more socially accepted readings (even though the readings and circuits of reception are also part of the *dispositif*). As Laura Basu reminds us, the *dispositif* allows us to observe ‘tendencies’ rather than finished processes.<sup>13</sup>

In this way, what matters to me is to point out that the visibility *dispositif* is always open and in transformation. The temporal dimension is, therefore, a fundamental element that will be included in this analysis. On the other hand, it is necessary to clarify that in this analysis I will not emphasize the power-knowledge relations present in any *dispositif*;<sup>14</sup> although I am interested in addressing two issues. First, to recall that — as Rancière has pointed out — every visibility *dispositif* allows for a certain distribution of the sensible that is intrinsically political.<sup>15</sup> Second, that the *dispositif* is traversed by ‘lines of force’, as already indicated by Deleuze, which I understand here as tensions — which are not necessarily resolved — in the space of the visible. In short, my analysis will address three issues: the conjunction of diverse elements, the temporalities and transformations, and the tensions that run through the *dispositifs*.

By pointing out that perpetrators can be seen through visibility *dispositifs*, I aim to avoid a naïve consideration of images in the study of the construction of the figure of the perpetrator, which would lead to the belief that, once identified, photographed, and exhibited, perpetrators are socially visible.<sup>16</sup> In this article, the *dispositif* will be considered as a methodological tool to relate and juxtapose what is shown and what is said in specific circumstances. As Rancière has noted regarding Holo-

<sup>12</sup> Rancière, p. 94.

<sup>13</sup> Laura Basu, ‘Memory *Dispositifs* and National Identities: The Case of Ned Kelly’, *Memory Studies*, 4.1 (2011), 33–41 (p. 34).

<sup>14</sup> Agamben, p. 250.

<sup>15</sup> Rancière, p. 56.

<sup>16</sup> This approach to images and the need for their social legibility is based on the perspective developed by Georges Didi-Huberman in *Images malgré tout*.

caust images, visibility *dispositifs* allow us to understand the system of relationships and tensions 'between the visible and the invisible, the visible and speech, the said and the unsaid'.<sup>17</sup>

To do so, I will first provide a brief overview of the case of Astiz and how he was individualized and identified between 1977 and 1979 through testimonies and denunciations. Then, I will focus on two series of photographs taken in October 1981 and April 1982, respectively, in two different places: South Africa and the South Georgia Islands. Based on this case, I will make more general observations about the capabilities, limitations, and demands of images in facilitating (or hindering) the public visibility of perpetrators involved in forced disappearances.<sup>18</sup>

### 'The blond angel': Early Testimonies about Astiz

The complaints and testimonies that circulated through humanitarian networks during the Argentine dictatorship served as initial visibility *dispositifs* to explain and give a name to the crime of forced disappearance. They were also fundamental in denouncing the perpetrators that survivors had seen in clandestine detention centres. In that context, both the lists of victims and the lists of perpetrators constituted a substantial part of the denunciations, even when the witnesses did not always know their full names: often, aliases and incomplete or misspelled names were intermingled with the real ones.

The case of the ESMA is unique because during the dictatorship there were some very detailed testimonies that gained international circulation, especially between 1978 and 1980.<sup>19</sup> In those early accounts, detailed information about two internationally denounced kidnapping

17 Rancière, p. 93.

18 It is necessary to clarify that this article will not focus on examining the subsequent uses of the photographs studied here, or the memory discourse around the perpetrator Astiz once the dictatorship ended. Although my perspective as a researcher is 'in-formed' by such memory discourse, it will not be the specific object of inquiry in this case. Additionally, the scope of this article does not allow for an extensive discussion of the theoretical and conceptual foundations in the field of image and photography. Nevertheless, my objective is to intervene in this field with a very specific focus, which is the debate on the social visibility of forced disappearances, as mentioned in footnote 2.

19 Rodrigo González Tizón, "Los desaparecidos empiezan a hablar": una aproximación histórica a la producción testimonial de los sobrevivientes de la dictadura desde el exilio (1976-1983), *Páginas*, 13.31 (2021), 1-34 <<https://revistapaginas.unr.edu.ar/index.php/RevPaginas/article/view/475>> [accessed 12 July 2023].

operations had a particular impact. The first one took place in January 1977 and concerned a seventeen-year-old Swedish-Argentine teenager named Dagmar Hagelin as the victim. The other case involved two French nuns, Alice Domon and Léonie Duquet, who were abducted in December 1977 along with a group of relatives of the disappeared who used to gather at the Santa Cruz Church in Buenos Aires. Much later, it was discovered that Alfredo Astiz of the ESMA's Task Force (*Fuerza de Tareas*)<sup>20</sup> played a crucial role in both kidnappings.

In January 1977, Astiz and several comrades from his Task Force were lying in wait at the residence of Norma Burgos, who had been detained the previous evening. At that moment, Dagmar Hagelin arrived at the scene looking for her friend Norma, not suspecting that an armed group of men were guarding the house. They mistook her for someone else, and Astiz shot her from behind when she fled into the street. She was captured and taken wounded to the ESMA. From there, according to several witnesses, she was *trasladada* (transferred) without anyone knowing anything more about her. In the lexicon of the clandestine detention centres, the term *traslado* (transfer) was a euphemism for assassination.

In a second operation that began in July 1977, Astiz infiltrated the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo that gathered at the Santa Cruz Church, presented himself under the pseudonym of Gustavo Niño, and falsely claimed that he was searching for his disappeared brother. A few months later, he acted as an informer in the abduction of twelve people from that group, including the two French nuns Alice Domon and Léonie Duquet.<sup>21</sup>

These operations quickly turned into international complaints. Dagmar's father, Ragnar Hagelin, took the protest to the Swedish embassy.<sup>22</sup> Several months later, the French embassy in Buenos Aires lodged a complaint with the Argentine Ministry of Foreign Affairs re-

20 The disappearances in Argentina were carried out by military Task Forces (*Fuerzas de Tareas*, or FTs) that organized the logistic, operational, and intelligence actions. Astiz was a member of FT 3.3 that was comprised mostly of navy officers and was located at ESMA's secret detention centre.

21 In 1977, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo held meetings in churches, such as Santa Cruz, to avoid the persecution of their members. Other people who collaborated with the Mothers went to these meetings, such as the French nun Alice Domon, who was kidnapped on 8 December 1977 in the operation carried out in the Santa Cruz church following Astiz's infiltration. The other nun, Léonie Duquet, who shared Domon's home, was abducted from her house on 10 December.

22 Ragnar Hagelin's testimony in the trial of the former commanders was published in the eighteenth volume of *El Diario del Juicio* magazine; see 'Testimonio del señor Ragnar Hagelin', *Diario del Juicio*, 24 September 1985, pp. 403-408 (p. 406).



questing information about the two disappeared nuns.<sup>23</sup> Early testimonies from ESMA survivors in 1978 specifically mention these two cases, but without yet associating them with the perpetrator Alfredo Astiz.<sup>24</sup>

In March 1978, Astiz was sent to France on a mission to infiltrate a group of Argentine exiles organized in the Argentine Committee of Information and Solidarity (CAIS), where he presented himself under the pseudonym of Alberto Escudero. There, he was recognized by one of the exiles who had previously attended the meetings at Santa Cruz Church.<sup>25</sup> This is how the relatives of the disappeared confirmed that the person who had betrayed them was the man who had joined them for months as Gustavo Niño. However, this undercover agent of the Argentine Navy had not yet been identified by his real name Alfredo Astiz.

Shortly after, new testimonies from ESMA survivors put the pieces together and the name of Astiz became associated with these two internationally prominent cases: particularly, the October 1979 testimonies of three women before the French National Assembly, and the December 1979 testimony of survivor Norma Burgos in Stockholm. The testimony of the three women described the kidnapping operation at the Santa Cruz Church, stating that Frigate Lieutenant Astiz had 'a leading role in the infiltration, pretending to be a relative of a disappeared person.'<sup>26</sup> Burgos's testimony placed Astiz at the scene of Hagelin's abduction, identifying him as the perpetrator who shot the teenager in the head from behind.<sup>27</sup>

23 Maria Soledad Catoggio and Claudia Feld, 'Narrativas memoriales y reclamos diplomáticos a la dictadura militar: Francia y Estados Unidos frente al caso de las monjas francesas desaparecidas en la Argentina (diciembre 1977 - noviembre 1978)', *Pasado y Memoria: Revista de Historia Contemporánea*, 20 (2020), 141-170 <<https://pasadoymemoria.ua.es/article/view/2020-n20-narrativas-memoriales-y-reclamos-diplomaticos-a-la-dict>> [accessed 12 July 2023].

24 Testimony before the Argentine Commission of Human Rights (*Comisión Argentina de Derechos Humanos*, or CADHU) by Horacio Domingo Maggio. Maggio had escaped from the ESMA and gave his testimony in March 1978, before being recaptured and assassinated. Maggio's complaint consisted of handwritten letters sent to different human rights organizations, including CADHU. Those allegations were not published in a report. The document is preserved in the National Memory Archive and can be accessed online via the following link: <<https://catalogo.jus.gob.ar/index.php/testimonio-ofrecido-por-horacio-domingo-maggio-fugado-en-un-traslado-desde-la-escuela-de-mec-nica-de-la-armada>>. Astiz's name is mentioned on page 5.

25 'Policier argentin à Paris pour espionner les réfugiés', *Le Matin*, 15/16 April 1978, p. 9.

26 See Ana María Martí, Alicia Milia de Pirlés, and Sara Solarz de Osatinsky, *Testimonios de los sobrevivientes del genocidio en la Argentina* (Madrid: CADHU, 1980).

27 See: Testimony of Norma Susana Burgos before the Swedish government, 13 December 1979. Available at: <<http://www.desaparecidos.org/arg/victimas/h/hagelin/Testimonio.htm>>.

It is important to emphasize that at that time, Astiz began to gain public attention, not so much for the scale of his crimes or his particular personality as a perpetrator, but because of the status of his victims. The vulnerability of an adolescent and two nuns, combined with their foreign status, made these kidnappings scandalous acts, and placed their perpetrator in a position of public condemnation and particular visibility. Proof of this is that the same testimony of the three survivors described in detail the atrocious torture sessions carried out by another ESMA perpetrator, Antonio Pernías, which did not have any significant repercussions until much later.<sup>28</sup>

In the descriptions of Astiz acting in these circumstances that started to become known, another element magnified the ominous nature of his situation: the stark contrast between his appearance and his criminal actions. Testimonies from several mothers of the infiltrated group recalled him as a young man with a good presence: physically strong, tall, blonde, and with light-coloured eyes.<sup>29</sup> According to one testimony, Astiz ‘incited others to protect him because of his childlike expression and gentle gaze, and that was the feeling he inspired [...] in the mothers at that time’.<sup>30</sup> This sinister contrast between his supposedly angelic face (and the nickname ‘the blond angel’ by which he became known) and his crimes is evident in many of the early testimonies about Astiz.<sup>31</sup>

Unlike the hundreds of perpetrators in the CCDs, Astiz had been seen in public. But the public vision of Astiz as the ‘blond angel’ was a delusion, a trap, used to ensnare his prey. Astiz’s face appears, from these early accounts, as the surface where falsehood is inscribed, like a veil that conceals the atrocious scene that his victims could not know. In this context, ‘making the perpetrator visible’ was not so much about knowing exactly what Astiz had done, as his actions in the ESMA were little known, but about deciphering that delusion and the interplay of tensions between him and his personas, Astiz and Gustavo Niño, and

28 The name of Pernías did not gain public visibility until 1994 when his promotion in the navy was halted in the national senate due to the accusations made by human rights organizations. See Horacio Verbitsky, *El vuelo* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1995).

29 See Uki Goñi, *Judas: La Verdadera Historia de Alfredo Astiz, El Infiltrado* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1996), pp. 44-45; and Leigh A. Payne, *Unsettling Accounts: Neither Truth nor Reconciliation in Confessions of State Violence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 75-77.

30 Haydée Segura de Maratea, Testimony quoted in the Habeas Corpus petition filed by relatives of the disappeared in August 1983 (Case CONSUFA, Body 06, Page 1741).

31 Martí, Pirlés, and Osatinsky.

between the infiltrator and the young man claiming to search for his brother. Thus, this initial visibility *dispositif* constituted by these denunciations and early testimonies (before any photo of Astiz circulated publicly) highlights the betrayal and abuse suffered by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. During the dictatorship, the notion of ‘the blond angel’, that angelic figure concealing the worst demon, became — for the families of the disappeared and humanitarian networks — an emblem in itself, condensing the hidden atrocities endured by the abducted and symbolizing the threat looming over those who were searching for them.

### **‘Envoys of horror’: A Repressor Discovered in South Africa**

In 1979, as part of the announced visit to Argentina by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) of the Organization of American States (OAS), the ESMA Task Force restructured its personnel, sending several perpetrators as naval attachés abroad. In June 1979, Astiz travelled to Pretoria, South Africa, where former ESMA Director Rubén Chamorro and Task Force (FT) Intelligence Chief Jorge Acosta had also been assigned.<sup>32</sup> It was there where the complaints and inquiries regarding the abduction of Dagmar Hagelin followed Astiz.

In March 1980, after a diplomatic exchange between Sweden and Argentina that ended with Argentine President Videla feigning a lack of knowledge about Hagelin’s whereabouts, the Swedish government released information that Astiz was in the naval attaché’s office in Pretoria, accompanied by his passport photo.<sup>33</sup> The case became a scandal in South Africa, where journalist William Saunderson-Meyer published an extensive article about the situation of the perpetrator in October 1981 (Figure 1). Shortly after, he managed to take two photos of Astiz, which were published in the Sunday Tribune between late 1981 and early 1982 (Figures 2 and 3).

32 Fernández Barrio links some missions of ESMA perpetrators in foreign naval attachés, especially that of Astiz, with the need to hide from human rights accusations, as well as reasons related to the restructuring of the CCD. Facundo Fernández Barrio, ‘Circulación transnacional de represores durante la dictadura argentina: las misiones en el exterior de los ex miembros del Grupo de Tareas 3.3 de la ESMA (1979-1981)’ (Unpublished manuscript, 2020). Regarding the ESMA perpetrators and the central role played by Acosta, see Valentina Salvi, ‘El poder en las sombras: el GT de la ESMA’, in *ESMA: Represión y poder en el centro clandestino más emblemático de la última dictadura argentina*, ed. by Marina Franco and Claudia Feld (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2022), pp. 55-78.

33 ‘Testimonio del señor Ragnar Hagelin’, p. 406.



FIGURE 1. *Sunday Tribune*, October 10, 1981 (Public Domain)

The October 1981 article specifically exposed Astiz’s connection to the Hagelin case but also held him responsible for the other crimes committed in the ESMA: the disappearance of pregnant women, the appropriation of children, torture, and death flights.<sup>34</sup> In other articles, Chamorro and Acosta were mentioned as Astiz’s superiors, but they were not identified as the main individuals responsible for the crimes at the ESMA.<sup>35</sup>

Astiz described as the torturer and ‘officer in charge of all kidnapping operations at the School’<sup>36</sup> contrasted, in some way, with the photographic images circulating publicly. In one of them, Astiz poses facing forward, with a serious expression, in casual clothing, and with his shirt partially open (Figure 2). In the others, he is seen smiling (Figures

34 I have been unable to determine the origin of the photo of Astiz reproduced in this article. It was probably the ID photo released by the Swedish government. The photographs taken by the South African journalist were published in December 1981 and May 1982.

35 Chamorro, Acosta, and Perrén are characterized as torturers from the ESMA. William Saunderson-Meyer, ‘More Torturers at Pretoria Embassy’, *Sunday Tribune*, 25 October 1981.

36 William Saunderson-Meyer, ‘Envoys of Horror’, *Sunday Tribune*, 10 October 1981, p. 29.

3 and 4).<sup>37</sup> The journalist described in the article how he took the photo and mentioned that Astiz tried to snatch the camera away from him, but eventually agreed to pose for the newspaper.<sup>38</sup>

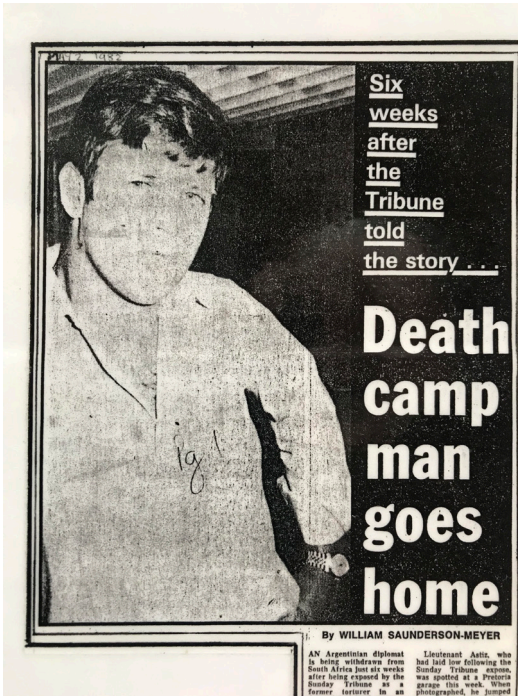


FIGURE 2. *Sunday Tribune*, December 6, 1981 (Public Domain)

- 37 The first photo was published in December 1981 and appeared on the cover of the newspaper. The second one was published in May 1982, illustrating an article about a medal awarded by the South African government to Astiz and other perpetrators from the naval attaché in Pretoria (Figures 2 and 3). Figure 3 shows how the *Sunday Tribune* cropped the original photo, which can be seen in Figure 4. The cropped version focuses on the face, excluding some significant details such as clothing, body position, and the surroundings where Astiz was located. The civilian attire worn by Astiz during infiltration operations, which was common among perpetrators operating within the ESMA, seems to have been the customary attire during his mission in Pretoria.
- 38 William Saunderson-Meyer, 'Death Camp Man Goes Home', *Sunday Tribune*, 6 December 1981, p. 1. In a personal interview, the journalist recounted that the frontal photo with Astiz posing seriously was taken first, and the photo of Astiz smiling was taken later when the naval officer was no longer posing for him. Online interview conducted with William Saunderson-Meyer by Claudia Feld and Dolores San Julián on 20 April 2022.



This visibility *dispositif* brings together, for the first time, the information and the images. What tensions result from this combination? Perhaps the most evident tension exists between secrecy and publicity, which runs through this entire journalistic production. In it, Astiz is 'discovered' and exposed abroad. It is uncertain how these reports resonated in Argentina and in other countries where he was being denounced.<sup>39</sup> Yet it is clear that it had effects in the South African political arena. The reports about the 'envoys of horror' in Pretoria sparked a series of demands from the political opposition in the South African parliament, calling for Astiz's expulsion. According to journalist Uki Goñi, the information 'shook the South African Minister of Foreign Affairs for not having noticed the presence of the Argentine perpetrators.'<sup>40</sup> The episode resulted in the Argentine government's decision to withdraw Astiz from South Africa in January 1982.<sup>41</sup>

On the other hand, the tension between the horrifying and the everyday, the secure and the threatening (that is, a tension that defines the uncanny)<sup>42</sup> also permeated the series of photos taken of Astiz in Pretoria. By analysing it, it is possible to hypothesize why the *Sunday Tribune* might use Astiz's image to make a denunciation that was both domestic and diplomatic. That man in civilian clothes, with a broad smile, fair skin, and light eyes, concealed the most terrible horrors reported in the news article.<sup>43</sup> Without explicitly stating it, Astiz's photo proved useful in pointing out to the readers of the *Sunday Tribune* (an opposition newspaper) that these Argentine 'torturers' had a similar appearance to those belonging to the White South African middle class

39 Regarding the circulation and impact of these news outside of South Africa, we have limited information and sources. Saunderson-Meyer, in the interview, states, 'I have no specific knowledge of where and when the articles were reproduced. As a matter of courtesy, I sent them to all the organizations and individuals I engaged with in France, Sweden, and the UK'. During those years, foreign newspapers circulated very restrictively in Argentina. Copies of some European and North American newspapers could be bought in specific locations in Buenos Aires (such as Calle Florida), but newspapers from other continents did not circulate, so it is likely that the news about Astiz in the *Sunday Tribune* reached the Argentine public much later, after its impact in other countries.

40 Goñi, p. 205.

41 Marisa Pineau, 'Vinculaciones de Argentina con la Sudáfrica del apartheid', in *La represión como política de Estado: Estudios sobre la violencia estatal en el siglo XX*, ed. by Gabriela Águila, Santiago Garaño, and Pablo Scatizza (Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi, 2020), p. 240.

42 Anderson, pp. 106-107.

43 The *Sunday Tribune* characterizes him as the officer in charge of 'all kidnapping and infiltration operations towards groups believed to be subversive'. See William Saunderson-Meyer, 'Horror Camp Men Now Envoys in S.A.', *Sunday Tribune*, 10 October 1981, p. 3.

aligned with the apartheid government.<sup>44</sup> In line with this, we also find a tension between the hidden and the visible, between what was shown and what remained in the shadows, because the most important figures of the ESMA, like Chamorro and Acosta — also hiding in South Africa — were not photographed or pursued in that same context.<sup>45</sup>

### The 'sadistic torturer': Astiz on the South Georgia Islands

After leaving Pretoria, Astiz embarked for the South Georgia Islands where, on 3 April 1982, once the Falklands/Malvinas War had begun, he took possession of the islands that had been under British control. This time participating in a conventional war (rather than a clandestine repressive campaign), Astiz surrendered to the British a few days later without having fought.<sup>46</sup>

On 26 April 1982, he is photographed signing the surrender of his troops before two British officers (Figure 5).<sup>47</sup> It is common to find in later documents the account that this photo allowed witnesses to 'recognize' Astiz and expose that the surrendered officer was also a perpetrator from the ESMA. It is often said that, thanks to that photo, the governments of Sweden and France demanded that this prisoner of war should not be returned by Great Britain to Argentina but tried in those countries.<sup>48</sup>

44 I thank Marisa Pineau for suggesting this interpretation in a personal conversation. According to Pineau, Astiz's physical appearance allowed the *Sunday Tribune* to denounce the White South African sectors that supported the regime; in contrast, neither Acosta nor Chamorro, with a very different physical appearance from Astiz's, could be associated, in the image, with the South African perpetrators.

45 This discrepancy is also confirmed when reviewing the different dates on which Astiz and Chamorro had to leave South Africa. The visibility of Astiz in late 1981 led to his expulsion from South Africa in January 1982, while Chamorro managed to stay in the country until February 1984 when he was expelled and had to appear before military courts in Argentina for allegations related to the ESMA, within the framework of the first trials carried out in Argentina during its return to democracy. See Pineau, p. 240.

46 Goñi, p. 206.

47 The moment is captured by a photographer from the British armed forces. In addition to this well-known photo, another one of the same event has circulated, in which the Englishmen are seen signing while Astiz observes them. Cora Gamarnik has investigated these photos and reports that, at one point, the British government had plans to print the photo of Astiz surrendering and make flyers to drop on the Falkland/Malvinas Islands, thereby demoralizing the Argentine troops in the midst of the war (personal conversation with Cora Gamarnik in March 2022).

48 Among many other sources, this account can be found in the Habeas Corpus petition signed by relatives of the disappeared individuals in ESMA on 9 August 1983. Case CONSUFA, Body 06, page 1744. See also Goñi, pp. 206-207.





FIGURE 5. Astiz signing the surrender of his troops in the South Georgia Islands on April 26, 1982 (Public Domain)

However, this account about the image faces a paradox in the sense that the alleged identification based on the photo of Astiz is an image where his face, shown in profile, with a grown beard and looking down, is difficult to recognize. This apparent contradiction led me to investigate how this visibility *dispositif* developed over time in the short period between Astiz's surrender (on 26 April 1982) and the publication of the photo in the international media (on 16 May 1982). My reconstruction of that period, comparing diplomatic documents with press coverage from France and Spain, allowed me to conclude that it was the Swedish and French diplomatic claims that triggered the publication of this photo, and not the other way around.<sup>49</sup>

My interpretation of the episode is that the British government made that image available in the specific context of agreeing — apparently questioned by international agreements concerning the treatment of prisoners of war — to keep Astiz in London while returning the rest of the prisoners of war to Argentina. Regarding this visibility

<sup>49</sup> The claims from Sweden and France to Great Britain were made on 7 May and 11 May 1982, respectively. On 13 May 1982, the British government sent all prisoners of war back to Argentina but agreed to retain Astiz in response to the Swedish and French requests. On 16 May 1982, Astiz's photo was published in several European newspapers, stating that he was sought out by both countries and that the photo was released by the British on 15 May 1982. See declassified diplomatic documents from the French government available at the Centre des Archives Diplomatiques, Série Amérique-Argentine, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Folder: 8000/305, Newspapers *El País* and *Diario 16* (Spain), *Le Monde* and *Libération* (France), between 26 April and 16 May 1982. Astiz's detention in London lasted until 10 June 1982, when invoking the Geneva Convention, the British government returned him to Argentina.

*dispositif*, it is important to underline that when the photo was published, it no longer revealed an anonymous perpetrator or a military officer surrendering in war, but rather a criminal sought after by two European countries.

The idea I would like to propose, reflecting on this image and its impact, is that although Astiz had already been sought out, identified, and denounced before the photo was published, the image still functioned as a tool to unmask him. Not necessarily because it publicly revealed the hidden perpetrator or showed the ‘other side’ of the surrendered military officer, but because the image contrasted with that of the persona of the ‘blond angel’. As both a uniformed combatant and a surrendering soldier, Astiz no longer displayed the sinister innocence conveyed by the testimonies of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. This is reinforced by the characterizations published in some European newspapers, stating that Astiz was ‘accused of multiple murders, rapes, and tortures’;<sup>50</sup> that he was ‘one of the most sadistic torturers of the Argentine Navy’;<sup>51</sup> and that ‘according to multiple testimonies, he raped a young Swedish woman and then threw her from a helicopter’.<sup>52</sup> The Spanish newspaper *El País* published the photo, stating in its caption that Astiz was accused of ‘having tortured a Swedish citizen and two French nuns before they were killed’.<sup>53</sup> As if marking the extreme vulnerability of his victims was not enough, the articles emphasized Astiz’s extreme cruelty with them. This characterization of Astiz and his role within the ESMA differs from many later testimonies.<sup>54</sup> However, it is useful to magnify, in that specific context, the visibility of this perpetrator and, at the same time, expose the terrible crimes committed by the Argentine dictatorship.

Within this visibility *dispositif*, one can also observe the tension between the persona of Astiz and the collective of Argentine military personnel (whether troops fighting in the Falklands/Malvinas or perpetrators of the

50 P. Sabatier, ‘Les Anglais gardent au frais “Le bourreau de Cordoba”’, *Libération*, 14 May 1982, p. 26.

51 ‘Intervention française contre la libération du “bourreau de Cordoba”’, *Libération*, 13 May 1982, p. 17.

52 Pierre Hasky, ‘Le Boucher de Córdoba’ aux fers dans une soutè’, *Libération*, 11 May 1982, p. 4.

53 ‘El capitán Alfredo Astiz en el momento de firmar la rendición’, *El País*, 16 May 1982, p. 1.

54 Astiz’s role as a member of the Task Force dedicated to kidnapping individuals has been corroborated by numerous testimonies, as well as his involvement in infiltration missions. In the judicial sentence of Case 1270, his role in kidnapping operations is described, and he is accused of committing torture and participating in the so-called recovery process of prisoners from the ESMA. He has also been convicted for his direct responsibility in the murder of the twelve individuals from the Santa Cruz group. TOF 5, Sentence Case 1270, 28 December 2011, p. 138.

dictatorship). The prominence of Astiz is constructed through his own name and that of his victims, the international scale of the accusations, extradition requests, and the hyperbole surrounding his crimes.

It is interesting to compare this case with Susanne Knittel's study that examines two photographs of Nazi commander Christian Wirth. Knittel proposes to consider how the uniform accentuates the 'symbolic function' of the perpetrator in contrast to the personal photo without a uniform.<sup>55</sup> In the case of Astiz, we can think of divergent interpretations depending on who, at that time, could look at the photo and make sense of it: for the British military, Astiz was an enemy surrendering, and there was no need to distinguish him from the rest of the Argentine armed forces. In contrast, for the French newspapers that denounced him, he was an executioner wanted for heinous crimes, and it was necessary to identify him to reveal the 'sadistic torturer' who should be extradited.

However, those 'war attributes' fail to portray Astiz in a position of power. With his head down and dishevelled, facing the upright British officers, the photo of his rendition exposes a sinister ambivalence, different from the previous *dispositifs*: no longer between the 'blond angel' and the traitor, no longer between the privileged white youth and the 'man from the death camp', but between the imprisoned soldier and the unpunished perpetrator. While the photo, the name, and the reported cases supported the claims and allowed for wide circulation, they ultimately led to Astiz's impunity that would last for decades.

Before the end of the dictatorship, Astiz was tried by a military tribunal for his role in the Falklands/Malvinas War,<sup>56</sup> and a case was opened regarding the disappearance of Dagmar Hagelin, but he was not convicted. A few years later, the so-called Due Obedience Law (1987) granted him impunity in Argentina for the forced disappearances he was responsible for. In 1990, he was tried in absentia by a French court for the case of the disappeared nuns and was included in the list of persons sought by Interpol, which prevented him from leaving Argentina. Although justice could not pursue him at home, he continued to be at the centre of accusations and commemorative actions. In 2006, trials against the perpetrators of the dictatorship were reopened after amnesties and pardons had been revoked in court, and Astiz was sentenced to life imprisonment in 2011 and 2017.

<sup>55</sup> Knittel, pp. 140–41.

<sup>56</sup> Astiz was accused of 'surrendering his troops to the enemy without offering resistance', according to the Rattenbach Report conducted by the Argentine military and published in 1983. *Informe Rattenbach* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Fin de Siglo, 2000), 246.

Long before justice caught up with him, Astiz became one of the most emblematic perpetrators of the dictatorship. In the mid-1990s, when he enjoyed his long-standing impunity, a survivor from another clandestine detention centre recognized him on a street in the city of Bariloche and punched him in the face.<sup>57</sup> It was a symbolic blow to that ‘angelic face’ that no longer merely revealed a perpetrator of the dictatorship but also exposed, behind that impassive face, the impunity of all other perpetrators.

### **Conclusions: How to Think about the Visibility of Perpetrators?**

This brief journey through the different scenes, contexts, and media that allowed the identification and visibility of the perpetrator Alfredo Astiz during the Argentine dictatorship raises some questions for the debate on the social construction of the perpetrator as a social category and the approaches we can use to investigate this social process. The ‘visibility’ of perpetrators is significant because it counters the secrecy and invisibility that characterized the system of forced disappearances and other repressive and genocidal modalities. Moreover, studying perpetrators contributes new elements to the analysis of forced disappearances, which has traditionally focused on the visibility and figure of the victims.

In this regard, investigating the visibility *dispositifs* helps us understand that the discovery and unmasking of perpetrators can be slow and more complex than is often considered in hindsight. Although the recognition of Astiz came early, the gradual assembly of the various pieces, like a puzzle, did not create certainty until long after his name was circulated. Even when the pieces of the puzzle seem to come together, their meanings can be ambiguous, hyperbolic, or paradoxical in relation to the information that will be known later. In this respect, I would like to pose some questions to encourage further investigation into other cases.

To begin with, who took these photos? The two series of photos studied here were taken, one by a journalist attempting to denounce Astiz, and the other by a photographer from the opposing armed forces. I will not delve into the implications of these two different ‘perspectives’ on Astiz, but I do want to emphasize the need for a more thorough ex-

<sup>57</sup> Omar Lavieri, ‘Cuando le pegué a Astiz sólo veía pañuelos blancos’, *Clarín*, 3 September 1995, p. 12.

amination of the camera's 'eye' that seeks to uncover and expose those responsible for violence. These photos differ from the images of perpetrators produced by propaganda operations common in authoritarian regimes, which aim to conceal violence.<sup>58</sup> They are also quite distinct from what Sánchez-Biosca refers to as 'perpetrator images'.<sup>59</sup> If, in the latter, victims are photographed by the perpetrators or their accomplices, thus prolonging and perpetrating the violence, in this case, the images seek visibility and a condemnation (even if symbolic) of the violence through the photographic image of the perpetrator.

It is important to ask, consequently, how these images of perpetrators are linked to the violence exerted: to what extent do they allow for its visibility? From the analysis conducted here, it can be deduced that different social mediations are needed for violence to be seen in the image of a perpetrator photographed afterwards and far from the places where their crimes were committed. Methodologically, it may therefore be useful to pay attention to the different components of the visibility *dispositif*, especially to those paratexts that accompany the images: newspaper headlines and typography, captions, journalistic notes, and so on. But the *dispositif* is more than the image and the text, as they interact and compose meaning. It is also the location and opportunity of its circulation, the tensions, the layers of 'sedimentation', and the lines of 'creativity', as Deleuze calls them.<sup>60</sup> In that aspect, it is interesting to pay attention not only to the connection and coincidence of the different components but also to the dislocations, ruptures, and collisions between opposing meanings that each visibility *dispositif* establishes. That is, meanings are not univocal, so a study of the social construction of perpetrators should take into account these fractures as part of the visibility process. For example, the vision of Astiz's 'angelic face' coexists simultaneously with his visualization as a 'sadistic torturer'. These meanings coexist and cause the image to reverberate with a sinister halo in these existing and in new visualizations.

For all these reasons, it is interesting to pay attention to the spaces and times of image circulation and their 'afterlife'. In this regard, these two series of photographs are quite different from each other. While the Pretoria photos were little known and hardly circulated outside

58 Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 3-7.

59 Vicente Sánchez-Biosca, *La muerte en los ojos: Qué perpetraron las imágenes de perpetrador* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2021).

60 Deleuze, p. 161.

South Africa, the one from the South Georgia Islands was published in newspapers from different countries at the time and in the post-dictatorship period. It became an iconic photo associated with the episode in which Astiz surrendered to the British without having fought. It illustrated his 'cowardice' as a soldier and therefore amplified his negative characteristics as a perpetrator. Here, we have analysed how the South African photo was taken with the intention to unmask Astiz, while the one produced by the British had other purposes in the context of the war.<sup>61</sup> Paradoxically, the South Georgia photo had a 'subsequent life' in which it became associated with the moment Astiz was identified as a perpetrator, although, as we have shown, it did not happen that way: Astiz was identified before the photo was published; the photo was published because he was a wanted perpetrator. This allows us to raise other questions about the dissociations between the intentions of the photographer and the subsequent circulation of the images, between the narrative about the image and its functionality at the time it was taken. In the case of perpetrators, it leads us to consider that the image and its visibility are two different matters. Analysing the visibility *dispositifs* and not just the images allows us to investigate the complex processes of meaning construction over time, their displacements and fractures, in addition to the consolidated and crystallized meanings.

A final set of questions relates not to what is seen but to what remains in the shadows. There is something that the images themselves obscure, hide, and prevent from being seen. In our case, we have paid attention to the contrast between the hyperbolized image of Astiz and his crimes, versus the invisibility — in the same visual space — of other higher-ranking and more responsible perpetrators from ESMA (Chamorro, Acosta, and Pernías). What conjunctions between discourse, context, and image are conducive to making a perpetrator (or a group of them) visible, and what is it that the same *dispositif* is preventing from being seen? What is it, to use the words of Sánchez Biosca and Zylberman,<sup>62</sup> that the visual medium reveals and masks? This case also serves to draw attention to those hidden and invisible aspects that are, likewise, a constitutive part of the visibility *dispositifs*.

61 See footnote 42.

62 Vicente Sánchez-Biosca and Lior Zylberman, 'Perpetradores de crímenes de masas a la luz de la imagen: A modo de introducción', *Papeles del CEIC*, 2 (2021), 1-12 <<https://ojs.ehu.es/index.php/papelesCEIC/article/view/23018>> [accessed 12 July 2023].

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**Claudia Feld** is a Researcher of the National Council of Scientific Research (CONICET). She is a member of the Nucleus of Memory Studies (Núcleo de Estudios sobre Memoria, IDES) and the director of *Clepsidra: Revista Interdisciplinaria de Estudios sobre Memoria*. She published *Del estrado a la pantalla. Las imágenes del juicio a los ex comandantes en Argentina* (Madrid, 2002), among other books and articles on memories and visual culture.

## Before, During and After: Difficulties and Controversies in Fieldwork with Retired Officers from the Argentine Army<sup>1</sup>

Valentina Salvi

**Abstract:** Between 2004 and 2007, I conducted fieldwork to analyze the memories and commemorative practices of retired officers of the Argentine Army, who were on active duty during the state terrorism executed by the armed forces during the military dictatorship (1976-1983) in Argentina. I conducted a series of open and semi-structured interviews with officers who participated in Operation Independence (Operativo Independencia) in Tucumán Province and made observations during public events in military churches and military clubs that paid tribute to officers who were assassinated by nonstate armed organizations during the 1970s. This ethnographic methodology has allowed me, first, to address the manifestations of the past as constructed, staged, and transmitted by the retired officers; second, to identify the meanings and values that these officers evoke to justify state terrorism; and third, how they constructed a retrospective relationship with violence and dealt with the criticisms they received from society. The aim of this article is to highlight the vicissitudes, difficulties, and controversies that framed my fieldwork with retired officers of the Argentine Army at three moments: before, when I was designing the methodology to delve into the military world; during, when I established contact and conducted the interviews with retired officers; and after, when I presented the results of my work on their memories to colleagues in academia. In sum, the article reflects on the conditions for the production of knowledge about perpetrators in Argentina. I explore the problems related to understanding the memories of the officers and interpreting their words: both what is said and what remains unsaid in the interviews, and how this can contribute to knowledge about processes of mass violence based on the memories of the perpetrators.

**Keywords:** Perpetrators, Argentina, Fieldwork, Interviews.

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1 An earlier Spanish version of this article was published in *El pasado es hoy: Investigaciones y debates sobre las herencias criminales*, ed. by Lucas Martín and Enrique Andriotti Romanin (Mar del Plata: EUDEM, 2017).

## Introduction

Between 2004 and 2007, as part of my doctoral research, I conducted fieldwork to analyze the memories and commemorative practices of retired officers from the Argentine Army who were on active duty during the State terrorism executed by the armed forces during the military dictatorship (1976-1983). I conducted a series of open and semi-structured interviews with officers who participated in Operation Independence (*Operativo Independencia*) in Tucumán Province. I also made observations during public events, held in the squares of Buenos Aires and in military churches and military clubs, that paid tribute to officers who were, as they phrased it, ‘killed by the subversion’ (*muertos por la subversión*) — killed by armed revolutionaries who were called subversives instead of combatants so that they were not protected under the Geneva War Conventions.<sup>2</sup> This ethnographic methodology has allowed me to delve into the meanings and manifestations of the past as constructed, staged, and transmitted by retired officers.<sup>3</sup> Focusing on their memories enabled me to identify the interpretations of the past that these officers presented, and the meanings and values they evoked, reworked, and adjusted in order to justify state terrorism, as well as how they reframed this state terrorism in response to the criticisms from the Argentine society.

This article aims to present the vicissitudes, difficulties, and controversies that framed the fieldwork with retired officers of the Argentine Army during three key moments: before, when I was designing the methodology to delve into the military world; during, when I established contact and conducted the interviews with retired officers; and after, when I shared the results of my work on their memories with colleagues in academia. The reflective turn I propose here will neither

2 ‘*Muertos por la subversión*’ (‘killed by the subversion’) and ‘*lucha contra la subversión*’ (‘fight against the subversion’) are local expressions that will appear in quotation marks throughout the text. The term subversion is part of the language of the counterinsurgency doctrine that, in the context of the Cold War, identified not only guerrilla insurgents but also a wide range of political, social, and cultural practices and beliefs as a threat to Argentina’s Western and Christian order.

3 During my fieldwork, I participated in different activities organized by memory organizations for retired officers, their wives, and sons and daughters. I also conducted group interviews with military personnel at the Defence Ministry and the National Military School (*Colegio Militar de la Nación*) and made observations at events and religious services with retired officers that paid tribute to their fallen comrades. In this article, I focus on interviews conducted with retired officers who participated in regular operations in the jungle of Tucumán Province. Some of them were convicted for crimes against humanity years later.

focus on the feelings or emotions produced by the proximity or direct contact with the retired officers who were on active duty during the dictatorship and who defend the regime's state terrorism, nor on the ethical dilemmas and dangers surrounding the knowledge production process on this subject matter.<sup>4</sup> Rather, I am interested in discussing the problems related to understanding the memories of the officers and interpreting their words: both what is said and what remains unsaid in the interviews, and how this can contribute to knowledge about processes of mass violence based on the memories of the perpetrators.

My interest in an ethnographic investigation of the memories of retired officers was motivated by the broader objective of critically reviewing perspectives that tend to reproduce what Celso Castro and Piero Leirner refer to as an external view of the military in the Southern Cone of Latin America.<sup>5</sup> In Argentina, there is an important field of research that focuses on the analysis of various declassified official sources to understand the doctrinal, ideological, and politico-military aspects of the planning and execution of state terrorism by the armed forces. There have been fewer studies that examine the military from the inside through participant-observation.<sup>6</sup> Such ethnographic approach is also in line with the idea to shift from the focus on perpetrators to *perpetration* or *perpetratorhood* because it allows a more holistic and complex comprehension of the atrocities.<sup>7</sup> But this comprehension needs as a first methodological step an inside study of the perpetrators, using a qualitative or ethnographic approach that avoids an external view of the military. Based on the fieldwork experience

- 4 These aspects of fieldwork with perpetrators are discussed, for example, in Kathleen M. Blee, *Understanding Racist Activism: Theory, Methods, and Research* (New York: Routledge, 2018); and Jeffrey Sluka, 'Managing Danger in Fieldwork with Perpetrators on Political Violence and State Terror', *Conflict and Society*, 1 (2015), 109-124 <<https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/conflict-and-society/1/1/air-cs010109.xml>> [accessed 11 July 2023].
- 5 *Antropología dos militares: Reflexões sobre pesquisa de campo*, ed. by Celso Castro and Piero Leirner (Rio de Janeiro: FGV Editora, 2009) p. 8.
- 6 Antonius C. G. M. Robben, *Political Violence and Trauma in Argentina* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Valentina Salvi, *De vencedores a víctimas: Memorias castrenses sobre el pasado reciente en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2012); Eva Van Roekel, *Phenomenal Justice: Violence and Morality in Argentina* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020); and Analia Goldentul, 'Oficiales organizados: entre el dialoguismo y la normatividad militar', *Izquierdas*, 49 (2020), 4262-4285 <[http://www.izquierdas.cl/images/pdf/2020/n49/art201\\_2241\\_4261.pdf](http://www.izquierdas.cl/images/pdf/2020/n49/art201_2241_4261.pdf)> [accessed 11 July 2023].
- 7 Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee, 'Introduction', in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 3-22 (p. 14); and Antonius C.G. M. Robben and Alexander Laban Hinton, *Perpetrators: Encountering Humanity's Dark Side* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023), p. 32.

and the analysis of the three research periods, I aim to contribute to a broader discussion regarding, on the one hand, the social and political conditions of knowledge production about violence by focusing on the academic repercussions of studying one's own society, and on the other hand, I want to address the epistemological dimensions related to the construction of an object of study that deals with the memories and experiences of those who have committed heinous acts and how, in face-to-face encounters, they silence, deny, or justify their actions.

## Before

The possibility of conducting fieldwork that included interviews with retired officers generated some controversies among my colleagues. My interest arose from my time in Brazilian academia where it was common and acceptable for oral historians, anthropologists, and journalists to engage in conversations with military personnel and publish their discussions about the so-called years of lead (*anos de chumbo*).<sup>8</sup> As a starting point, I would like to reflect on a comment I received from an Argentine colleague with extensive experience in the social sciences when I told her, around 2003, about the topic and methodology of my research, 'How can you sit at a table with those guys!' ('¿Cómo te vas a sentar en una mesa con esos tipos!').<sup>9</sup> Beyond the shadow of suspicion cast over my moral integrity and the discouragement contained in this sentence, my intention is to account for the implications of interviews with military personnel as well as those of creating a space for dialogue or even establishing physical contact with those who justify or advocate human rights violations and/or are responsible for them.

What meanings does the image of 'sitting at a table with those guys' entail? What makes it unacceptable and intolerable to engage with retired officers of the dictatorship? To understand some of these issues, it is necessary to look back a bit. The Trial of the Military Juntas in 1985 led to the conviction of the highest officials of the military regime with lengthy prison sentences and the judicial confirmation that the

8 *Visões do golpe*, ed. by Maria Celina D'Araújo, Gláucio Ary Dillon Soares and Celso Castro (Rio de Janeiro: Relume-Dumará, 1994); *Os anos de chumbo*, ed. by Maria Celina D'Araújo, Gláucio Ary Dillon Soares and Celso Castro (Rio de Janeiro: Relume-Dumará, 1994); and *Á volta aos quartéis*, ed. by Maria Celina D'Araújo, Gláucio Ary Dillon Soares and Celso Castro (Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 1994).

9 This phrase resonates with another one I often heard, 'What a stomach you have to work on these topics!' ['¡Qué estómago que tenés para trabajar estos temas!']

enforced disappearance system carried out throughout the country was systematic and clandestine. However, this legal accountability did not extend beyond the top echelon of the armed forces because other high-ranking military officers and police could not be prosecuted due to the so-called impunity laws of 1986 and 1987. The 1986 Full Stop Law (Punto Final) and 1987 Due Obedience (Obediencia Debida) laws were the result of the decision by the government of Raúl Alfonsín to reduce the number of defendants accused of human rights violations due to increasing pressures from the armed forces.<sup>10</sup> The judicial avenue sought by the relatives of the disappeared was therefore cut short, with the exception of the crime of ‘baby theft’ involving children born during their mothers’ captivity or who had been abducted together with their parents. Finally, in 1989 and 1990, President Carlos Menem pardoned the former commanders who had been convicted in the Trials of the Military Juntas, as well as other retired officers and former guerrilla insurgents. With all this, a period began that guaranteed impunity to the perpetrators for almost two decades.<sup>11</sup>

In the mid-1990s, ‘sitting at the table’ with these pardoned and amnestied officers became as sinister as it was commonplace on Argentine television. In the talk shows of the time, a scene was presented in which several guests sat at one or two tables: on one side, there were perpetrators, members of FAMUS (Relatives and Friends of those Killed by the Subversion), and relatives of civilians assassinated by the former guerrilla organizations; on the other side, there were the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, members of human rights organizations, survivors of clandestine detention centers, and former members of ERP (People’s Revolutionary Army), and Montoneros — all brought together to enter into a dialogue. These staged encounters reached their peak when retired police commissioner Miguel Etchecolatz and deputy Alfredo Bravo engaged in a heated argument that almost turned violent. Bravo had

10 The ‘Ley de Punto Final’ (Full Stop Law) aimed to establish a deadline for Federal Courts to take investigative statements from the accused and thus limit the number of criminal cases. However, the law had an unexpected effect, as it resulted in a wave of prosecutions throughout the country. The ‘Ley de Obediencia Debida’ (Due Obedience Law) definitively closed the issue of these new prosecutions by establishing that most personnel from the armed forces and security forces were not punishable for human rights crimes because it was presumed that they acted under superior orders.

11 Carlos Acuña and others, *Juicio, castigos y memorias: Derechos Humanos y justicia en la política argentina* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1995).

been abducted and tortured during the dictatorship by a task force under the command of General Ramón Camps, Etchecolatz's direct superior.<sup>12</sup>

'Sitting at the table' materialized in those television programs. The ruling idea was that there were two sides, that both sides should be heard, and that perpetrators had the right to express their opinions, which mainly consisted of denying the occurrence of the events and, in particular, the forced disappearances. These staged encounters also meant listening to perpetrators who accused the victims or their families. The victims were treated as perpetrators, casting suspicion on them, just as had occurred during the dictatorship. They were accused of lying and even threatened anew. This involved witnessing journalists who, without any ethical concern, allowed any statement — even those referring to torture, abduction, or forced disappearances — to be treated as a matter of opinion and of trivial relevance.<sup>13</sup>

Around the year 2000, with the increasing judicial summons of retired and active-duty officers to testify in trials related to the stolen babies or in the Truth Trials (*Juicios por la Verdad*),<sup>14</sup> Army Chief Ricardo Brinzoni adopted a corporate defense and focused on the strategy of closing the past through the proposal of a dialogue table. This was a political and extrajudicial means to evade legal responsibilities.

At the time, 'sitting at the table with perpetrators or military personnel' was controversial in whichever setting or situation. But what could happen in an interview situation where a social science researcher asked questions and listened to a retired army officer? What is at stake in this statement is the researcher's subjective position when the purpose of social research is not to attribute motives and intentions to the acts of individuals, as the judicial system does, but to clarify the causes of those acts. Therefore, hidden in my colleague's reservations about 'sitting at the table with those guys' is the fact that the effects of past violence also extend to those who investigate perpetrators of this violence. Indeed, researchers who devote themselves to studying

12 Claudia Feld, 'El imposible "debate" entre víctimas y victimarios: notas sobre las declaraciones televisivas de Miguel Etchecolatz (1997)', *Rubrica Contemporánea*, 5.9 (2016), 77-101 <<https://revistes.uab.cat/rubrica/article/view/v5-n9-feld>> [accessed 11 July 2023].

13 Claudia Feld, 'La construcción del "arrepentimiento": los ex represores en la televisión', *Entre pasados*, 20/21 (2001), 35-54; Feld, 'El imposible "debate" entre víctimas y victimarios'.

14 In the mid-1990s, when the judicial route was closed, the federal courts granted a request from the relatives of the disappeared who, under the right to truth, requested information from the armed forces and security forces regarding the fate of their relatives. This gave rise to a particular type of trial without criminal sanctions called Truth Trials, which were held in various cities throughout the country between 1998 and 2005.

the worldview of perpetrators are seen, in some way, as if they were involved in the violence itself. Oral historian Erin Jessee observes in her study of the Rwandan genocide that ‘engagement in any meaningful way with *généralistes*’ narratives can place researchers at risk of being identified as suspected political subversives’ by the police or government.<sup>15</sup> That is to say, the researchers could be viewed as accomplices or opponents, sympathizers or informants, unlike what happens with research topics where the illusion of the impartial observer can be maintained, or at least, where an investigator is not directly involved in the phenomenon studied. I am not saying that the researcher’s position is impartial and disinterested, or that he or she cannot be directly implicated in a biased position by the social actors being studied, as when the retired officers situated me on one side or the other (as in the abovementioned case of Rwanda). Rather, the researcher studying the worldview of perpetrators can be identified with one of these positions by their colleagues without even knowing the results of their work but simply by wanting to investigate it.<sup>16</sup> Although the results of social research can be mistakenly interpreted as a form of exoneration for the perpetrators, it is true that guilt and causation are not the same, and as Habermas said, ‘a causal explanation can neither condemn nor excuse’,<sup>17</sup> but rather seeks to understand. These tensions take on different dimensions for those studying their own societies compared to those who are interested in other societies. Anderson and Jessee recognize that genocide studies ‘retains a colonial quality [...] dominated by researchers who are not necessarily from the genocide-affected contexts that they study.’<sup>18</sup> So I am interested in the approach of local researchers who are immersed in academic fields that, in many cases, were directly affected by state violence or were shaped by social and political struggles as part of post-dictatorship democratization processes.

15 Erin Jessee, ‘Seeing Monsters, Hearing Victims’, in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 67-90 (p. 69).

16 Guber analyzes the researcher’s position in the field based on an incident with Native Argentines where she faced an accusation, see Rosana Guber, *La etnografía: Método, campo y reflexividad* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2001), pp. 101-121. On the other hand, Ginsburg addresses the difficulties of presenting the results of her research to her research population, see Faye Ginsburg, ‘Quand les indigènes sont nos voisins’, *L’Homme*, 32.121 (1992), 129-142.

17 Jürgen Habermas, ‘Goldhagen and the Public Use of History: Why the Democracy Prize for Daniel Goldhagen?’, in *Unwilling Germans? The Goldhagen Debate*, ed. by Robert Shandley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 263-273 (p. 267).

18 Anderson and Jessee, p. 15.



## During

When I was preparing for my fieldwork, I had many doubts about the actual possibilities of carrying it out. To my surprise, the contacts were made relatively easily, and the snowball effect that led me from one retired officer to another happened without major difficulties. The interviews took place between 2004 and early 2007, at a crucial moment in terms of the prosecution of Argentine perpetrators. In 2005, the Supreme Court declared the Full Stop and Due Obedience laws unconstitutional and upheld Law 25,779 through which Congress had invalidated these impunity laws in 2003. This decision by the highest court paved the way for judicial proceedings against military personnel suspected of having committed crimes against humanity. Although the legal conditions were in place to initiate a new cycle of criminal prosecution, the first trials did not begin until 2006. While it was expected that with the removal of the impunity laws retired officers would remain silent and inaccessible, this was not the case. Since 2004, the memory of the so-called 'fight against subversion' had been gaining more public attention and support among comrades. In that context, retired officers accepted the interviews as part of a general strategy to bring visibility to their demand for 'complete memory'.<sup>19</sup>

All the retired officers I had access to had participated in regular operations in the jungle of Tucumán Province. If we start from the assumption that the accounts obtained in the interviews cannot be understood outside their context of production, including the political dimensions surrounding the events, we must ask ourselves why the retired officers who took part in Operation Independence agreed to be interviewed and spoke about the repression in Tucumán. Operation Independence was a counterinsurgency campaign carried out by the Argentine Army against the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP), which had established a military front in the jungle region of the northwestern province of Tucumán in 1975, a year before the coup d'état in March 1976. The plan relied on direct combat in the jungle and was supported by clandestine and illegal actions in the towns of the

<sup>19</sup> This slogan expresses the shift in memory among the military from being combatants in the 'fight against subversion' – that is, the vindication of the actions taken by the generals and commanders – to being the 'victims of terrorism' – that is, military and civilian individuals killed by nonstate armed organizations during the 1970s. From this perspective, the memory constructed of the disappeared is partial, as it focuses exclusively on the violence committed by the nonstate armed organizations while concealing and diluting the responsibility of the armed forces for the forced disappearances. See Salvi, *De vencedores*, pp. 73–107.

area and the city of San Miguel de Tucumán. This double mission of the counterinsurgency campaign served retired officers to strengthen the image of the army as a lawful force that defended the state against terrorism in the political context of the loss of impunity and the renewed trials for crimes against humanity. The officers' accounts echoed Decree 261, promulgated by President María Estela Martínez de Perón on 5 February 1975, which ordered the offensive operations against the revolutionary combatants in the Province of Tucumán.<sup>20</sup> This not only allowed the retired officers to evoke the 'fight against subversion' as a conventional war but also to present their actions in the jungle as a theater of regular operations and thus cleanse the so-called 'dirty war'<sup>21</sup> of its negative connotation of state terrorism.

During the fieldwork, I conducted interviews with retired officers ranging from the rank of lieutenant to lieutenant colonel; more precisely, two of them were not retired but had been expelled from the force for participating in uprisings against democratically elected governments during the 1980s.<sup>22</sup> The interviews were conducted in the officers' homes, their workplaces, or in cafes in Buenos Aires. Most of the interviews, by my own decision, were conducted without a recording device, although many officers had no qualms about being recorded. I took care of my appearance, wearing small earrings, a wristwatch, pastel-colored clothing such as jackets, sweaters, and blouses, and tying my hair in a half ponytail. In all cases, I presented myself as a resident of Brazil, where I was pursuing my doctorate degree, and did not mention that I was a sociologist and professor at the University of Buenos Aires because I believed it could raise suspicion among my interviewees. These decisions regarding my appearance and background reflect my intention to anticipate the expectations of my interlocutors as a way to manage the intersubjective encounters and verbal exchanges.<sup>23</sup> As a counterpart, I had to answer questions about my parents' ac-

20 Decree No. 261/75 - 5 February 1975.

21 'Dirty war' is a euphemism used by the Argentine military to refer to unconventional war. This expression has had significant circulation in English as a misguided translation of state terrorism.

22 These military ranks include both junior officers and mid-level officers with commanding responsibilities. Some of the officers interviewed were later convicted of crimes against humanity for their involvement in task forces, while others have not faced any accusations or judicial citations to date. In most cases, their position within the military hierarchy does not explain their participation in crimes against humanity, as their clandestine actions undermined the organizational structure of the chain of command.

23 Blee, *Understanding Racist Activism*, p. 24.

tivities, whether I had deceased relatives, whether I believed in God, and if I knew about events considered relevant in the history of the 1970s: the assassination of General Aramburu and Captain Viola, the amnesty granted to what they regarded as terrorists by Argentine president Cámpora on 25 May 1973, the attacks on military bases by nonstate armed organizations, and so forth. In general terms, the officers demonstrated an extensive knowledge of world history, political philosophy, twentieth century military history, and the history of the Cold War. They constantly emphasized my supposed lack of knowledge regarding military matters, which, due to my dual status as a civilian and a young woman, I could not possibly have.

During the interviews, discretion and seduction proved to be the most frequent attitudes displayed by the retired officers. Both discretion and seduction were deployed as strategies to influence the relationship with a stranger and to shape the dialogue and the conditions of listening. While the former maintains appearances and reinforces distances, the latter seeks complicity and identification. Research interviews constitute auditory situations that are external to the internal channels of memory transmission among retired military personnel, as they introduce otherness in the form of the interviewer. While the officers' speeches during the public events that paid tribute to troops that were killed by the guerrilla insurgency functioned as ritualized repetitions of collectively shared meanings, in the interviews their narratives were challenged by the dialogue with a stranger. Indeed, this specific context influenced the levels of spontaneity, ways of speaking, and the sharing of types of information that the retired officers presented in the interviews I conducted.<sup>24</sup>

In the ceremonies in churches and military clubs, as well as at the Plaza San Martín in Buenos Aires, the officers who were assassinated by nonstate armed organizations during the 1970s were remembered as 'victims of terrorism', and a heroic and patriotic memory was staged confirming that the officers participated in the 'fight against subversion'. The main organizers of these events were retired officers who had been in active service during the dictatorship. These events were a way of pressuring the current army command to take a political stance on trials for crimes against humanity. Beyond this open promotion of the desire for a 'complete memory', namely the official acknowledgment and commemoration of the military who were killed by the armed insur-

24 Michael Pollak, *Memoria, olvido y silencio: La producción social de identidades frente a situaciones límite* (La Plata: Ediciones al Margen, 2006), p. 61.

gency, the first-person accounts of the officers who participated in Operation Independence gather memories that were kept, as Pollak asserts, in informal structures of communication and transmission.<sup>25</sup> Certain aspects of these accounts are shaped by gestures and words that can alter, or even contradict, what was expressed in public speeches.<sup>26</sup> Throughout the interviews, meanings, interpretations, and feelings about violent episodes emerged, which, although carefully avoided during the commemorative events, are part of the usual narratives of retired officers. This includes not only the atmosphere of fear and paranoia often expressed in the public memory of the 'fight against subversion', but also feelings of fury, anger, hatred, and revenge that are carefully sidestepped in favor of the portrayal of heroism, patriotism, and sacrifice. While the former are public sentiments and the latter circulate more offstage, both are interconnected and form a whole in the accounts of retired officers.

While discretion constitutes a fearful and cautious reaction to encounters with strangers, it is also a strategy for enunciating personal narratives in interviews. With their secrets, the officers repeatedly sought to exclude me from their inner circle, constantly affirming a distance. The meticulous surveillance over a set of compromising memories expressed the officers' fear of being questioned and incriminated under unfavorable conditions. However, this discretion regarding what was said during the interviews also allowed them to present a certain coherence between their self-image associated with a heroic narrative and the image they seek to present to others. The act of filtering, excluding, and concealing the content of what is transmitted and communicated about their own experiences denotes the presence of secrecy as a protective device. This subjective protection at play during the interviews takes on diverse characteristics compared to the exercise of the constitutional right to remain silent. In the interviews, the shadow of secrecy that looms over the narrative (especially concerning the systematic torture of individuals, the conditions of detainment, the locations where these took place, the names of the officers involved, and the ways in which people were killed) also delineates the boundary between what can be said and what remains unspeakable about the repression in Tucumán Province. The problem of silence or the presence of the unspeakable in perpetrators' accounts raises questions regarding the relationship between narrative, experience, and horror that have

25 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

26 James Scott, *Los dominados y el arte de la resistencia: Discursos ocultos* (México City: Era, 2000), p. 34.

been discussed quite extensively in the context of Holocaust Studies. In this vast literature, I find especially illuminating Ernst Van Alphen's considerations about the impossibility of survivors giving meaning to their traumatic experiences, and that, unlike survivors, perpetrators have the interpretive frameworks to make sense of their experiences.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, during the interviews, the retired officers recounted combat in the jungle of Tucumán, spoke about direct clashes with the guerrillas, gave long descriptions of their enemy's behavior, talked about the death or murder of their comrades in arms, and also expressed sentiments of fear and paranoia of being victims of attacks, but they never mentioned their participation in clandestine repressive actions. They were combatants, heroes, victims, or avengers but never torturers. As I will elaborate later, Van Alphen gives suggestions on how to think about what is said and what is not said in perpetrator accounts in relation to their self-image and to the image that society has of them.<sup>28</sup>

Unlike the distance caused by fear and mistrust, seduction arises from a certain willingness to establish closeness with the interlocutor. As Robben shows, seduction is a strategy to win supporters and to make researchers adopt military interpretations of the recent past.<sup>29</sup> By elaborating an enunciative strategy aimed at generating trust and closeness during the interview, the retired officers invited me to participate in and agree with their statements to create intimacy and evoke complicity. Through vague revelations and confessions, they attempted to erase the otherness of my position as the interviewer and control the conditions of listening by appealing to an uncritical identification with their narratives. For example, they used statements like 'as you know' ('como vos sabés') or 'you already know how things were' ('ya sabés como fueron estas cosas'). In this way, the officers included me in an uncritical

27 Ernst van Alphen, *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1997); and Ernst Van Alphen, 'Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory and Trauma', in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. by Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer (Hannover: University Press of New England, 1999), pp. 24-38.

28 Van Roekel rightly points out that the silence of the Argentine military is more than a tactic to deny accountability. See Eva van Roekel, 'Getting Close with Perpetrators in Argentina', in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 115-136 (p. 116).

29 Antonius C. G. M. Robben, 'The Politics of Truth and Emotion among Victims and Perpetrators of Violence', in *Fieldwork under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival*, ed. by Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius C. G. M. Robben (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 81-103 (p. 83).

and accommodating 'us' through a set of implicit understandings that were expressed as if they were shared.

Both attitudes, discretion and seduction, reveal the distance and disagreement that exist between the heroic and victorious narrative of the retired officers as combatants in the 'fight against subversion' or the traumatic narrative of them as victims of subversion on the one hand, and on the other, the political meanings that civil society attributes to the violence perpetrated during the illegal repression. Therefore, the narratives of retired officers are also influenced by the negative perceptions that a substantial part of the Argentine society has of them and their actions, which were confirmed in hundreds of court rulings. Since every utterance, according to Bakhtin,<sup>30</sup> is dialogical and populated by the voices of others, retired officers incorporated the marks of what had been socially said about the recent past in the interviews, deploying narrative mechanisms to confront the contradictions that arose between their self-image and the image reflected back to them by society. In this way, a shift from a self-centered narrative to a dissenting narrative occurred, in the sense that, driven by the needs and urgencies of the present (both historical and enunciative), retired officers were compelled to incorporate those other narratives that confronted and even challenged them.

They perceived this discursive shift negatively as a process of denaturalizing the military profession that was manifested in the transition from war to politics. While the officers felt strengthened at war, the same did not happen in politics where they felt resented by society. Consequently, the victorious and vindictory narratives gave way to reproaches and recriminations. Thus, the officers revisited the past to identify what should have been done to prevent them from suffering the political and pending judicial consequences. And due to 'the military's inability to bring the battle won on the military plane into the political realm', the reproaches were directed towards the commanders of the dictatorship, who 'should have made the war public, made the names of the disappeared known' [*tendrían que haber blanqueado la guerra, hecho conocer los nombres de los desaparecidos*].<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the concern of the retired officers focused on what should have been done to prevent tarnishing the reputation of the Argentine armed forces and to ensure that history would later prove them right. The disagreement

30 Mijail Bajtin, *Estética de la creación verbal* (México City: Siglo XXI, 1999).

31 Raúl, retired captain (interviewed by Valentina Salvi, March 2005).

about the recent past also divided the universe of possible interlocutors between those who were with the army and those who were against the army, between an 'us' who understood and knew what it meant to be in the military and the others who said that the military were genocidal, torturers, murderers, and monsters. Military/genocidal, before/now, war/politics were oppositions that populated the narratives of retired officers, reinforcing their sense of identity and allowing them to perceive the social and moral position that the Argentine society assigned to them.

## After

Retired officers evoked the past through the memory of the officers 'killed by the subversion'. This strengthened their belief that the military did not kill to defend the homeland but rather died for it. In other words, it would no longer be about officers who fought against the nation's enemies, but rather about officers who died in its defense. However, within the implications, and implicit understandings of personal memories, narratives about repression emerged that eroded the protective shell of the self-complacent image that retired officers displayed in their public acts. Nevertheless, there was something that the retired officers did not talk about openly: they kept the secret of their direct participation in the illegal repression to themselves. Not only did they not speak about it, but they also sought to downplay the presence of officers who carried out torture among their comrades:

How many military personnel tortured? Not many, but they did not do it out of perversion or sadism; they did it for the homeland and because it was the only way to defeat a cunning enemy who was hidden among the civilian population.

[Los militares que torturaron, ¿cuántos fueron? No muchos, pero no lo hicieron por perversión o sadismo, lo hicieron por la patria y porque era la única manera de vencer a un enemigo artero que se escondía entre la población civil.]<sup>32</sup>

32 Ricardo, retired lieutenant-colonel (interviewed by Valentina Salvi, March 2005).

The retired officers sought to distance themselves from the sadistic and perverse torturer as it was unbearable for the image they had of themselves and wanted to portray to society. The statements on television programs made in the 1990s by military and police officers strongly contradicted the image that the retired officers wanted to display publicly and the narratives they wished to hear about themselves. Turco Julián, a torturer who worked in the clandestine detention center El Olimpo, boasted on several occasions about his acts of torture and proudly justified his actions. The naval officer Adolfo Scilingo, on the other hand, also acknowledged on television his participation in death flights and described how he threw people into the sea.<sup>33</sup> These public accounts of torture and assassinations were intolerable for the retired officers because they contradicted their own public and heroic memories and also betrayed the self-complacent image that army officers did not torture or kill but '[fought] for the homeland' and 'died for it', a portrayal performed during the homage acts.

When I presented some of these conclusions at an academic conference, a colleague made the following comment: 'The officers are unable to say that they killed, to see themselves as murderers, because that possibility had already been taken from them by the extermination machinery itself' ('Los militares son incapaces de decir que mataron, de verse a sí mismos como asesinos, porque esa posibilidad ya les fue sustraída por la propia maquinaria de exterminio'). This comment falls within the literature on the crisis of narration of Walter Benjamin about the muted soldier who returned from the First World War. Benjamin explains that the horrifying experience is unknowable and unspeakable, because the experience itself — in my colleague's words — is missing.<sup>34</sup> From this perspective, the possibility of meaningfully elaborating on what was experienced and recognizing oneself in it has been lost. My colleague thought that 'the horror has been possible because its experience was alienated from the perpetrating agents due to the advancement of techno-rational mediations that place bodies in a disappearance machinery, which functions beyond the men who

33 Luciana Messina, 'Reflexiones en torno a la figura del torturador: el caso del "Turco Julián"', in *Las voces de la represión: Declaraciones de perpetradores de la dictadura argentina*, ed. by Claudia Feld and Valentina Salvi (Buenos Aires: Miño y Dávila, 2019), pp. 153-172; and Feld, 'La construcción del "arrepentimiento"', pp. 35-54.

34 Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskóv', *International Journal of Oral History*, 2-3 (1981), 195-204.



created it'. In this sense, the actions of the perpetrators are explained as the result of a machinery that destroys any moral inhibitions about criminal acts and the suffering of others. The weakening of experience contributes to the euphemistic and denigrating character of the narratives of the individuals who operated the machinery of death and disappearance. What is absent is not simply the narrative of what was lived, but the experience itself as a knowable and understandable event since the conditions of experience are in ruins.

While my colleague's comment raises concerns about the social conditions of the exercise of violence, his argument tends to confirm that there is no sense in interviewing retired military personnel who participated in Operation Independence. This comment opens a new debate. What is the value of the words of perpetrators in spite of the silence? What is the relevance of an ethnographic inquiry even when the statements of the interviewees are filled with intrigues, secrets, silences, and even lies? Moreover, is there anything that the officers say or evoke that can help clarify the conditions of their experience and, therefore, the violence in which they were active participants? Van Alphen establishes that 'the problem is not the nature of the event' but 'the forms of representation with which the event can be (re)experienced'.<sup>35</sup> This distinction allows me to avoid my colleague's idea that the silence is explained by the absence of the perpetrators' experience or that the experience itself is in ruins. Although van Alphen developed these considerations to examine the problem of victims' testimonies, it provides a very interesting insight to shift the focus from silence as a consequence of criminal acts to other aspects of the narrative frameworks of the statements and self-representations made by perpetrators.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, it is not so much the content of the narrative — the facts, names, or activities, and not just because many of them are systematically denied and concealed — but the strategies of self-representation and the narrative modes of naturalizing violence that the retired officers mobilize when recalling the past that can be investigated. Anderson and Jessee open a very interesting methodological analysis helped by Paul Ricoeur's differentiation between narratives: *objective* (positive facts), *subjective* (a particular perspective or interpretation), and *constitutive* (identity making).<sup>37</sup> Subjective and constitutive narratives obtained in interviews draw attention to how perpetrators represent themselves

35 Van Alphen, *Caught by History*, p. 44.

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 41-64.

37 Anderson and Jessee, p. 16.

and how they naturalize past violence through narrative frameworks available to them as officers trained in counterinsurgency war.

The study of memories enables an analysis of how retired officers account for the strategies deployed to elaborate their self-image in relation to the image reflected back to them by society. In this way, they utilize their narrative frameworks to recount the violent experiences in which they took part.<sup>38</sup> Making strategies of self-representation and the relation between violence and camaraderie the objects of analysis implies questioning the problem of the relation between subjectivity and violence and its forms of representation. The narratives I encountered when the retired officers spoke did not provide immediate access to their lifeworld — even though speech is often interpreted by Western epistemology, as well as judicial investigations, as a kind of privileged access to experience. Speaking about experiences in these terms leads us, as Joan Scott argues, to take the existence of individuals for granted (experiences as something people have) rather than asking how conceptions of the self (of subjects and their identities) are socially produced.<sup>39</sup> In this sense, what I heard in the interviews was a narrative voice through which a subjectivity/identity was constructed, to the extent that this self-conception retrospectively constructs the past experience through socially shared narrative frameworks. Certainly, what we can account for in ethnographic research are the interpretive frameworks with which retired officers make sense of their experiences, even though these are permeated by a veneer of secrecy and self-protection. Therefore, violence becomes knowable and understandable because it is integrated within available interpretive frameworks such as war, the rationality of victory, the fight against the enemy, the conception of the terrorist, the value of camaraderie, masculinity, loyalty, predestination, the ethos of the combatant, normative conceptions of good and evil, and legality and illegality. In sum, focusing on self-representation and interpretive frameworks could open a way to shift from perpetrators to perpetration or perpetratorhood, as Robben and Hinton have proposed.<sup>40</sup>

38 Van Alphen, *Caught by History*, p. 58.

39 Joan W. Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', *Critical Inquiry*, 17.4 (1991), 773–97 (p. 782). See also van Alphen, 'Symptoms of Discursivity', pp. 24–38.

40 Robben and Hinton, p. 32.

## Final ideas

Based on the analysis of the vicissitudes, difficulties, and questions that framed the before, during, and after of ethnographic fieldwork with retired officers of the Argentine Army, this article addresses the debate on the social and political constraints that frame the investigation of violent pasts and the circulation of research findings. Although this reflection arises from concrete experiences in post-dictatorship Argentina, it provides elements to think about social research in other academic fields. There is a common sense prevailing in the academic world that science advances into unexplored territories due to a pre-existing void.<sup>41</sup> This view, which is sometimes emphasized in the study of perpetrators, overlooks the fact that social research is immersed in a territory of ongoing social and political debates and is part of a space of enunciation that conditions its practices and findings. Following Trouillot, I highlight the value of analytical perspectives that, 'situated in their historicity', reflexively consider the context of enunciation in which they arise and intervene to analyze how their effects and tensions impact both the design and execution of the research and the possibilities of understanding mass violence.<sup>42</sup>

Different political post-violence contexts determine a moral topography about what to investigate and how to do it. The study of perpetrators does not always start from the same issues. Contrary to what Blee argues, there is neither always an ethically positive assessment of this type of research, nor are its benefits taken for granted.<sup>43</sup> This moral topography has its peculiarities depending on the different contexts and affects of local and foreign researchers because the latter do not have to deal with suspicions of betrayal or contamination by their own colleagues which do not directly affect their reputation in their academic field. Faced with this situation, addressing the network of relations that violence brings about requires constructing a new type of research agency, one that avoids placing the researcher in a specific position. The position of someone investigating state processes or political violence

41 Rosana Guber, oral presentation in October 2018, at an academic colloquium at IDES, Buenos Aires.

42 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, 'Anthropology and the Savage Slot: The Poetics and Politics of Otherness', in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. by Richard G. Fox (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1991), pp. 17-44 (p. 19).

43 Kathleen Blee, 'Methods, Interpretation, and Ethics in the Study of White Supremacist Perpetrators', *Conflict and Society*, 1 (2015), 9-22 (p. 16) <<https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/conflict-and-society/1/1/air-cs010103.xml?rskey=qHkFIR&result=1>> [accessed 11 July 2023].

requires the creation of a set of conceptual, epistemological, and methodological mediations about their controversial subject of study to make the moral topography, its conflicts, and its effects on academic work conscious and comprehensible. It is useful here to return to Anderson's positional approach: 'who is the perpetrator for me?'.<sup>44</sup> But being aware of this moral topography requires a shift from me to us (as researchers who came from different contexts, local or foreign) in order to improve the reflection, suggested by Anderson, on 'our understanding of perpetrators'.<sup>45</sup>

When studying the memories of perpetrators based on the narratives produced in interviews, as I mentioned earlier, the question arises whether it is possible to know where silence, concealment, and even lies take a central place in the oral exchange. Despite this, the narratives can be revealing of the understanding, vision, and expression of the interviewee's trajectory as a fable which is told over and over again. Therefore, in the interviews, trajectories appear as various masked voices whose owners claim to be heroes, combatants, avengers, victors, and even victims. However, these narratives are not constructed in isolation; they are constituted in the presence of others: the others invoked in the narrative, the others who accuse them, the others for whom they speak, and the others with whom they converse in the interview situation. Their narratives are also influenced by other narratives that confirm or confront them, and the social discourse that the narrator adopts. In short, these first-person narratives allow glimpses of a life and its lived events, shedding light on their belonging to a generation of army officers and their relationship with a specific social and cultural context. These narratives also manifest the need to respond, negotiate, and publicly reconstruct their meanings and representations in conflict with what is said by other social actors.<sup>46</sup> It is here where what is denied or silenced appears surreptitiously in the voices of those others and acquires a place in the oral exchange, thus straining the self-image.

Along this same line, the study of perpetrators of state violence encompasses a paradox that relates to its chiaroscuro as an object of study. The massive crime, the abhorrent ways in which it was carried out, and the deliberate actions of concealment and denial undoubtedly situate the perpetrator's agency in a historical process of political

44 Kjell Anderson, 'The Perpetrator Imaginary: Representing Perpetrators of Genocide', in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 23-48 (p. 23).

45 *Ibid.*

46 Robben, 'The Politics of Truth and Emotion', p. 82.

violence. However, the factual demonstration of the criminal actions committed in the past, whether through legal evidence or historiographic reconstruction, does not necessarily lead to the acknowledgement on the part of those responsible. This has ethical implications, but above all, epistemological implications for research because this lack of acknowledgement demands a problematization of the notion of experience that is commonly used in social research. Indeed, pursuing the epiphany of experience as something that our research participants have — and that perpetrators have — does not allow for problematizing the tension that arises between what is said and what is not said by them. This relation between subject and experience, which is taken for granted in many research studies, needs to be revisited to construct knowledge that acknowledges that perpetrators are not only producers of violence (as subjects with experience)<sup>47</sup> but are also produced by the experience of violence for which they are responsible (as subjects of experience). This epistemological difference highlights the radical difference between social research and judicial investigation when studying the agency of perpetrators.

<sup>47</sup> Anderson and Jessee write that there is a kind of 'near-universal phenomenon that the perpetrator is perceived primarily as a producer of harm' dislocating their violent performance from the society where they emerged. See Anderson and Jessee, p. 11.

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**Valentina Salvi** is a Researcher of the National Council of Scientific Research (CONICET) at the Institute of Economic and Social Development (CIS-CONICET/IDES-UNTREF) in Argentina. She published *Vencedores a víctimas: Memorias militares sobre el pasado reciente en la Argentina* (Biblos, 2012), and edited with Claudia Feld *Las voces de la represión: Las declaraciones de los perpetradores de la dictadura argentina* (Miño y Dávila, 2019).

# 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

Santiago Garaño

**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

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## 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 forced<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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,<sup>9</sup> as well as the epistemological, ethical and emotional challenges involved in this type of research.<sup>10</sup>

This is not the usual approach in Argentina to the study of perpetrators, which has privileged public statements,<sup>11</sup> official memories,<sup>12</sup> and the experiences of career personnel in the Armed Forces.<sup>13</sup> We also have ethnographies on the trials of crimes against humanity, which analyse the activism of relatives of perpetrators,<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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”’.<sup>17</sup>

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,<sup>18</sup> 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](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,<sup>19</sup> 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].<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> 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].'<sup>23</sup>

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].<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

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.]<sup>26</sup>

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.'<sup>27</sup>

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*)<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> 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"].<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup> '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.<sup>34</sup>

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].<sup>35</sup> 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].<sup>36</sup> 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].<sup>37</sup>

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].<sup>38</sup> 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].<sup>39</sup>

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'.<sup>40</sup> 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".<sup>41</sup>

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.<sup>42</sup> 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.]<sup>43</sup>

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.']<sup>44</sup>

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].

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

<sup>44</sup> *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].]<sup>45</sup>

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.<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup> 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*]).<sup>48</sup> 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.<sup>49</sup>

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].<sup>50</sup> 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?'<sup>51</sup> 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.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> *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?<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup>

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,<sup>54</sup> 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, 'Maleficio. 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’.<sup>55</sup> 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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**Santiago Garaño** is a Researcher at the National Council of Scientific Research (CONICET), and Professor of Human Rights at University of Lanús (UNLA) and University of San Martín (UNSAM), in Argentina. His most recent book is *Deseo de combate y muerte. El terrorismo de estado como cosa de hombres* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2023).

# Between What They Are and What They Were: Power Dynamics and Knowledge Production in Fieldwork with Argentine Perpetrators

Analia Goldentul

**Abstract:** This article reflects on fieldwork conducted between 2015 and 2017 with Argentine perpetrators who were tried for crimes against humanity. The majority of these retired officials were interviewed while they were in prison, subject to widespread social condemnation, and no longer held positions of power. Consequently, this article focuses on how these conditions influenced the power dynamics between the interviewees and the researcher, the type of data collected, and the production of knowledge. Additionally, it examines how the emotions that emerged in the interaction with perpetrators affected the researcher and the course of the research.

**Keywords:** Argentina, perpetrators, prisons, power relations, knowledge production

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## Introduction

In contemporary ethnographies, setbacks involving the researcher and their field of study often play a prominent role in the development of the research. These incidents are usually episodes that lead to the discovery of new dimensions of the research topic that may not have emerged otherwise. Through reflexivity, such errors, misunderstandings, conflicts, and humiliations can become decisive moments that change the course of research and subsequently invite successful narratives of these setbacks. However, for this to happen, it is important not only for the incident to be productive in generating knowledge but also for the research to move forward and conclude satisfactorily. Phillipe Bourgois's work on crack dealers in East Harlem, New York provides a good example.<sup>1</sup> The author begins his book by

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers, Antonius Robben, Valentina Salvi, and the editors for the readings, suggestions, and revisions that contributed to significantly improve the quality of the manuscript.

1 Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).



recalling the occasion when he inadvertently humiliated a gang leader by inviting him to read aloud the note of a newspaper that had published some preliminary results of his investigation. In a flash of lucidity, he realized that the gang leader was illiterate.<sup>2</sup> The bond between the two remained strained for months, but that incident allowed him to grasp in a more sensitive way the system of relationships between crack dealers and how this gang leader had forged his authority in the neighbourhood.

In turn, there are too few of such candid reflections about unfinished or failed studies, where the outcomes did not meet the expectations. Let us think about how much it would benefit researchers to read about the methodological and analytical decisions that by action or omission led to the end of an investigation. Just as successful studies set precedents and trace possible paths for how to do research, reflections on failed investigations could be productive in reflecting on what was missing, what went wrong, and what could have been done differently. My fieldwork experience falls in this second group of investigations that for various reasons did not work out. Between 2015 and 2017, I visited various federal prisons in the province of Buenos Aires to interview perpetrators from the last Argentine dictatorship (1976-1983). This fieldwork was crucial for my doctoral research, which aimed to reconstruct the personal and professional trajectories of officers from the armed forces who were convicted of crimes against humanity. For almost three years, I had regular contact with detainees, sometimes establishing relationships of relative trust. Most of them had held lower ranks during the dictatorship (ranging from sub-lieutenant to first lieutenant) and retired with the middle rank of lieutenant-colonel at end of their military careers.

By mid-2017, the feeling of not gathering relevant and substantial material led me to interrupt my fieldwork and change the research topic. As a result, the material that was supposed to constitute the core of my dissertation ended up being largely archival. It also became the 'black hole' of my research practices due to the difficulty of convincingly analysing interviews with Argentine perpetrators. Based on the conviction and hope that setbacks and failures in research can lead to useful scholarly contributions, this article reflects on how the degradation of the interviewees' status and their confinement in prison impacted the course of the investigation. It specifically addresses the power

2 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

dynamics that unfolded during the interviews and the challenges of constructing knowledge under such conditions.

One distinctive aspect of the fieldwork was the unique position these state agents were in when I contacted them. Officers who were part of the repressive apparatus during the dictatorship, which caused the disappearance of thousands of people, were being interviewed by me when they had already been sentenced, detained in common instead of military prisons, and had limited possibilities of finding interlocutors who would attend to their claims or listen to them. From regarding themselves as 'the moral reserve of the nation', these state agents were now placed, and seen, in the lowest of moral positions. This process of social degradation spread through Argentine society with the return to democracy in 1983 during the government of Raúl Alfonsín (1983-1989) and was reinforced by the memory and human rights policies promoted since 2003 by the governments of Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-2011/2011-2015). In 2006, society's moral condemnation found its counterpart in the legal sphere with the reopening of trials for crimes against humanity, which led to the detention of hundreds of officers in ordinary prisons.

In many ways, the interviewees were, at the time of my fieldwork, extremely marginalized individuals in a position of symbolic and material inferiority. This position resulted from the widespread social condemnation and the limitations inherent to being incarcerated. At that time, various studies had already been conducted on the ways in which these new circumstances affected the narratives of officers active during the dictatorship. Valentina Salvi's research shows that the heroic story that pronounced the armed forces as the victors of a war against the revolutionary insurgency, which they called 'the subversion' (*la subversión*), changed into a discourse that defined the military as victims of 'the subversion'.<sup>3</sup> Eva van Roekel, on the other hand, demonstrates how some military detainees, without expressing remorse for their actions during the dictatorship, admitted the existence of bad and inappropriate behaviour among the officers who 'fought against the subversion', and even showed a certain lack of understanding towards some repressive policies such as the death flights or the appropriation of babies.<sup>4</sup>

3 Valentina Salvi, *De vencedores a víctimas: Memorias militares sobre el pasado reciente en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2012).

4 Eva van Roekel, 'Getting Close with Perpetrators in Argentina', in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 115-136.

In my case, these conditions influenced how I engaged with my interviewees, under modalities that would hardly have taken place years earlier when Argentina was characterized by a climate of impunity. What power dynamics unfolded during the fieldwork with perpetrators who were deprived of their freedom and whose status, in the terms of Harold Garfinkel, had degraded?<sup>5</sup> What problems and challenges did these conditions entail for knowledge construction? What were the obstacles that a young female researcher faced in gathering ethnographic knowledge? And, in more general terms, what determined the failure of the research? These are some of the questions I will try to answer in this article. With this purpose in mind, the first section reconstructs the power dynamics of interviews with perpetrators, while the second focuses on the type of data collected and the difficulties in constructing a valuable object of study from them. In both cases, I take inspiration from Kathleen Blee's plea to reflect on the emotions experienced during fieldwork, and in particular to examine what happens to us as researchers when we are actively engaged in acquiring knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

## Power Dynamics During Fieldwork

The resumption of the trials for crimes against humanity in Argentina in 2006 was a momentous event after more than twenty years of advances, standstills, and retreats in holding perpetrators accountable for their human rights abuses. In December 1983, following the end of the bloodiest dictatorship in Argentine history, Raúl Alfonsín was elected president, marking a new chapter in the country's political history. Alongside the activism of human rights organizations, state policies implemented by the newly elected government affirmed the value of human rights as a central axis of the new democracy. Towards the end of 1983, Alfonsín decreed the formation of the National Commission on the Disappeared (CONADEP) to prepare a report on the human rights violations committed between 1976 and 1983. This report played a fundamental role in raising awareness among broad sectors of Argentine society about the magnitude of the crimes committed by the dictatorial state. Two years later, within the framework of the Trial of the Juntas

5 Harold Garfinkel, 'Conditions of Successful Degradation Ceremonies', *American Journal of Sociology*, 61.5 (1956), 420-424.

6 Kathleen Blee, *Understanding Racist Activism: Theory, Methods, and Research* (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 13-20.

(1985), the information provided by the CONADEP report was crucial in convicting the highest military commanders of the forced disappearances, making Argentina the first country to prosecute its armed forces under civilian jurisdiction.

Subsequently, the military institution exerted pressure on Alfonsín's government to prevent the prosecution of the rest of the military officers who had participated in the repressive machinery. Faced with protests in various military barracks throughout the country that revived fears of a new coup d'état, the Full Stop Law (1986) was passed, which set a deadline for presenting incriminating evidence against mid- and low-ranking members of the armed forces. Seven months later, this channel of denunciation was completely closed with the enactment of the Due Obedience Law (1987), which exempted lower-ranking officers from any criminal responsibility on the grounds that they had acted on orders from their superiors.

In 1989, the inauguration of Carlos Menem as Argentina's president (1989-1999) marked a radical change in the treatment of crimes against humanity committed during the dictatorship. Up until then, the only individuals convicted by the justice system were the members of the military juntas and other high-ranking officers, who were later pardoned by the new government with the aim of healing the wounds of the past and achieving national reconciliation. Within the human rights movement, the term impunity gained significance in judicial interventions, political demands, and public mobilizations. In 1995, a new generation of activists emerged, composed of children of the disappeared, former militants, and exiles, who gathered under the organization Children for Identity and Justice Against Oblivion and Silence or HIJOS (*Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia Contra el Olvido y el Silencio*). Its members developed a novel form of collective action called *escrache* (street happening) that aimed to achieve a 'social condemnation' in the absence of a 'legal condemnation'.<sup>7</sup> As a cultural and political practice, the *escrache* shifted the focus from the victim to the perpetrator. It sought to expose the participants of state terrorism, as well as their homes, activities, and routines, to their neighbours and society at large. These protests, along with numerous cultural expressions in film, music, literature, and graphic humour, served as 'status degradation ceremonies' of the perpetrators that contributed to their public visibility

7 Santiago Cueto Rúa, *Nacimos en su lucha, viven en la nuestra: Identidad, justicia y memoria en la agrupación HIJOS-La Plata* (La Plata: Universidad Nacional de La Plata, 2009).

through markers of otherness that associated them with radical evil and symbolically expelled them from the national community.<sup>8</sup>

With the election in 2003 of Néstor Kirchner as president, policies regarding memory and human rights gained new momentum, visible in the creation of numerous memory sites, the opening and preservation of archives, and public speeches and tributes to the victims and their families.<sup>9</sup> The convergence between a sector of the human rights movement and the national government reached one of its milestones on 24 March 2004, when the *Escuela Mecánica de la Armada* (Navy Mechanics School) - one of the most emblematic clandestine detention and disappearance centres of the dictatorship - was transformed into a 'space of memory'. In this act of recovery of the premises, Kirchner apologized to its victims in the name of the Argentine State.<sup>10</sup> The following year, the Supreme Court of Justice declared the Full Stop and Due Obedience Laws unconstitutional, enabling the reopening of trials for crimes against humanity in the following year.

In the new round of trials that began in 2006, the punitive intent was not limited to the highest military ranks but extended to mid- and low-ranking members of the armed and security forces. This meant that their accountability before the criminal justice system was a turning point in the life trajectories of most former state agents. For hundreds of retired officers and their families, this new stage of transitional justice meant a detachment from the military institution that until then had trained and sheltered them. By 2015, when I began my fieldwork, the number of inmates in regular prisons had reached 542.<sup>11</sup> In some prisons, the large number of indicted military personnel led to the assignment of entire pavilions exclusively for their accommodation. This was the case at the Marcos Paz Penitentiary Complex, located forty-six kilometres from Buenos Aires, where I initiated the research that would provide me with the necessary material for my thesis.

8 Harold Garfinkel conceptualizes status degradation ceremonies as ritual instances that aim to diminish a person's identity and status. According to him, degradation rituals achieve their goal when the degraded person's identity undergoes a radical transformation, and no trace of their former self can persist. Garfinkel, p. 420.

9 Cinthia Balé, *Memoria e identidad durante el kirchnerismo: La "reparación" de legajos laborales de empleados estatales desaparecidos* (La Plata: UNLP, 2018).

10 Elizabeth Jelin, *La lucha por el pasado: Cómo construimos la memoria social* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2017).

11 Centro de Estudios Sociales y Legales, *Derechos Humanos en la Argentina: Informe 2016* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2016).

I gained access to the first interviewee through his son, Esteban Molina,<sup>12</sup> who had become an active member of organizations advocating for the freedom of the detainees since 2010. From the moment I contacted Esteban through social media, he was more than willing to assist. He assured me that his father would be delighted to receive me at the Marcos Paz prison and even offered to accompany me during the visit. On 11 November 2015, I entered the prison for the first time to interview Alberto Molina, a sixty-four-year-old retired lieutenant-colonel who had been sentenced to life imprisonment in 2010 for his involvement in the illegal repression in the province of Mendoza as a sub-lieutenant. From then on, I visited him regularly, with varying frequencies at different times. Additionally, Esteban introduced me to Ricardo Elsesser, a sixty-three-year-old retired lieutenant-colonel who had served during the dictatorship as a sub-lieutenant. Ricardo was neither prosecuted nor suspected of committing crimes against humanity, but he maintained an active commitment to the prisoners due to the detention of his brother, who was also a retired military officer. In this article, I will focus on my dialogues with Alberto and Ricardo, as they were the ones with whom I established more frequent contact, and through them I expanded my network and gained access to other interviewees, eventually leading to a total of ten interviewees.

In the early days of my fieldwork, whenever I had to orally present my research topic at seminars and conferences, some colleagues and peers were surprised and praised my courage, which increased the feeling of making some sort of sacrifice to expand knowledge about perpetrators. The limited number of scholarly investigations on Argentine perpetrators and the fact that I was able to enter a space that was initially thought to be difficult to access strengthened my confidence in the value of the research.<sup>13</sup> In her study on the participation of women in the Ku Klux Klan, Kathleen Blee rightly draws attention to the 'heroic' position from which some right-wing scholars communicate their

12 The real names of the interviewees have been modified to preserve their identities.

13 In Argentina, while there is not an abundance of studies on perpetrators, there is nevertheless a valuable set of research on the subject, among which the following stand out: Leigh A. Payne, *Testimonios perturbadores: Ni verdad ni reconciliación en las confesiones de violencia de Estado* (Bogotá: Ediciones Uniandes, 2009); Antonius C. G. M. Robben, 'Seducción Etnográfica, Transferencia, y Resistencia en Diálogos sobre Terror y Violencia en Argentina', *Aletheia*, 1.2 (2011), 1-32 <<https://www.aletheia.fahce.unlp.edu.ar/article/view/ATHv01n02a21/17125>> [accessed 11 July 2023]; Salvi, *De vencedores a víctimas; Marguerite Feitlowitz, Un léxico del terror* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2015); *Las voces de la represión: Declaraciones de perpetradores de la dictadura Argentina*, ed. by Claudia Feld and Valentina Salvi (Buenos Aires: Miño y Dávila, 2019).

findings, as if they are the only ones willing to delve into objects and actors that no one wants to investigate due to their abject or unpleasant nature.<sup>14</sup> I mention Blee because I am interested in demonstrating that the heroic position I initially assumed would lose its foundation under the conditions in which the fieldwork was conducted and the particular dynamics that these conditions enabled.

First and foremost, the development of the trials and the absolute deprivation of freedom of the detainees provided me with a secure framework in which to conduct interviews in relative comfort, both inside and outside the prison. I remember experiencing anxiety, nervousness, curiosity, and even an adrenaline rush in the moments leading up to each encounter, but not fear. Contrary to Blee's experiences conversing with members of the Ku Klux Klan and supremacist groups that carried weapons in their homes, I never felt that my physical integrity was in danger. This also suggests a difference with the interviews conducted by Valentina Salvi with retired Argentine officers between 2004 and 2007 when the trials were just beginning and threats directed at family members of the disappeared and victim-survivors were common.

By 2015, the majority of the interviewees had been in prison for several years. This translated into fewer resources and less energy to try to reverse their situation, especially in the case of middle-ranking individuals who did not carry emblematic surnames and therefore aroused less interest and curiosity in the public sphere. In February 2017, Alberto Molina went on hunger strike to denounce the living conditions in the prison, which only drew the attention of two small news portals. Stripped of all support and connection with the military institution, the detainees depended to a large extent on strategies mobilized by family members and fellow military officers, who were also rarely heard and seen in the public space.

Given this context, my allegedly heroic position gradually diminished as I observed an unfolding dynamic where, rather than being in a subordinate position, I had agency and freedom to engage with actors whose social status had been completely degraded. 'I noticed that you were comfortable', a colleague said to me one day after leaving the prison in March 2017, after I accompanied him to a meeting with Alberto Molina for his ongoing research. His comment - provocative in the best sense - forced me to keep a more conscious record of the potential com-

<sup>14</sup> Blee, p. 57.

fort I was experiencing during fieldwork, which does not mean that the research tasks were entirely devoid of ethical dilemmas.

On the one hand, I would say that I became tense once I got closer to the ethnographic encounter because interviewing individuals convicted of crimes against humanity with apparent ease never ceased to disturb me. In the literature on perpetrators, the cultivation of good rapport is often emphasized as important for interaction and knowledge production. Eva van Roekel's account of her conversations with Argentine perpetrators emphasizes precisely these implications of 'getting close' with these actors. Van Roekel explains that it was by forging a sort of 'professional friendship' with the detained officers that she was able to discover new dimensions of analysis that would not have emerged otherwise. These friendly relations, she emphasizes, were governed by rules that inform the military world: camaraderie, decorum, traditional gender values, and respect for the silence of the interviewees about crimes committed during the dictatorship.<sup>15</sup> Her account assumes that the researcher starts with a moral rejection of the human subjects they study. The challenge lies in overcoming this aversion to amplify the possibilities of understanding and creating empathy for the interviewees.

But in my case, the problem was that I did not have to develop empathy but instead needed to avoid becoming trapped in it. From the beginning of my research, my perception of the interviewees was affected by the material conditions of their existence. As their days in prison increased, the conditions of their confinement were a recurring topic of conversation. They frequently referred to the shortages of and poor access to health care, invoking their advanced age or noting that several of their fellow inmates were senile. As Antonius Robben explains, being or appearing frail is an effective form of seduction, which can override the ethnographer's judgment and critical capacity. Furthermore, as I had no personal ties to the families of the disappeared and no active involvement in the human rights movement, with the emotional commitment that such ties and involvement would entail, there was a permanent risk of being ethnographically seduced by my interlocutors' narratives that sought to evoke favourable impressions and generate feelings of sympathy for their vulnerable position.<sup>16</sup> In addition, although the dictatorship and the crimes the convicted officers had committed were important topics of conversation and the reason for interviewing them, as mutual trust with the interviewees increased

<sup>15</sup> van Roekel, p. 131.

<sup>16</sup> Robben, p. 2.



their crimes tended to lose their significance at times. I could distance myself from them in an unforeseen way at the beginning of the research. Additionally, in most cases, the interview atmosphere was relaxed. I always tried to bring something sweet or savoury to share, and in Alberto's case, he prepared lunch twice when my visit took place at midday. We also drank herbal tea (*mate*) together and made jokes and ironic comments to one another.<sup>17</sup>

Consequently, what I began to question during the interviews was not so much the experience of the perpetrators in recalling the terror in which they had been involved, but rather my own experience at these encounters. I was surprised by how my mind produced a sort of cognitive dissociation between the interviewees' present situation and their criminal past. Overall, I felt uncomfortable about my own comfort.

On the other hand, there were also ethnographic encounters that, at the very least, caused bewilderment. Interviewing detainees who mostly came from the military meant dealing with a social order where my gender tended to prevail over my status as a researcher, putting me in a position of inferiority that took on different characteristics depending on the interviewee.

For example, Ricardo Elsesser was married and had three children, which strongly influenced his style of argumentation: 'If you were my daughter and in danger because you were kidnapped, I would not hesitate to do everything in my power to save your life' [*Si vos fueras mi hija y corrieras peligro porque estás secuestrada, yo no dudaría en hacer todo lo que está a mi alcance para salvar tu vida*].<sup>18</sup> Thus, during our conversations, it was common for him to activate his role as a father (protector) and my role as a daughter (vulnerable) to justify the illegal methods of the armed forces, but also to build a relationship as affectionate as it was paternalistic, which influenced the type of data produced. In fact, both Ricardo and the other interviewees avoided narrating themselves in contexts of violence, or at most, they did so by invoking hypothetical situations, as reflected in the dialogue with Ricardo. Celina Albornoz describes something similar in her research on Tacuara, an extreme right-wing Catholic movement that operated in

17 *Mate* is a herbal tea traditionally consumed in Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay. It is prepared in a gourd that is shared among its consumers.

18 Interview with Ricardo Elsesser, 7 November 2016. All interviews were conducted in Spanish and translated for the purposes of this publication.

Argentina in the 1950s and 1970s.<sup>19</sup> While her male colleague was able to interview a former member of this organization and obtain gruesome details of beatings, attacks, and harassment, when it was Albornoz's turn with the same interviewee, cordiality, condescension, constant examination, and above all secrecy regarding acts of violence prevailed. It is likely that the sharing of this type of information was associated by the interviewees with a masculine code, making its evocation more likely to occur among men than with women.

It is from these references that one can understand the gallantry that Alberto Molina practiced with me during the interviews, as an acceptable form of interaction with the opposite sex. Unlike Ricardo Elsesser, Alberto had been divorced for several years. In his case, reminiscences of his past as a military officer and his present status as a 'political prisoner' alternated with gestures and comments that sought to engage me as a woman to shift the encounter to a more intimate and personal level:

How can it be that you are single? It's incomprehensible!

I don't know if your intention is to continue the interviews or if, on the contrary, you are no longer interested in me.

The last time we met, I noticed you were sad. Was something bothering you?

[¿Cómo puede ser que estés soltera?...iNo se entiende!

No sé si tu idea es continuar las entrevistas o si de lo contrario ya no te intereso más"

La última vez que nos vimos te noté triste, ¿te pasaba algo?]<sup>20</sup>

Although courtesy, chivalry, and gallantry are ingrained practices in military circles, I could not help but perceive the courtship of a person convicted of crimes against humanity as strange and unusual. Although it never became sexual harassment, Alberto tried to give a

19 Celina Albornoz, 'Una historiadora en el territorio de las extremas derechas: Reflexiones en torno al trabajo de campo', *Sudamérica*, 17 (2023), 350-368 <<https://fh.mdp.edu.ar/revistas/index.php/sudamerica/article/view/6462/6595>> [accessed 11 July 2023].

20 Excerpts from conversations between Alberto Molina and the researcher that took place between 2015 and 2017.

sexual connotation to our fictive kinship. These attitudes, as Sinah Theres Kloß reflects when discussing her male informants during her fieldwork in Guyana, allow them to reaffirm their masculinity, their position of power and authority within the framework of a social order that, in the case of the military, is markedly patriarchal.<sup>21</sup>

It is evident that at times it was difficult to establish boundaries. However, I also had control over many situations and could even subvert some dynamics with which I felt uncomfortable. During a visit to the Marcos Paz prison, Alberto had prearranged my return with the wife of another detainee who had a car. The interviewee, aware of the time it would take me to travel back to Buenos Aires, wanted to take care of me and for me to let him take care of me. Accepting the proposal had two advantages: on the one hand, I would save a long journey and the logistics of combining a train and two buses; on the other hand, I would have the opportunity to converse with the wife of a detainee in an informal context. I was ready to go, but an unexpected situation disrupted the plan. Before I said goodbye, another detainee approached the table where we were talking and whispered a comment to Alberto, at which both of them laughed. Alberto reacted with a knowing smile, and in response to my curiosity, he jokingly commented that his peers teased him, saying, ‘They say we’re ‘amigovios’ [a term combining ‘friends’, *amigos*, and ‘lovers’, *novios*]. They’re outrageous’ [Me dicen que somos amigovios. Son unos guachos]. The situation made me uncomfortable, and when I left the prison I decided to return to Buenos Aires on my own. When I arrived home, Alberto called me to make sure I had arrived safely and reproached me for returning alone. Feeling overwhelmed by the possibility of becoming entangled in a relationship that was taking on more intimate tones, I decided to subvert that dynamic and show my autonomy by traveling alone between Buenos Aires and Marcos Paz prison.

During her participant observation with veterans of the Falklands/Malvinas War, Rosana Guber met an informant who tried to seduce her, which raised the concern about how it could affect the continuity of her work.<sup>22</sup> In my case, Alberto’s and other interviewees’ gallantry did not lead me to perceive my presence in the field as a risk. I let some time pass and eventually returned to the prison. I was interested in

21 Sinah Theres Kloß, ‘Sexual(ized) Harassment and Ethnographic Fieldwork: A Silenced Aspect of Social Research’, *Ethnography*, 18.3 (2017), 396–414.

22 Rosana Guber, *La etnografía: Método, campo y reflexividad* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XX, 2014), pp. 118–122.

meeting more interviewees through Alberto and ended up accepting and interpreting his seduction game as one of the few resources he had left with which to cope with life in prison. In other words, just as he tended to prioritize my status as a woman over that of a researcher, I always ended up prioritizing his status as a segregated and detained individual over that of a man and military officer, which, in turn, allowed me to mitigate the effects of his game.

Certainly, the vulnerable condition of the interviewees posed certain dilemmas, especially the difficulty of representing them in Pilar Calveiro's terms as the 'lords of life and death' they were during the dictatorship.<sup>23</sup> However, these same conditions also contributed to the power relations between the interviewees and the researcher having various shades and being somewhat more dynamic, which gave me the possibility of reducing the asymmetry in which they attempted to place me because of my age and gender. As will be seen below, the context of the prison not only enabled a new dynamic but also influenced the ways of gathering data and the possibility of making an original contribution to the field of perpetrator studies in Argentina.

### **The Construction of Knowledge within Walls**

An important aspect of the fieldwork resided, naturally, in what the retired officers said during the meetings to reverse their segregation and counteract the marks of otherness associated with them as radical evil. Since the resumption of the trials, both they and their family members and comrades-in-arms made public and legal demands that adopted the language of human rights, a lexicon that in Argentina is associated with the struggles against the crimes which, ironically, these retired officers had committed. Making claims in these terms implied having to deal with a series of temporary, symbolic, and material disadvantages. In fact, when the detained officers and their family members began vehemently to adapt their demands to the categories, forms, and tones of a humanitarian logic, there already existed a dense network of institutions, experts, and relatives of the disappeared that held the authority and legitimacy to express themselves in those terms, and who also had strong ties with the State. Given that victims and experts mutually

23 Pilar Calveiro, *Poder y desaparición: Los campos de concentración en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 2004), p. 5.

constitute each other,<sup>24</sup> differential access to capital, networks, and resources resulted in varying degrees of enablement and receptiveness to their demands. ‘They don’t acknowledge you as a victim, which makes everything very difficult’ [No te reconocen como víctima, lo cual hace todo muy difícil], remarked one of the interviewees while describing the difficulties he had faced in being attended to by a doctor when he was ill. Furthermore, I must add that the majority of the retired officers, both detained and free, encounter serious difficulties in incorporating the language culturally expected of a victim, as they continue to justify torture and kidnapping as necessary methods in the so-called fight against subversion.

In the particular cases of Alberto Molina and Ricardo Elsesser, both were desperate to escape the individual and collective ostracism in which they found themselves, and from the beginning they presented themselves to me as military personnel with extraordinary qualities. Alberto was interested in demonstrating his reflective capacity, and perhaps for that reason he frequently recalled that on the day of the coup d’état he voiced criticisms of his superiors. He also often reminisced about his old desire to study psychology, a field that emphasizes listening as a preferred working tool. Similarly, Ricardo made efforts to demonstrate openness and a capacity for dialogue. In contrast to most officers, who evoked a military career as an innate vocation, Ricardo mentioned several times that he enrolled in military school as an obligation to his father rather than an expression of his own desire. He would have liked to become a doctor, and during the period in which our conversations took place he expressed a strong interest in studying sociology or political science. He wanted to have better tools to understand the situation of the detainees, although it is also possible that he was attempting to strengthen his connection with me through a shared interest in the social sciences.

During the course of the fieldwork, I learned that Alberto and Ricardo had initiated a collective action among the detainees to ask for forgiveness from Argentine society for the crimes they had committed, while also expressing their willingness to collaborate in the search for information about the disappeared. As different studies show, *esprit de*

24 As Santiago Cueto Rúa argues: ‘Victims rely on professionals to assert their rights and demands, as well as to position themselves in relation to institutions, to build their activism and associative networks. Meanwhile, experts find in the victim the ethical foundation of the social problem they manage.’ Santiago Cueto Rúa, review of *Un mundo de víctimas*, ed. by Gabriel Gatti (2017), *Anuario de la Escuela de Historia*, 30 (2018), 217-223 <<https://anuariode-historia.unr.edu.ar/index.php/Anuario/article/view/258/277>> [accessed 11 July 2023].

*corps* is a value that is inculcated from the moment officers begin their military training.<sup>25</sup> Individual interventions are generally not well considered and can even mean the person's expulsion from the military family. This was the case with the retired frigate captain Adolfo Scilingo when in 1995 he confessed to his participation in the death flights,<sup>26</sup> and made it clear that he suffered from nightmares and depression because of what he had done. Although Ricardo and Alberto also tried to show sensitivity in their interventions, neither of them referred to Scilingo's confession when promoting the initiative. On the contrary, they levelled harsh criticism against him and singled him out for vitriolic insults because he had betrayed the military institution. In line with the values of comradeship, Ricardo and Alberto understood that their pardon project, in order to have legitimacy, had to be collective.

Ricardo drafted the statement and circulated it in Marcos Paz prison and other correctional facilities. While the proposal gained some support, it also generated strong disagreements, which raised my curiosity and led me to consider the possibility of shifting the focus of my research to this initiative. Until then, the prison had provided me with a secure and controlled research environment, but this also had its limitations. Prisons entail a narrow social context where detainees are subject to daily routines, waiting, the deceleration of time, and the dissociation of relations.<sup>27</sup> These factors influence what the researcher can hear and observe from the interviewees and their interactions, since they operate under the influence of a total institution that only allows visits on specific days and times. Focusing on the collective action undertaken by Alberto and Ricardo would allow me to reconstruct a web of relations and avoid the methodological individualism that can sometimes arise when attempting to reconstruct life trajectories. It would also give me the opportunity to organize and give meaning to the material that emerged from the interviews, which at times seemed somewhat scattered and disconnected.

Being free, Ricardo Elsesser had greater leeway to promote the initiative within the universe of detainees and to establish connections

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

26 The death flights were a methodology implemented by the dictatorship to dispose of the bodies of disappeared detainees. Victims were thrown into the open sea from military airplanes while under the effects of a drug that made them drowsy.

27 Antonio Viedma Rojas and others, 'Investigar en cárceles: Apuntes para futuros científicos sociales', *Revista de Metodología de las Ciencias Sociales*, 42 (2019), 165-195 <<https://revistas.uned.es/index.php/empiria/article/view/23256/18861>> [accessed 11 July 2023].

with intellectuals and journalists who could give public exposure to the project. On the few occasions when he shared the same space with relatives of the disappeared, he presented himself before them and asked for forgiveness:

I am ashamed of what happened and of my participation in it. I always say it to each affected person. I meet a child of the disappeared and say, 'I apologize for not giving you explanations about the fate of your parents. I don't know where they are. For forty years, I've been saying we should say where they are. I apologize to you for that.'

[Esto que pasó de lo que yo de alguna u otra manera fui partícipe, me avergüenza. Siempre lo digo con cada persona afectada. Me encuentro con un hijo de desaparecidos y le digo 'Te pido perdón por no darte explicaciones sobre el destino de tus padres. No sé dónde están. Hace cuarenta años digo que hay que decir dónde están. Yo te pido perdón por eso.]<sup>28</sup>

These words often carried an emotional precariousness that accentuated the tone of speech. I remember being moved the first time I heard it. With this ritual of introduction, Ricardo sought to reaffirm his adherence to a set of socially shared values before others and thus distinguish himself from the group of retired officers. According to him, his relations with them were rough: 'Most of them are fools, lacking the will and understanding required for this.'<sup>29</sup> Alberto Molina, on the other hand, claimed that several of his comrades had bad intentions and accused them of being traitors. The moral boundaries drawn by Alberto and Ricardo had symbolic effects beyond their potential or actual existence, as it allowed them to establish themselves as legitimate interlocutors who had something relevant to say and were worth listening to.

At the same time, Ricardo's and Alberto's discourse still retained much of the military worldview that had characterized the armed forces when they were still an institution with power and influence in the Argentine political system. Both engaged in a ritualized repetition of justificatory arguments for state terrorism and appealed to the same 'techniques of neutralization' noticed in other studies of Argentine perpetrators: 'It was always others who had done bad things', 'there were

28 Interview with Ricardo Elsesser, 13 March 2017.

29 Interview with Ricardo Elsesser, 7 November 2016.

always others above', and 'they only followed orders'.<sup>30</sup> Thus, what separated Alberto and Ricardo from other military personnel was often overshadowed by what united them.

In hindsight, the interviewees attempted different strategies to counteract the loss of status, constantly navigating between what they are and what they were, between the language of human rights and the discourses of the fight against subversion. This duality also influenced my own perceptions of them. While at times I tended to dissociate the interviewees from their criminal past, at other times I encountered narratives that fit the usual discourse of Argentine perpetrators: in addition to their beliefs and worldview about the last dictatorship, they were culturally extremely conservative, devout Catholics, spoke of homosexuality in terms of illness, criticized any progressive movements like feminism, and held very derogatory views of the left.

We can agree that ethnographers aim to restore the complexity of the webs of meanings and relations they investigate, seeking to unveil different forms of action and classification among the actors involved. But in this case, although differences among retired officers existed, they turned out to be less significant, resulting in a network of actors that was not very homogeneous but not heterogeneous either. The difficulties in gathering relevant information or in deriving meaning from the interview material that would allow me to move beyond the exploratory stage increased the challenge of building a valuable object of study. I had managed to enter the universe of detainees for crimes against humanity but was not able to advance in the research. The heroic position I initially assumed was losing more and more sustenance. Towards the end of my visits to the prison, I started to become impatient, as can be seen in one of my last conversations with Alberto:

Anaía: The other day when we were talking on the phone, you asked me if these encounters were useful to me. And the truth is, I kept thinking about it. They are useful, but sometimes I feel like they're not. What you say, I find it coming from other military personnel as well. The phrases, the arguments, they're repeated.

Alberto: Yes, because we all lived through this.

30 David Matza and Gresham Sykes, 'Técnicas de neutralización: Una teoría de la delincuencia', *Caderno do Centro de Estudos e Pesquisas em Humanidades*, 21.52 (2008), 163-171 <<https://periodicos.ufba.br/index.php/crh/article/view/18960/12318>> [accessed 11 July 2023].



Analia: But even with testimonies that don't refer to Argentina, but to other regional and international processes.

Alberto: Because what happened here happened at a regional and global level as well.

Analia: Yes, but still... I expected to find a more personal narrative.

[Analia: El otro día cuando hablábamos por teléfono me preguntaste si me servían estos encuentros. Y la verdad es que me quedé pensando. Me sirven pero a veces siento que no. Que lo que vos decís lo puedo encontrar en boca de otros militares. Se repiten frases, argumentos.

Alberto: Sí, es que todos vivimos esto.

Analia: Pero incluso con testimonios que no refieren a la Argentina, sino a otros procesos regionales e internacionales.

Alberto: Es que lo que se vivió acá se vivió a nivel regional y mundial.

Analia: Si. Pero yo esperaba encontrar un relato más 'personal'.]<sup>31</sup>

Confronting the interviewee and demanding a more personal narrative is an example of the more dynamic relation enabled by the confinement and deprivation of the detainees. At the same time, the confrontation originated from the fact that the information gathered up to that point was considered not very useful, but also from making conscious a feeling that grew as the meetings went on: boredom with the interviewee's formal narrative. Regarding the effects that these exchanges can have on the researcher, Blee recounts that after interviewing a good number of Ku Klux Klan members, she began to develop a kind of numbness to the gruesome episodes they narrated. She no longer felt anything, and that led her to pause her fieldwork.<sup>32</sup> Her reflection is highly useful for rethinking some of the sensations experienced during the interviews, such as boredom, not so much due to becoming accustomed to the horror but as a result of hearing the same justifications over and over again.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Alberto Molina, 1 December 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Blee, *Understanding Racist Activism*, p. 16.

On emotions in fieldwork with perpetrators, Antonius Robben and Alexander Laban Hinton explain that researchers cannot always handle them, so it is important not to repress or ignore these emotions, as they ‘can reveal new layers of cultural understanding’.<sup>33</sup> In my case, my emotions revealed different methodological issues.

The first of these has to do with the construction of the research problem. It is common for researchers to construct their topic in dialogue with the research participants. However, in my case the prison context, the limitations of the visiting hours and, above all, my lack of experience caused this approach to reduce the fieldwork’s potential.

Secondly, it was extremely difficult to work with stereotyped narratives, by which I mean narratives that appeal to an existing repertoire of arguments. I sense that this is not just my problem. In her research, van Roekel had to conduct detailed interpretive work by observing and attending to small gestures and silences. In other words, she had to improvise to uncover the nonverbal meanings of interviewees who constantly repeated the same deceptive phrases and arguments.

In general, scholarly research is expected to problematize the stereotypes projected by society onto a particular phenomenon or actor and provide elements for a better understanding. But in my case, I encountered interviewees who, in several aspects, resembled the social representation of the perpetrator, although in a more down-to-earth and less spectacular version. And those who aimed to break that stereotype and tried to reverse their loss of status, like Alberto and Ricardo, did not have the intellectual or material resources to achieve it. Their initiative to ask Argentine society for forgiveness never materialized. Some intellectuals and journalists who were contacted by Ricardo became initially enthusiastic but later dismissed the project, considering that it didn’t say anything new or that it said more of the same. Something similar happened to the fate of my research. I stopped going to the Marcos Paz prison because I became interested in the children of perpetrators. The generational transition had enabled more interesting perspectives, and like someone chasing novelty, I ended up shifting my attention to these emerging actors.

33 Antonius C. G. M. Robben and Alexander Laban Hinton, *Perpetrators: Encountering Humanity’s Dark Side* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023), p. 23.

## Conclusions

Starting from the need to reflect on dead ends and research paths that do not lead anywhere, this article sought to uncover some dynamics in the fieldwork with Argentine officers convicted of crimes against humanity. This interest was not solely focused on perpetrators. Perpetrator studies has made valuable contributions in this regard by studying what these actors say, about what they remain silent, and what they omit, or by reflecting on the meaning of this controversial concept.<sup>34</sup> In this article, the focus was rather on the historical, material, and symbolic conditions in which the interviews took place and how these conditions influenced me and the course of my research.

Fieldwork with perpetrators involved placing my relationships with them in a historical context marked by the development in Argentina of the trials for crimes against humanity, the imprisonment of perpetrators in regular instead of military prisons, and, in general terms, the strong deterioration of their status and reputation. These elements were enabling and conditioning factors. I was able to access the interviewees because they longed to be heard and reverse their segregation. However, this element also posed one of the main challenges of the investigation: how to account for the deterioration in their material and symbolic conditions of existence without victimizing or exculpating them from their crimes? How to account for the emotions they experienced from that position of inferiority, such as despair and anguish, without undermining the subject position of the researcher?

Perpetrators, both inside and outside Argentina, are often of interest for what they did when they held power, but a dialogue with them generally occurs only when their position of authority has deteriorated. In my fieldwork, this deterioration did not mean for the interviewees an absolute loss of power. As I demonstrated in this article, the interviewees often made me feel very conscious of my age and my status as a woman. This means that, in various ways, the officers sought to resurrect past hierarchies despite the fact that prison is not the best place for producing asymmetrical relations with interlocutors that live beyond the prison walls.

34 Gitta Sereny, *Into That Darkness: An Examination of Conscience* (London: Vintage, 1983); Sibylle Schmidt, 'Perpetrators' Knowledge: What and How Can We Learn from Perpetrator Testimony?', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 1.1 (2017), 85-104 <<https://jpr.winchesteruniversitypress.org/articles/10.21039/jpr.v1i1.38>> [accessed 11 July 2023]; Salvi, *De vencedores a víctimas*; Feld and Salvi (eds.) *Las voces de la represión*.

Even so, the transitory nature of the positions these perpetrators occupy affects their narratives as well as their self-perception and their relations with those interested in them. How to restore such variability that is constitutive of the perpetrator as an interviewee? How to produce knowledge considering the combination of what they are and what they have been? In his study on the fate of East German officers after Germany's reunification in 1989 to 1990, Andrew Bickford shows how these military personnel were absorbed into another state - West Germany - which considered them enemies.<sup>35</sup> They had been part of a military elite and had enjoyed all the accompanying benefits, but overnight their legitimacy and power were greatly diminished. The process of interviewing these agents entangled Bickford in bonds of trust and friendship, even though he knew that many of them had committed serious human rights violations. In my case, continuing to investigate the degradation of the status of perpetrators could have been a privileged path to understanding the broader political and cultural phenomena that framed this cleavage. At least during the fieldwork period, approaching the perspective of military retirees and temporarily entering their world allowed me to grasp the magnitude of the effects that memory and justice policies had on their modes of existence, providing me with a suggestive angle to analyse the strategies and resources they mobilized to deal with their new position.

35 Andrew Bickford, *Fallen Elites: The Military Other in Post-Unification Germany* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

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**Analía Goldentul** is a sociologist and PhD in Social Sciences (University of Buenos Aires). She is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the National Scientific and Technical Research Council, where she is studying the activism of relatives of Argentine perpetrators.

JPR ARTICLES





## New Forms of Genocide Documentaries: The Duel and the Quiet Interview

Raya Morag

**Abstract:** This essay aims, first, to put forth two new forms of genocide documentaries: The Duel and the Quiet Interview (my terms). These forms emerged from two of the major non-Western catastrophes of twentieth-century Communism – the Cambodian autogenocide and the Chinese Maoist Revolution, respectively. In both the Duel and the Quiet Interview, the directors search for historical truth, which, in both societies, has been silenced, taboo-ized and censored for circa 40 years. Second, despite the obvious differences between their historical-traumatic-cultural contexts, and their addressees, I contend that both forms shed light on the failure of post-Holocaust Western paradigmatic literature – initiated most prominently by Felman and Laub (1992), Hilberg (1993), LaCapra (2001), Felman (2002) and Wieviorka (2006) – to recognize these non-Western catastrophes as an immanent part of the Age of Testimony. I further contend that both forms expand the ethical boundaries of trauma, trauma cinema studies and related fields of research. Finally, dealing with collaboration as an undertheorized subject position in the West, this essay calls for the constitution of collaboration studies alongside perpetrator studies.

**Keywords:** genocide documentaries, the Duel, the Quiet Interview, post-Khmer Rouge Cambodian cinema, post-Cultural Revolution Chinese cinema, collaboration studies

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### Introduction

**T**his essay aims, first, to put forth two new forms of genocide documentaries: The Duel and the Quiet Interview (my terms). These forms emanated from two of the major non-Western catastrophes of twentieth-century Communism – the Cambodian autogenocide and the Chinese Maoist Revolution, respectively. In both the Duel and the Quiet Interview, the directors search for historical truth, which, in both societies, has been silenced, taboo-ized,

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and censored for circa forty years.<sup>1</sup> Second, despite the obvious differences between their historical-traumatic-cultural contexts, and their addressees, I contend that both forms shed light on the failure of post-Holocaust Western paradigmatic literature — initiated most prominently by Felman and Laub,<sup>2</sup> Hilberg,<sup>3</sup> LaCapra,<sup>4</sup> Felman,<sup>5</sup> Wieviorka,<sup>6</sup> and Hartman<sup>7</sup> — to recognize these non-Western catastrophes as an immanent part of the Age of Testimony.

I further contend that both forms expand the ethical boundaries of trauma, trauma-cinema studies, and related fields of research. Finally, dealing with collaboration as a subject position hardly recognized in the West, this essay calls for constitution of collaboration studies alongside perpetrator studies.

Moreover, the ethics of both forms are novel in their raising the issue of collaboration. Being conspicuously prevalent in the context of Communist regimes, as well as repressed by these regimes and cultures despite its major presence in both societies' traumatic histories, collaboration as a subject position in and of itself remains relatively undertheorized in post-Holocaust (and post-colonial) Western as well

- 1 A thorough discussion of the cultures of silence, taboo, and impunity in both contexts is beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice here to say that in the Cambodian context, the first history book on the period meant to be studied in schools and universities — *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975–1979)* — was written only in 2007, breaking thirty-two years of taboo in the Cambodian historiography and education curriculum. See Khamboly Dy, *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975–1979)* (Phnom Penh: DC-Cam, 2007). The crimes of sexual violence committed during the Khmer Rouge (KR) regime, for example, were legally recognized as crimes against humanity only in 2016, ten years after the ECCC (the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, see below) began its work; and even then, as both ECCC reports and documentary films like Lov Sophea's *Breaking the Silence – Sexual Violence under the Khmer Rouge* (2017) tell us, only the marital rapes committed during KR forced marriages are dealt with, and not those committed in detention centres and work camps. On intergenerational silence in Cambodian cinema and television see, e.g., Raya Morag, 'Gendered Genocide: New Cambodian Cinema and the Case of Forced Marriage and Rape', *Camera Obscura*, 35 (2020), 76–107.
- 2 Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).
- 3 Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933–1945* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993).
- 4 Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).
- 5 Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
- 6 Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, trans. by J. Stark (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).
- 7 Geoffrey Hartman, 'The Humanities of Testimony: An Introduction', *Poetics Today*, 27 (2006), 249–60.

as non-Western scholarship.<sup>8</sup> Thus, while there is important work in trauma studies, genocide studies, and related fields of research on the subject position of collaboration (and/or bystanding), this does not yet constitute a field of collaborator studies.

The first part of this essay will briefly introduce the paradigmatic form constituted by the New Wave of post-Khmer Rouge (KR) cinema: interviewing the perpetrator, staged as a confrontation, a duel, between the First-Generation director-survivor and the perpetrator. This will serve as a background for analysing Cambodian director and First-Generation survivor Roshane Saidnattar's *Survive: In the Heart of Khmer Rouge Madness*<sup>9</sup> as a unique case of duelling. Analysing this documentary form shows that, similar to other Cambodian duel documentaries,<sup>10</sup> confronting the high-ranking perpetrator (as well as the spectators) in *Survive* constitutes an ethics of un-forgiveness and non-reconciliation.<sup>11</sup> Subsequently, an analysis of second-generation French-Cambodian director Neary Adeline Hay's non-fiction film *Angkar* will focus on the repressed and under-theorized issue of collaboration.<sup>12</sup>

- 8 See Raya Morag, 'Post-Cultural Revolution Chinese Cinema of Betrayal: The Figure of the Collaborator and the Doubling Paradigm', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 34 (2020), 556–76.
- 9 *Survive: In the Heart of Khmer Rouge Madness (L'important c'est de rester vivant)*, dir. by Roshane Saidnattar (Morgane Production, 2009).
- 10 This corpus includes films such as *Enemies of the People: A Personal Journey into the Heart of the Killing Fields*, dir. by Thet Sambath and Rob Lemkin (Old Street Films, 2009); *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Death Machine (S-21, la machine de mort Khmère rouge)*, dir. by Rithy Panh (Arte France Cinéma, Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée [CNC], and Česká Televize, 2003); *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell*, dir. by Rithy Panh (Agence Nationale de Gestion des Oeuvres Audiovisuelles (ANGO), Bophana Production, and Catherine Dussart Productions [CDP], 2011); *Red Wedding*, dir. by Lida Chan and Guillaume Suon (Bophana Production and Tipasa Productions, 2012); and *About My Father*, dir. by Guillaume Suon (Bophana Productions, 2010). The scholarship on Cambodian cinema is growing rapidly. Some recent articles relate to the encounter between perpetrators and survivors, but none of them analyse this encounter as a unique phenomenon nor relate to the entire corpus of duels. See, e.g., Vicente Sánchez-Biosca, 'The Perpetrator's mise-en-scène: Language, Body, and Memory in the Cambodian Genocide', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 2.1 (2018), 65–94; Didem Alkan, 'Refiguring the Perpetrator in Rithy Panh's Documentary Films: S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine and Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell', *Continuum*, 34.2 (2020), 271–85. See also Leslie Barnes and Joseph Mai, eds., *The Cinema of Rithy Panh: Everything Has a Soul* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021).
- 11 See Raya Morag, *Perpetrator Cinema: Confronting Genocide in Cambodian Documentary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); and Raya Morag 'Big Perpetrator Cambodian Cinema, the Documentary Duel, and Moral Resentment', *Screen*, 62 (2021), 37–58.
- 12 *Angkar*, dir. by Neary Adeline Hay (The Cup of Tea Production, 2018).

The second part of the essay will analyse Chinese-French director Wang Bing's *Quiet Interview* in *Dead Souls*.<sup>13</sup> This two-part testimonial film mainly features interviews with survivors of the re-education-through-labour-[death]-camp of Jiabiangou, commonly regarded as a horrific symbol of Maoism. My analysis will outline the ethics of *The Quiet Interview* as constituting an act of re-subjectivization. Subsequently, I will discuss Wang Bing's testimony-based fiction film *Le Fossé* (*The Ditch*).<sup>14</sup> As I will show, *Le Fossé* as well as *Angkar*, can be seen as examples of how, notwithstanding the low number of documentaries engaging with collaborators, cinema can pave the way for the societal recognition of collaboration. In the conclusion I will reflect on how the study of these particular cinematic forms can contribute to bringing the topic of collaboration into the fields of trauma studies, documentary cinema studies, as well as perpetrator studies.

## The Documentary Duel

The New post-Khmer Rouge Cambodian documentary cinema (1990s–2020s) arose from the post-autogenocide era<sup>15</sup> (1975–1979). As I have contended in other forums,<sup>16</sup> it is the autogenocide, during which the KR murdered almost two million of their own people, a quarter of the population at the time, that made the Duel confrontation possible. After the fall of the regime, both high- and low-ranking perpetrators<sup>17</sup>

13 *Dead Souls* (*Les Âmes mortes*), dir. by Wang Bing (Les Films d'Ici, 2018).

14 *The Ditch* (*Le Fossé*, also known as *Goodbye Jiabiangou*), dir. by Wang Bing (Wil Productions, Les Films de L'Étranger, Entre Chien et Louup, 2010).

15 The term 'autogenocide' is widely discussed by Ervin Staub in *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 7, 191. The first to mention this term was probably the historian and philosopher Arnold Toynbee in 1958. My use of the term henceforth is not evaluative. Using it means addressing the *Condition Inhumane* of the extermination of the Other who, pre-Revolution, was the self. In autogenocide, those whom we wish to eliminate are not Others whose strangeness makes us wary, but those we know best: our family members and closest neighbours, as well as those who, like ourselves, belong to the same imagined community. Autogenocide, thus, is an intimate crime, inspired not by estrangement or ignorance, but by the closest possible relations and confidential knowledge. On different conceptions of autogenocide as a useful term see e.g., from Martin Shaw, *What is Genocide?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007) to T.O. Smith 'Cambodia: Paranoia, Xenophobia, Genocide and Auto-Genocide', in *The Routledge History of Genocide*, ed. by Cathie Carmichael and Richard C. Maguire (London: Routledge, 2015).

16 See Raya Morag, *Perpetrator Cinema*.

17 Pol Pot, 'Brother Number 1', was the KR leader, general secretary of the party during the Cambodian genocide; Nuon Chea, 'Brother Number 2', was the chief ideologist of the KR, prime minister of Democratic Kampuchea; Ieng Sary, 'Brother Number 3', was the foreign minis-

continued to live their lives alongside their former victims; past intimate violence once again turned into the daily closeness of members of the same imagined community (sharing the same ancestral heritage, origins, ethnicity, language, religious belief, body politic, and fellowship).

The notable difference between the Cambodian autogenocide — meaning that the enemy was not a foreign Other but a member of the same imagined community — and the other major genocidal catastrophes of the twentieth century (from Rwanda and Sierra Leone to former Yugoslavia) reflects on the extraordinariness of this cinema both in regard to the number of films produced and their novel form of addressing the perpetrator. The documentary *Duel* is established here: a new, rare, form of direct confrontational interview between the First- (or Second-) generation survivor and the perpetrator. The uniqueness of this form becomes evident if we recall, for example, that Jewish survivor–Nazi perpetrator direct encounters are unthinkable in post-Holocaust European cinema. In contrast to the Cambodian context, the basic situation could not have been realized: the wide majority of Jewish survivors did not return to their homes in Germany (or other European locations) and the option of confronting the Nazi perpetrators was unimaginable and indescribable.

Undoubtedly, the establishment of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia for the Prosecution of Crimes Committed during the Period of Democratic Kampuchea<sup>18</sup> (ECCC,<sup>19</sup> also known as the KR Tribunal) enabled thousands of witnesses (as well as civil parties) to confront the KR high-ranking perpetrators, thus deeply affecting the forty years of taboo-ized public sphere and supporting the only medium that could stage such a confrontation — documentary

ter and deputy prime minister; Khieu Samphan, 'Brother Number 4', was Cambodia's head of state.

18 Democratic Kampuchea was the government founded after KR forces defeated the US-backed Khmer Republic of Lon Nol in 1975. It existed until 1979. See 'Khmer Rouge History', *Cambodia Tribunal Monitor* <<http://www.cambodiatribunal.org/history/cambodian-history/khmer-rouge-history>> [accessed: 18 December 2023]. On the history of the Cambodian genocide see, e.g., David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 4th edn (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 2008).

19 The ECCC is a special Cambodian court set up in 2006 pursuant to a 2003 agreement between Cambodia and the United Nations to prosecute only high-level KR leaders of former Democratic Kampuchea. See 'Introduction to the ECCC' <<https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en/introduction-eccc>> [accessed 15 June 2023]. The ECCC is the first court trying international mass crimes to provide an opportunity for victims to participate directly in the proceedings as 'civil parties'. See ECCC, 'Who is Eligible to become a Civil Party?' <<https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en/victims-support/civil-party-information>> [accessed: 19 December 2023].

cinema.<sup>20</sup> It was only when the ECCC began its work in 2006 that testimonies of survivors and perpetrators' accounts entered more forcefully into the public sphere. The detailed voice of the perpetrator is mediated by this unique corpus and is heard against the proceedings of the ECCC.

The most conspicuous characteristic of the direct-encounter-turned-duel is its (explicit or implicit) transformation of power relations, especially in regard to high-ranking perpetrators. Although they do not take full responsibility in any of the documentary perpetrator films, through the duelling they either partially confess to their crimes and/or reveal part of the truth in regard to the KR regime. In addition, these films implicitly stage the question of whether duelling might be a 'civilizing' process for the (high-ranking) perpetrator.<sup>21</sup>

Accusations of dishonesty, historically one of the most frequent grounds for traditional duelling, inform the underlying tension between the survivor-interviewer and the perpetrator-interviewee. The First/Second-Generation survivor is undoubtedly aspiring, after years of effort, to extract the perpetrator's confession. In this corpus, however, as will be described below, it is the survivor's status and courage that, encountering deep interactional obstacles, shape the flow of the confrontation.

I suggest differentiating between two kinds of duels: the first is the duel often exemplified by a long period in which the survivor/interviewer hides his or her traumatic past in order to establish relationships with the (mostly high-ranking) perpetrators (as in *Enemies of the People: A Personal Journey into the Heart of the Killing Fields* [2009]). Thus, it inevitably seeks to engage two different addressees: the perpetrators and the spectators. The spectators, cognizant of the secret identity of the survivor/interviewer, are exposed to an abundance of information (voice-over, archival footage, editing) that stands in harsh contrast to the perpetrator's lies, and denials; their ethical participation in the duelling process is charged with the tension entailed in the concealment and the enormous difficulty faced by the post-traumatic survivor to embrace a 'neutral' position. The second is the duel that confronts the perpetrator with his crimes without hiding the interviewer's identity as survivor (as in Rithy Panh's *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell* [2011]).

20 Together with, to a lesser extent, an imaginary staging of this encounter format in fiction cinema.

21 Similar to traditional duels, in which 'the point [...] was more to demonstrate one's status-group membership than to establish dominance over one's opponent.' Randall Collins, *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 218.

Here the spectators' participation in the duelling process is charged with the tension built into the prolonged duelling: a fear of defeat.

### **Survive: In the Heart of Khmer Rouge Madness**

Roshane Saidnattar's *Survive: In the Heart of Khmer Rouge Madness* (2009) is an autobiographical film of a second-generation survivor that presents memories of her childhood during the KR regime intermingled with her lengthy interview with Khieu Samphan, 'Brother Number 4', Cambodia's head of state from 1976 until 1979 and one of the most powerful officials in Pol Pot's regime.<sup>22</sup> The interview, in which Saidnattar hides her identity as a survivor of the autogenocide and presents herself as a journalist, took place over several days in his house near the Thai frontier, prior to Samphan's incarceration by the ECCC in 2007. Saidnattar, also the scriptwriter, is heard through the voice-over:

It took me years to get this interview. I didn't say that I lived here in the time of Democratic Kampuchea. I simply said I wanted to understand their motivations, their ideals, the reasons for their fight. He said to me, 'I am going to tell you the real story of Cambodia'. Now I had to win his trust.

Samphan did not ask her questions about her past. As the interview unfolds, Saidnattar describes the evacuation of Phnom Penh, the whereabouts of her family, the forced separation from her father, and later, at the age of seven, from her mother, and the labour camps. Cutting the flow of the interview towards the end of the film, she chooses to focus on her family and describes their escape from the last village, Rounge, to which she returns with her mother (and her daughter) for the first time after thirty years, their meeting with the 'Old People',<sup>23</sup> including informers, and their prayers at the temples of Angkor Wat.

22 On 7 August 2014, Samphan was convicted by the ECCC and received a life sentence for crimes against humanity during the Cambodian genocide. A trial in 2018 found him guilty of genocide. As of 2023, he is the last surviving senior member of the KR.

23 The peasants from rural areas, considered the privileged class, were called the Old People (Base/Ancient People), pure and unstained by what the KR regarded as the corruption of capitalistic city life. This stands in contrast to the New People, sometimes termed 'April 17 people', the KR term that defined the new class that, broadly speaking, included anyone from an urban area and thus impure: the middle class, intellectuals, and artists. It also in-

The uniqueness of Saidnattar's duel with Samphan lies, first, in the way she deals with his various forms of denial (particularly of knowledge and responsibility [‘as for the massacre of the population, I didn't know about it. I didn't see anything. I didn't pay attention’], but also moral indifference, means-end dissociation, and denial of the victims<sup>24</sup>). Second, and consequently, the uniqueness lies in the multiple perspectives built into the structure of the narrative with which the spectators need to negotiate: since Saidnattar presents through reenactments the voice of the five- and seven-year-old girl that she was, it is through this perspective that she as an adult tells her story. However, there are also the perspectives of the interviewer who listens to the unprotected child inside herself; of her present self, hearing their traumatically broken narrative; of the adult who shares post-traumatic experiences with her co-survivor mother and young daughter, accompanying them to the scene of the crime, the labour camp, and the last village she lived in with her mother; and of the filmmaker, reflecting both on what she heard and came to comprehend through the memorial process. Thus, multiple voices of personal testimony/re-enactments, dreams (nightmares), returns to the scenes of crimes, three generations' post-traumatic sharing, and three generations' mother-daughter mirror-relations, remembrances through archival materials, and voice-over historical commentary provide the scaffolding along which the cinematic narrative and the duelling unfold.

After a few introductory historical scenes, Saidnattar begins to tell the spectators about the Phnom Penh evacuation and deportation of the New People to labour camps in rural Cambodia:

The first new year I remember was that of 1975. [...] My parents, my grandparents, my aunts, and my uncles. We took to the road with all the others.

Setting the personal tone endows the testimonial mode with an urgency and significance that attempts to both create an incessant conflict with the perpetrator's 'story' (which is, in fact, a failed account) and reduce the latter's significance in terms of the narrativization of the history the film aspires to portray.

cluded ethnic minorities and any other social stratum defined as an enemy. Being deported from the cities to the countryside on April 17, 1975, they were made a New People.

24 See Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2001), esp. 76–116.



Third, regardless of Samphan's incessant denials and highly disturbing evasion of past horrors, the uniqueness of the duelling lies in Saidnattar as an interviewer continuously asking him mainly ostensibly innocent questions typical to low-profile investigative journalism. This gradually reveals the film's total negation of Samphan's version of history and the official discourse of denial.<sup>25</sup> For instance,

ROSHANE SAIDNATTAR: What were your daily tasks at that time? What did you do?

KHIEU SAMPHAN: My daily work [...] I didn't do much. Like when I was in the resistance. I worked in Centre 870 [...]. Secondly, I divided up items collected in Phnom Penh, like fabric, clothes, household goods, sugar, medicine, etc. There was no one left in Phnom Penh, and no more stores. Everything was abandoned. The KR stocked it all in warehouses. And my job was to manage and guard these stocks. In fact, I had subordinates to do it. I had the title of the president, but I was president of warehouse security.

Samphan relates a whitewashed description of the office for enforcing mass killing known by the code name '870', and the horror of the Phnom Penh evacuation. He speaks using the same devoid-of-emotion cold tone of voice, and so does she, presenting her questions in a neutral tone. Even when she poses more critical questions, she neither discloses her attitude nor her emotional reaction:

ROSHANE SAIDNATTAR: Do you think those who massacred the population overstepped the orders of the party leaders? You said that the hierarchy didn't order any massacres. Yet those accused of illegal sentimentality were removed. Those accused of lacking discipline were re-educated. Re-educated, under the KR between 1975 and 1979, meant killed. .... Were your orders overstepped? Or were they ill-interpreted?

KHIEU SAMPHAN: For me, re-educating doesn't mean killing. Re-educating means persuading someone to do the right thing, not the wrong thing. To mend their ways. I didn't know about these executions.

25 Ibid., 103. Emphases in the original.

Addressing the spectators, following this encounter, the film constantly builds a contrast between the archival materials, which reflect the same events to which Samphan refers, and the testimony the filmmaker inserts. This refuting editing is made more complex due to the multiple perspectives that make the spectators active listeners. For instance, showing a re-enactment of a little girl collecting dung in the field, we hear the perspective of Saindattar, the adult, reflecting on herself and then giving body and voice to herself as the little girl who was forced to be a labourer in a children's camp (and to survive alone, far from her mother who worked in a unit building a dam):

Children had to collect dung to serve as fertilizer, five kilograms a day per child. [...] When we didn't meet standards [...] [w]e were deprived of food, given even worse jobs and we had to work to the point of collapse. In the end, their favourite fertilizer was bodies.

The film cuts from first-person testimony intermingled with the commentary of the narrator, the filmmaker, to a reenactment of the first-person testimony of a little girl returning from the field. The little girl says:

Often in the evening, I returned to my hut crying because I was all covered in dung. During work, the peasant kids played at making me fall so I'd get dirty. [...] They were taught to despise us [...] children of the New People.

It then creates a contrast when, in the next scene, we hear Khieu Samphan's reflection on labour:

I only visited the work sites when I escorted King Sihanouk and the princess. [...] I knew our comrades were tired. They maintained their enthusiasm and their fervour by working to the rhythm of revolutionary songs. I thought they worked willingly.<sup>26</sup>

Fourth, and most importantly, *Survive's* uniqueness in terms of the survivor–perpetrator encounter lies in the shift Saindattar presents when she testifies in the midst of this 'neutral' interview that she is

26 Khieu Samphan, 'Cambodia's Economy and Problems of Industrialization, in Underdevelopment in Cambodia', trans. by Laura Summers, *Indochina Chronicle* 51-52 (Berkeley, CA.: Indochina Resource Center, 1976), 1-27 <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/58800629/Underdevelopment-in-Cambodia-by-Khieu-Samphan#scribd>> [accessed 19 December 2023]

re-experiencing the genocide not only because of her internal pressure to bear witness, but because of the nightmarish presence of the perpetrator: 'Since I had arrived at his home, a flood of memories were coming back to me'. The scene that embodies this turning point shows a little girl hiding in the forest and hearing someone beg a KR cadre not to kill him and a shadow theatre presenting a scene in which the cadre grabs a baby from his mother and smashes its skull against a tree.

This nightmare takes place in Khieu Samphan's home where she, as his guest-and-interviewer, sleeps. The camera shows her as she awakens to an unrecognized noise and the sound of the monsoon. She is then seen on the stairs outside the house, wet from the heavy rain. The next scene is a reenactment, we see part of a line of girls planting rice during a heavy rain, eating from a bowl full with rainy water, shivering. In the next scene, the next morning, we hear her adult voice-over telling us: 'With each passing day my anxiety and fear intensified. I didn't yet tell Khieu Samphan what I had seen and heard. I survived KR massacres while he was president'.

In this kind of duelling film, the survivor/interviewer/activist/docu-historian/filmmaker's problem of integrating and communicating their own traumatic experiences under conditions in total contrast to the contentions put forward by the major scholars of the Age of Testimony (explained below) worsens through time. Since the director does not disclose to Khieu Samphan her true identity as a survivor, the spectators are watching a double Duel — one shown in the scenes of the interview and the other rendered through the editing and her voice-over, simultaneously and alternately representing her camp- and survivor-selves.<sup>27</sup> Her nightmare, grounded in the suddenness of the shift to anxiety, is the outcome of the emotional field (intertwining fear, anger, tension, hope, dread, grief) to which she was exposed during the duel. After her long duel with Samphan of the previous weeks, she became distressed by her failure to establish authority over the contested truth.

Moreover, as analysed in the above example, though the survivor-interviewers' symptoms worsen during their interviews with the perpetrators because of the latter's constant denial and lies, the inner paradox of apparently getting closer to the perpetrators — of allegedly getting to know them better while in fact this acquaintance negates itself — becomes more and more unbearable as the relationships develop. During this 'round', the Duel thus also embodies a process of what

27 This distinction is made by Holocaust survivor Primo Levi in his *If This Is a Man*, trans. by Stuart Woolf (New York: Orion Press, 1959).

the French sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu famously calls ‘symbolic violence’, a battle over domination.

Under these extreme circumstances of months and years of ‘Duel rounds’, overcoming the perpetrator’s psychological reactions when interviewed — lying, self-falsification, aporias, projection of guilt, refusal to acknowledge responsibility, and adhering to past indoctrination — while the unspoken and the unspeakable are still felt by the survivor, establishes a unique social process. It leads to constituting an ethics of unforgiveness without reconciliation.

Shoshana Felman claims, ‘Holocaust survivors — cannot fulfil their task without, in turn, passing through the crisis of experiencing their boundaries, their separateness, their functionality, and indeed their sanity, at risk’.<sup>28</sup> In the *Duel*, this means that a shattered self in the very act of remembering faces the denial of one’s suffering, of oneself, and though the post-genocide self of the survivor motivates the entire process, no assumption of a reconstructive effect that might emerge out of the possibility of a dialogue is rendered. Though a few directors (like Rithy Panh and Teth Sambath) testify that relationships were built during the years, the two parties, in contrast to those who participate in a conventional format of interviewer and interviewee, of course do not form a testimonial alliance. As Saidnattar, as well as other post-KR directors, tells us, perpetrators not only represent the indifference of the world to genocide, but their denials are still part of this world, making the violence present. The threat that the constant denials, evasions, manipulation, and lying will cause a secondary traumatization of the survivors, although they do not expect the perpetrator to take on the role of a listener, is realized in *Survive* and in all other duelling films.

Thus, the duels in *Survive*, as well as other duelling documentaries, emphasize shifts from the perpetrator’s inhuman behaviour to the humanity of the survivor and back. As Geoffrey Hartman argues,

Every witness, [...] becomes the last — the only remaining — witness. Each account, therefore, tries to reach a [...] listener and soul mate removing the solitariness of those not listened to. The shattered or isolated self of the victim is given a chance to reenter, through the interviewing process and however provisionally, a personal bonding that is also a social bond and which is necessary for the transmission of memory.<sup>29</sup>

28 Felman and Laub, xvii.

29 Hartman, 257.

I suggest that the nightmares and the voices of the dead begging to come back that Saidnattar hears stand for what Samphan does not say. Thus, combining (through the editing) Samphan's monologues-of-denial and her post-traumatic memories, her understanding of her own story and the reconstruction of her testimony is produced in relation to this high-ranking perpetrator's personality. As the narrative deepens, the beneath-the-surface encounter gains a life of its own, dissimilar to the polite and formal discourse of the interview. In this, it is the unspoken dimension of the survivor-perpetrator encounter, revealed to the survivor in a horrific painful way, that makes trauma-induced fragmented memories and psychic disruption a major means for rejecting the perpetrator and for self-healing.

This total rejection is embodied in the painful visit Saidnattar, with her mother and daughter, pays to the last village they had lived in. The camera shows the poor condition of the peasants as another indication of the failure of the Revolution. Saidnattar is whispering as if she were still in the past, afraid to be heard: 'These people were the eyes of Angkar (informers) [...] I wanted to see the man who killed my uncle [...] we were afraid of them. Him. Her. They have not changed. They are still peasants.' The last scene, inside a Buddhist temple, reflects faith, inner silence, a family bonding and Saidnattar's reconciliation-within-herself. My discussion of *Survive: In the Heart of Khmer Rouge Madness* has sought to highlight that the complex process of testimony, triggered by a survivor-perpetrator duel, constitutes an ethics of survival that first and foremost establishes the truth and the ability of the survivor-interviewer to constitute internal mirror-relations as a way for self-healing. The film concludes with credits that inform the viewers about Khieu Samphan's arrest and trial. These words further underline the undeniable attitude of non-reconciliation and unforgiveness towards the past that pervades the film.

## The Documentary Duel and Collaboration

Under the unprecedented circumstances of the complicity of most of the Cambodian people with the Pol Pot regime (whether voluntarily when, often as young people following the KR propaganda against Vietnam, King Norodom Sihanouk's<sup>30</sup> support of the KR, and US carpet bomb-

30 In 1975, his support of the KR movement allowed his return to Cambodia as the KR figure-head head of state.

ing during the early 1970s, they joined the movement, or involuntarily under the regime's terror and suppression), duelling in documentary cinema primarily takes place with high-ranking perpetrators. However, the cinematic corpus under discussion here entails an additional, symbolic layer of reference both to the huge number of (mostly hidden) low-ranking perpetrators and — being everywhere and nowhere — collaborators. Interviewing the Big Brothers and simultaneously reflecting on the entire community of KR cadres, this corpus touches on the all-encompassing problematic of the Cambodian post-genocide human condition — threatened by a potentially massive indictment of a huge population — which is crucial to Cambodia's psycho-social and political as well as cine-cultural and post-memorial future.

The Cambodian direct, non-archival, face-to-face confrontation with the collaborator is derived and realized through the directors' activism, which acknowledges and thus breaks the intimacy of the (horrific) neighbourhood prevalent in post-1979 rural Cambodia, where low-ranking perpetrators and collaborators live among their one-time victims. However, as the films show, breaking this intimacy does not transform the power relations between them (as it did during duels with high-ranking perpetrators), mainly because the low-ranking perpetrators and collaborators knew they would not be tried in the ECCC. This means, moreover, that the wider question of complicity in communities the KR regime ruled was considered sufficiently dealt with after the ECCC trials had come to a close. As studies of the ECCC show,<sup>31</sup> it contributed to exposing the few indicted high-ranking perpetrators while normalizing the many who were not brought to trial, thus blocking the option of collective coming-to-terms with collaboration. Although Cambodian cinema does not present any master-narrative of complicity, it does deal with it through the motif of cinematic duelling and the ethics it entails.

The films dealing with low-ranking perpetrators and collaborators suggest that the subject position of the collaborator is fraught with denial and remains ambiguous within the biological (or symbolic) post-autogenocide family. With the absence of laws to support the breaking of the taboo on discussing or acting upon the widespread collaboration during the KR period, familial-social-cultural processes of

31 See, e.g., John D. Ciorciari and Anne Heindel, *Hybrid Justice: The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014); Alexander Laban Hinton, *Man or Monster: The Trial of a Khmer Rouge Torturer* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

coming to terms with the past are blocked. As the comparison presented here will show, duelling between members of a family creates intergenerational aporias no less than intergenerational transmission of the genocidal trauma. Reflecting on both as irresolvable in 2000s Cambodia, the films simultaneously propose new ethics for their spectators.

In contrast to Saidnattar's incessant confrontation with the high-ranking perpetrator during *Survive* (2009), two of the major films that present low-ranking ex-KR cadres involved in KR crimes (Lida Chan and Guillaume Suon's *Red Wedding* [2012] and Neary Adeline Hay's *Angkar* [(2018)]), raise the question of confronting collaborators. I will focus on Hay's second-generation documentary film *Angkar*, in which the filmmaker, who was born out of a forced marriage,<sup>32</sup> accompanies her father, Khonsaly Hay, the only survivor of his family, to the village of Ta Saeng (in northern Cambodia), where he had been subjected to four years of forced labour. After over forty years of living in France (where the family fled after a few years in a refugee camp on the Thai border), Khonsaly Hay meets the villagers who had been his torturers, the guards, the camp's perpetrators and collaborators (who participated in criticism sessions, supervised the hard labour in the rice fields, etc.), and the collaborator-spies (*schlops*).

*Angkar* is the first documentary film to render through a personal story the suffering caused by low-ranking perpetrators and collaborators in rural Cambodia. Neary Hay, as Khonsaly's daughter, received the perpetrators' and collaborators' permission to film the sequences of the meetings with her father. Thus, the heart of the film is built on sheer *verité* scenes that she shot as the cinematographer, creating an unnatural, eerie 'home-movie-with-the-perpetrators/collaborators' film.<sup>33</sup> In contrast to the duels in the films that interview high-ranking perpetrators (like *Duch*), in this film the conversations take place in the presence of many people over food, drink, the sharing of memories, and laughter.

Following the opening scene, the film's title, *Angkar* (literally in Khmer, 'The Organization', Cambodia's Communist Party), written in huge red bold letters, appears on the entire cinematic screen. This

32 A marriage between total strangers enforced in order to increase the number of KR as well as to control the family unit. See Morag, *Perpetrator Cinema*; Theresa de Langis, "This Is Now the Most Important Trial in the World": A New Reading of Code #6, the Rule against Immoral Offenses under the Khmer Rouge Regime, *Cambodia Law and Policy Journal*, 3 (2014): 61-78.

33 As the filmmaker told me, her father met his former acquaintances, and from time to time she joined them with a small video camera, and with no extra film crew. (Personal conversation via Skype on 17 August 2018).

design is pre-emptive of the film's strategy of naming the perpetrators and collaborators (especially those not seen in the film but known to be in the village, like the cannibals [who removed human livers and regularly drank the gallbladder bile of their victims], the cut-throat Khmer, and the executioners). In this, the film meta-reflexively declares the power of cinema in establishing a visual duel with evil. The red colour refers of course to danger; thus, together with the act of naming, it serves to break Angkar's terror, still felt in the village.

*Angkar* presents two non-linear parallel narratives that intertwine throughout the film: of the father, heard in the voice-over in Khmer, and of the daughter/filmmaker, heard in the voice-over in French. The double narrativization is a major strategy for the filmmaker/daughter to honourably oppose her father's reconciliation with his former oppressors, as well as strictly oppose these low-ranking perpetrators' and collaborators' refusal to be engaged with questions regarding their deeds. The Duel, in other words, is taking place through the film's cinematic language no less than through the father's encounters with his former torturers. The filmmaker's voice-over addresses the father directly: 'There was still a fearful respect when you spoke of them. As if the victim you'd been had never entirely left you'. The double-narrative structure not only presents the daughter-father and Second-First generation relationships, but, through the editing, also contrasts the perpetrators' and collaborators' reactions of evasion, lying, indifference, and denial with a woman's voice, and with her objections as revealed through her film. In this way, the film both relates to the question of complicity and constitutes non-reconciliation and un-forgiveness. Later, Khonsaly refers to one of the old women in the village as Mother and hugs her. During the regime, this woman supported him and once risked her life by giving him food (though in the end she turned him in). The spectators hear Neary's voice-over saying: '[T]he woman you called Mother, I couldn't understand. For me there were only ever victims and their executioners'.

One of the last scenes of the film presents the faces of the perpetrators and collaborators on the cinematic screen. Their roles are printed in big red Godardian-like letters over their faces while Khonsaly's voice discloses their names and roles: 'Chief of District, Ta So; Pat, Bourreau, executioner; Égorgeur, Moeung San, Throat Cutter; Ta San, Collabo, collaborator'. The spectators, who were not familiar with their names or with their specific roles until this scene, and who got to know them partially through the filmed meetings, are now confronted not only



with the naming, but with their total exposure. The faces that were part of semi-friendly conversations throughout the film now re-appear for a few seconds, flickering as if in a brief nightmare. This powerful sequence places on them the responsibility they mostly refused to accept in the conversations.

Angkar's competing voices create an irresolvable tension, but, most importantly, they emphasize the immense importance of the law in breaking what Robert Eaglestone terms (in the context of Nazism) a 'public secret':

The public secret [...] creates a passivity in the victims; [...] and worse, it makes victims complicit with their own trucidation. [...] [T]he public secret creates not a community but an 'un-community', binding people in shame and secrecy.<sup>34</sup>

The perplexity of the relations between perpetration and complicity becomes part of the trauma of the autogenocide, which — as the films show — is lived as an unresolvable aporia. In a situation in which all collaborators are native, local, and intimate, an active denial of moral culpability becomes an urgent issue for mainstream society. Thus, in its representations of various forms of duelling, Cambodian cinema has paved the way for audiences to discover a new ethics, breaking the paradoxical situation of widespread violent collaboration as a 'public secret'.



FIGURE 1. Still from *Angkar*, dir. Neary Adeline Hay (2018); Image courtesy of Christophe Audegus (The Cup of Tea Productions)

<sup>34</sup> Robert Eaglestone, *The Broken Voice: Reading Post-Holocaust Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 26.

## The Quiet Interview

As is well known, after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), collective memory and popular history were exploited and manipulated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to serve its propaganda and political ends. However, though major events were excluded from the official narrative, a *minjian* (counter-history) emerged as well. According to Sebastian Veg,

The memory of the Anti-Rightist Movement has long been a blind spot in Chinese debates. [...] However, the publication of Yang Xianhui's 2003 book *Chronicles of Jiabiangou* marked a turning point. Based on extensive oral history interviews, Yang's book makes a substantive connection between the Anti-Rightist Movement and the establishment of dedicated laojiao [...] camps such as Jiabiangou.<sup>35</sup>

Jiabiangou (literally, 'wedged between ditches') camp was in operation during the Anti-Rightist Movement from October 1957 to January 1961. Being the most horrific of all the camps for 're-education-through-[forced, hard]-labour', Jiabiangou was used mostly to imprison intellectuals and former government officials who were declared 'Rightist'. Located in northwest China near the Badanjilin Desert and bound in the north by the Gobi Desert, it was well-known for its harsh natural conditions and isolation. With no deliveries of external food supplies and rations deliberately cut again and again, the result was a dreadful famine that took place during the Great Leap Forward (1958–61) and the Great Chinese Famine (1959–62).

As testimonies in literary memoirs such as Yang Xianhui's *Chronicles of Jiabiangou* (2003), Zhang Xianliang's *Grass Soup* (1993/1995), and Gao Er Tai's *In Search of My Homeland: A Memoir of a Chinese Labor Camp* (2009)<sup>36</sup> make clear, in order to survive, prisoners ate leaves, tree bark,

35 Sebastian Veg, 'Testimony, History and Ethics: From the Memory of Jiabiangou Prison Camp to a Reappraisal of the Anti-Rightist Movement in Present-Day China', *The China Quarterly*, 218 (2014), 514. Re-education through labour (*láodòng jiàoyāng*, abbreviated *laojiao*) was a system of administrative punishment and detention established in 1955. See Hualing Fu, 'Re-Education Through Labour in Historical Perspective', *The China Quarterly*, 184 (2005), 811–30; and Sebastian Veg, *Minjian: The Rise of China's Grassroots Intellectuals* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), pp. 96–101.

36 Yang Xianhui, *Jiabiangou jishi* [Chronicles of Jiabiangou] (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 2003); Xianliang Zhang, *Grass Soup*, trans. By M. Avery (Boston: Godine, 1993/1995). See also, e.g., *Half of Man is Woman*, trans. By M. Avery (New York: Norton, 1986/1988); Er Tai, Gao, *In Search of My Homeland: A Memoir of a Chinese Labor Camp* (New York: Ecco Press, 2009); and

worms and rats, human and animal waste. During the period they still had coal and could light a fire, they also ate flesh from dead inmates, who were cremated. The bodies of the dead, left unburied on the sand dunes surrounding the camp because the surviving prisoners were too weak to bury them, were thus reachable for cannibalism.

In October 1961, the government ordered the closure of Jiabiangou, as well as a cover-up. According to witnesses, not a single Rightist death either in Jiabiangou or in the Mingshui annex was recorded as being caused by starvation. As Cai writes,

This strange 'fact' was based on the 1,500 copies of the medical histories of the Rightists made by the remaining Rightists according to the instructions of the CCP [...]. The CCP regime's insistence to endorse the legitimacy of the Anti-Rightist Movement and attribute the main reason of the Great Famine to natural disasters hides the truth that the totalitarian regime and the unscrupulous dictator were the real directors of these political and social disasters.<sup>37</sup>

Six films are included in Chinese-French director Wang Bing's cycle of works on the Jiabiangou re-education-through-labour-[turned-death]-camp. They represent the Maoist era from the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957) to the Great Leap Forward (1958–60), the devastating famine that followed (1959–61), till the Cultural Revolution (CR)'s extraordinary turmoil (1966–76).<sup>38</sup> The extraordinary timespan dedicated to these productions (thirteen years: 2005–18) attests to Wang's unwavering determination to reveal the historical truth. Detailing everyday

Harry Wu and Carolyn Wakeman, *Bitter Winds: A Memoir of My Years in China's Gulag* (New York: John Wiley, 1994).

- 37 Cai, p. 125. In addition, Yenna Wu claims, 'Based on the unofficial figures Yang obtained from the ex-inmates, we can estimate around 2500 out of 3000 inmates perished in Jiabiangou. By contrast, the official figures reported by Yang indicate that only about 1300 out of 2400 inmates died there' (Yenna Wu, 'Cultural Trauma: Construction of the Necropolitical Jiabiangou Laojiao Camp', *American Journal of Chinese Studies*, 27 (2020), 29).
- 38 Wang's debut fiction film was *Brutality Factory* (*Baoli gangchang*, a 14m segment from Pedro Costa's *The State of the World*, [Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Kick the Machine, LX Filmes, 2007]). It re-enacts a torture scene typical to the era of the Anti-Rightist Movement. Though this very short film does not directly address Jiabiangou, it opens Wang's emergency decade. Second is the nonfiction *He Fengming: A Chinese Memoir (Fengming)* (Wil Productions, 2007, 3h 6m), which describes He Fengming's life during the turmoil years 1957–78. The third is *Traces/The Relic* (2009; also screened in 2014 as a twenty-five-minute digital video art entitled *Yizhi*). Fourth is his fiction film, *The Ditch* (2010; 1h 52m), which dramatizes the last period of starvation in Jiabiangou. Fifth is *Dead Souls* (2018). The sixth is *Beauty Lives in Freedom* (2018, 4h 30m), a nonfiction film of an interview with Jiabiangou survivor Gao Er Tai.

life in Jiabiangou/Mingshui, the hexptych also contributes to the recent, mostly unofficial, reassessment of Maoism in and out of China.

### ***Dead Souls (2018; Les Âmes mortes)***

Shot between 2005 and 2017 and based on 600 testimonies (presenting twenty of them in two-parts encompassing 8h 15m), *Dead Souls* is the most prominent testimonial work of the hexptych. Analysing Wang's po/ethics<sup>39</sup> in *Dead Souls*, I will reflect on the ways the interview recognizes the former Rightists' long ambiguous loss and unresolved prolonged grief, and — accordingly — constitutes the interviewees' new epistemology and radically alters current documentary spectatorship.

More than sixty years after their rehabilitation, while largely living in loneliness and isolation, devoid of a supportive social movement and a veteran community, most of the survivors interviewed, already in their late seventies and eighties, are eager to be heard.<sup>40</sup> Regardless of phases of state 'rehabilitation' before and after the CR, they were ostracized from society and their self-story was hardly heard until this old age. I argue that Wang's is a Quiet Interview in which he only asks a few informational questions at the beginning of the interview ('Why were you charged with being a Rightist?', 'When did you arrive in Jiabiangou?', 'How did you arrive there?'), and afterwards, if needed, only a few more (e.g., 'Can you explain how did you dig the trenches?' 'How many people survived?' 'How was your health when you came back?'). During the long hours of the interview Wang mostly listens, quietly, not reacting and not interfering, thus enhancing the interviewees' desire to talk. Most of the former inmates speak incessantly. The sheer length of the Quiet Interview functions thus as a necessary catalyst to subject formation.

I claim that a re-subjectivization process unfolds in at least two ways: first, the ex-victim's subjectivity, identity, and sense of self are reclaimed by and through his act of giving testimony that enables an acknowledgment of the gap between the false Rightist identity im-

39 I use this wording to indicate that Wang's works are based on a unique aesthetics that is both poetic and possesses a strong dedication to cinema's structuring of the anti-Maoist ethics.

40 In contrast to Yang, who, fearing censorship, published his book as a literary-fictional work, while occasionally using fictional names, Wang indicates the name, date, and age of the interviewee at the beginning of each interview.

posed on him and his true identity. The truth stands in contrast to past experience in which the Party negated his subjectivity and tabooed the events that happened in Jiabiangou. The former subject of a history deprived of that history was reduced to nothing, while the past was not registered as past but suspended and finally erased. Wang's quietness allows self-inquiry into the time of the trauma to become possible and thus affirms the identity of the Jiabiangou victim as a-person-who-had-a-past. The detailed testimonies the victim gives helps him reclaim this past and re-own it.

Most of the interviewees tell, in their pain, how they were falsely incriminated and labelled Rightists (sometimes just to fill the Maoist 'quota' of 'enemies' in each work unit), the shock of discovering the camouflage of 're-education', the lie of a fictitious world based on arbitrariness<sup>41</sup> and the slow degradation of their humanity. They describe their arrival at the so-called agricultural farm and finding there were no seeds to be planted, no tools, no water for irrigation, and during winter — with the temperature between minus twenty and minus forty degrees — the earth was frozen to the depth of one meter, impossible to dig. They had no shelter and were forced to dig holes in the ground or hide in nearby caves. Later, when their food rations were reduced to 200 grams per day, they began to drink their own urine; some became cannibals.

Through his receptive quietness, the documentary director functions both as a witness to the process he initiated and as the 'supportive community' that these former inmates never had. Consequently, the second way the re-subjectivization process is realized is by enabling the testifier's self to be inserted into the larger social order from which he was ostracized through endless sessions of violent humiliation and denouncement. The re-subjectivization not only connects them to the actual social history, but also builds the broken social connection. Thus, two seemingly conflicting worlds merge during the Quiet Interview: the world of the de-humanization of the past and the world of the re-humanization of the present produced by the witnesses' words and Wang's deep, total, listening. By the end of most of the interviews, the past becomes an immanent part of the testifiers' identity-history and, as their taking an active part in their own self-transforma-

41 See Francoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière, *History Beyond Trauma: Whereof One Cannot Speak, Thereof One Cannot Stay Silent* (New York: Other Press, 2004): Kindle location 1342. I am indebted to this highly original work, which influenced this section of my essay.

tion-through-the-witnessing-process shows, this new sense of belonging and social bond becomes a kind of resuscitation.

Constituting the subjectivization that was taken from them for decades in the face of ongoing state mnemocide, the issue of Jianbiangou becomes, therefore, a major epistemological breakthrough for the witnesses. What happens to the spectators? Avoiding any sort of discernible personal intervention during the length of the interviews, as hinted at above, Wang Bing positions himself first and foremost as a listener, a kind of seer or 'knower', who (similar to the Seer's appearance in religious contexts) is not seen. He neither uses intervention techniques like commentary nor lets himself be immersed in a personal reaction to the interviewees' horrific stories; nor does he let his body language express an involuntarily emotional reaction. His unobtrusiveness is so conspicuous that the spectators, through time adjusting to the camera as a mute witness, become, like Wang himself, entangled in the art of bearing witness only through gazing at the speaker and listening. This entanglement develops as the stories rendered by the interviewees themselves become entangled: the stories stand in contrast to each other; they reflect, echo, and repeat each other; they digress, overlap, and gradually accumulate. Thus, for the spectators, bearing witness becomes a time-dependent position based on the ability of totally 'being there', undivided listening. This epistemological totality is achieved through Wang's adherence to long takes, static camera, and wide-angled perspective. The camera keeps a fixed distance from the interviewees and the shots are dictated by the absolute duration of the interviewees' talk. The interviewees are usually filmed in their homes, from the far side of the room. Capturing their mundane, cluttered environments, mostly in poor housing, defines their world at present as a very simple surface onto which to project their horrendous stories of extreme de-humanization, starvation, and death-ness.

Moreover, Wang's, as well as the spectators', ability to 'meet' the psyche of the other through the Quiet Interview is built on transcending the caesuras<sup>42</sup> felt in the sudden silences of the witnesses. Traversing these gaps by accepting them as 'gaps with continuity' widens the capacity for free-flowing storytelling. Wang, in other words, mostly keeps quiet until the witness takes up his story again. Process-centred, the Quiet Interview is open and receptive to every inarticulate or inde-

42 As Bergstein claims, 'Caesura' seems to bear the meaning of a break and continuity'. Avner Bergstein, 'Transcending the Caesura: Reverie, Dreaming and Counter-Dreaming', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 94 (2013), 622.

scribable enunciation and every piece-of-memory that seems unavailable for integration by the subject (e.g., family betrayal, cannibalism).

The non-verbal testimony is embodied in the long take and the spectators' 'enclosed' focusing on the witness, unable to drift beyond the small space between the camera and the speaker. Although in Bazinian-influenced classical cinema theory this space is conceptualized as one open to the spectators' reflective mind and choice of focus, in *Dead Souls*, I suggest, it functions in a different way: the copious details heard about the atrocities convey a corporeal experience that dominates the scene to such a degree that spectators' minds, drifting to one or more of the objects in the room, seek 'refuge' in these looks, as if they take place outside of the horror's presence in the room. In fact, these looks convey less than a momentarily illusion of 'not being there' because the testimony continues hour after hour. The camera, placed in front of the speaker and hardly moving, embodies the ultimate listening, totally 'being there', as if it were a sonorous envelope. It presents the only ethical position approved by the film.

## The Quiet Interview and Collaboration

The inevitable inter-relations between the testimonial non-fiction film *Dead Souls* (2018) and the testimony-based fiction film *The Ditch* (2010)<sup>43</sup> propose a unique conceptualization of the collaborator figure. The camp's starvation-dependent collaboration-producing situation, I suggest, is emphasized in *Dead Souls* by the presentation of three collaborators who survived because they worked as cooks in Jiabianguo kitchens (*The Ditch* presents the guard of a dormitory).<sup>44</sup> The spectators are challenged with a po/ethics gap between the films: Wang's Quiet Interview po/ethics enables them, I suggest, to comprehend two out of the three collaborator figures presented in *Dead Souls* since in this collaboration-producing situation dominated by the chaos of starvation, their subject position has undergone a shift along an axis from victims-who-became-collaborators (volunteering to work as

43 Though *The Ditch* (2010) is a fiction film, its script, written by Wang, is based on 600 Jiabianguo testimonies he, following Yang Xianhui's book *Chronicles of Jiabianguo*, accumulated.

44 In my thinking about collaboration-producing situation I am indebted to Robert J. Lifton's term 'atrocious-producing situation'. See 'Haditha: In an "atrocious-producing situation" – Who is to blame?' *Editor & Publisher*, 4 June 2006. <<https://www.editorandpublisher.com/stories/haditha-in-an-atrocious-producing-situation-who-is-to-blame.80313>> [Accessed 19 December 2023].

cooks)<sup>45</sup> to becoming victims again (when this privilege was taken from them). This shift attests to the film's acceptance of the slippery nature of the camp's collaboration-producing situation. Moreover, the Quiet Interview reflects to the spectators, through the connections between the gradually revealed stories, the fact that all three raise the issue of cannibalism. This exacerbates the collaboration situation and its unstable nature.

In his interview, the first collaborator presented, Qi Luji (aged 83), tells two horrific stories that serve as a sort of justification for his privileged status ('Even though I was just a kitchen assistant, I had great power in that situation! An extra bowl of food could save someone's life'), as well as attest to his indifference to the fate of other prisoners. The first story is based on what he saw in the camp: 'I know that when they buried a dead person, they opened it up to take out the innards and after making a fire, they grilled them and ate them'.

As Wang just listens, Qi Luji continues by telling him (and the spectators) a second horrific story, based on a rumour he heard, about a couple with five daughters and a son, the youngest. They were starving and the father suggested killing the boy and cooking him. The eldest daughter volunteered to take the son's place because he would be the one to eventually head the family. They killed and ate her. Qi Luji ends by telling the story of his being labelled unjustly as a Rightist, his incarceration and suffering. Thus, though he takes upon himself the subject position of victim, reflecting on both his resourcefulness and the horror, the two stories leave the spectators ambiguous towards him.

The next two interviews further stress the starvation-dependent collaboration-producing situation, and structure an entangled victimhood-collaboration-victimhood trajectory. The second collaborator presented, Xing De (aged 86), begins with a cry ('What offense had I committed? [...] I ended up in jail without a clue why'), and tells about his tricks while working in the kitchens ('They made me a chef! From then on, my physical condition began to improve. I was even given the nickname chushkaty [...] it means 'pig' [...] because I was young and eating on the sly had made me fat') and shifts to describe life in the Mingshui annex where he lived in a hole he dug and ate from the leftovers the cadres threw to the pigs. Enduring extremely cruel and degrading conditions, Xing De tells how 'as we lacked water we drank our own urine', as well as his avoidance of cannibalism despite the 'total

45 One of the interviewers in the film states that the only Jiabiangou survivors were chefs, carpenters, cadres, those who knew how to fix machines, and those who ran away.



chaos'. Similarly, the third collaborator presented, Pu Yanxin (aged 85), also attests that he did not die in the camp because he was a kitchen worker. Later, sleeping in caves, becoming a gravedigger because he was stronger and could push the cart and 'dump the corpses somewhere', his health deteriorated ('I wrote to my wife: "I am at the gates of hell and I am waiting for my turn"').

In contrast to *Dead Souls*, *The Ditch* uses imagery and editing as major strategies to render the collaborator figure. It does so in various ways. First, the film's inclination towards images-of-excess functions as a horrific disruption of the spectators' comprehension of this figure. The obscene images of starvation dominate spectatorship to a level of experiencing re-traumatization. In other words, this film renders the entanglement within the post-trauma-re-traumatization trap of representation as irreconcilable, with ramifications on collaboration.

Second, a few scenes in *The Ditch* portray a collaborator figure, Chen, the guard of the cave (the dormitory). Wang uses the editing of two consecutive scenes to reflect on the film's critical attitude towards Chen: in the first scene, the (static) camera focuses for a long time on a prisoner who is starving. Too weak to sit or write, lying in his cave bed, he dictates a letter for his brother to a fellow inmate. In the letter he desperately asks his brother to send him food. At the end of what turns out to be an informal will, the cut leads the spectators from this scene of terrible misery to the camp director's office. In this second, mirror-scene, the camera's (wide) angle exposes both the steaming bowl of noodles the camp director holds and the figure of Chen at the entrance to the office. Addressing Chen as 'an old friend from the Party', the camera focuses on both of them eating. The weak whispers of the dying prisoner are displaced into the sounds of swallowing the noodle soup.

The extreme contrasts between the scenes (death versus life, cave versus office, helplessness versus power, rags versus warm coats, starvation versus eating, whispers versus sighs of pleasure) are emphasized even more in the next scene of *The Ditch*, which shows Chen and another inmate removing the naked body of a dead prisoner from the cave. The dead's skeletal body, clearly reminiscent of Holocaust imagery, is shown in a relatively long take and attests to the horror of starving to death, as well as to Chen's collaboration.

*The Ditch's* fragmented narrative, grounded in the ethics of representing the lacunae within Jiabiangou's most conspicuous trauma — starvation — seems to enhance the unbearable requirement to look at the horrific images that, although depicted at a distance, are shown

almost graphically. The excess of the starvation images (such as eating another prisoner's vomit) haunts the spectators and turns the images to a vital, complementary, form of testimony.

Most importantly, the lack of a visual archive of Jiabiangou makes *The Ditch's* inventive imagery a major contribution to testimony-based fiction cinema's ability to create such an archive. Under a dictatorial regime dominated by erasure of all evidence related to Jiabiangou — including the provisional cemetery, the memorial monument erected by survivors in 2005, prisoners' personal files, private images taken, and the camp landscape — the ongoing debate in Western scholarship on showing Holocaust atrocity images (regarding the numbing effect, the complex of attraction and repulsion to violence displayed, and fascination with abomination, among others) is not as yet adequate to deal with this case. I suggest that Wang's *The Ditch* mode of artistic work that blurs the distinction between non-fiction and fiction uses this blurring to justify its creation of visual (imaginary) memory that complements the oral testimonies of *Dead Souls* (2018). Thus, the spectators are compelled to view as well as to regard this as a future-oriented, reliable, archive. Confronting the documentary-based fictional figure of Chen assists them in transcending the epistemological gap between the two films.



FIGURE 2. Still from *The Ditch*, dir. Bing Wang (2010);  
Image courtesy of Wil Productions, used with permission.

## Conclusion

At the turn of the twentieth century and the Era of the Perpetrator, two non-Western corpora, I suggest, pave the way for a new understanding of the huge difference between Western and non-Western conceptualizations of twentieth-century traumas. Both post-Khmer Rouge Cambodian (mostly documentary) cinema and post-Cultural Revolution Chinese (mostly documentary) cinema teach us that what Felman calls the 'century of traumas and (concurrently) a century of theories of trauma',<sup>46</sup> is but a partial model. In other words, Western understandings of trauma 'as one of the key interpretive categories of contemporary politics and culture',<sup>47</sup> which emanated from post-Holocaust Age of Testimony paradigmatic scholarship, focus on the trauma inflicted upon the victims (mainly the Jews) by the 'enemy from without', the Nazis, while the post-Pol Potism<sup>48</sup> and the post-Maoist contexts centre on the 'enemy-within'. Driven by and through the documentary impetus, the docu-activisms set against the genocidists aspire to extend the spectrum of the twentieth-century Western ideologies of mass murder to include the new post-traumatic ethics of post-utopian Communism Killer regimes<sup>49</sup>: non-reconciliation and un-forgiveness (in the Cambodian context) and re-subjectivization (in the Chinese context).

Thus, the work of the Cambodian and the Chinese subversive political documentarists opposes the tendency to narratively integrate the traumatic event; disregards the interview 'text' as requesting particular hermeneutics, instead focusing on proposing multiple subject positions for the spectators' identification; transcends Hilberg's post-Holocaust paradigmatic triangulation (perpetrator, victim, bystander)<sup>50</sup> in favour of positions emanating from the Communist contexts, especially that of the collaborator; confronts the problem of un-representabili-

46 Felman, *Juridical Unconscious*, 1.

47 Wulf Kansteiner, 'Genealogy of a Category Mistake: A Critical Intellectual History of the Cultural Trauma Metaphor', *Rethinking History*, 8 (2004), 193.

48 See Ben Kiernan, 'Myth, Nationalism and Genocide', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 3 (2001), 192.

49 Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 569.

50 Many of the recent scholarly works in the West that oppose this triangulation and/or elaborate the theorization of the collaborator, do not refer to non-Western contexts, let alone to the collective traumas inflicted on the masses by the Communist Left. See, e.g., from Ehrenreich and Cole to Böhm, Robert M. Böhm, 'Judging "Privileged" Jews: Holocaust Ethics, Representation, and the "Grey Zone"', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 29.3, (2015), 489-92; Peter Ehrenreich and Tim Cole, 'The Perpetrator-Bystander-Victim Constellation: Rethinking Genocidal Relationships', *Human Organization*, 64.3 (2005), 213-24.

ty and the unspeakable in survivors' testimony; as well as the problem of denial and failed accountability in perpetrators in various new po/ethics, especially favouring the Caruthian audible (voice) on the invisible (wound).<sup>51</sup>

The directors' significant revelations that grew out of personal as well as collective traumas not only transcend taboo and censorship, but contest prevailing conceptions and myths on perpetrators, collaborators, and victims alike. Though it seems that there can be no connection between interviewing perpetrators and interviewing victims, both the *Duel* and the *Quiet Interview* show how the differences deepen our ethical conceptualizations and the limits of the imagined community, as well as cinematic spectatorship. In their extraordinary way, both corpora raise the option of mapping out future ethics for genocide, trauma, cinema trauma, documentary, perpetrator, and collaborator studies.

51 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

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**Biographical Statement.** Raya Morag is Professor of Cinema Studies in the Department of Communication and Journalism at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel. Her publications deal with post-traumatic cinema, perpetratorhood, and ethics. Her latest book is *Perpetrator Cinema: Confronting Genocide in Cambodian Documentary* (Columbia University Press, 2020).





# JPR

REVIEWS



## On Argentina's Crimes Against Humanity Trials

REVIEW OF: Eva Van Roekel, *Phenomenal Justice: Violence and Morality in Argentina* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020). 196 pp. (paperback). ISBN 978-1-978-80026-7.

Erin Jessee

**E**va van Roekel's *Phenomenal Justice: Violence and Morality in Argentina* is an important contribution to studies of political violence in Argentina in the twentieth century and more specifically, the military dictatorship that ruled the country from 1976 to 1983. While this is not the first ethnographic study to consider the dictatorship's efforts to annihilate alleged political subversives and the aftermath of the resulting atrocities,<sup>1</sup> van Roekel's monograph offers a particularly valuable focus: it brings into conversation people who represent different parties to the conflict, showing how they navigated the crimes against humanity trials that the Argentinian government used — over thirty years after the dictatorship's end — to prosecute trial military officers who the prosecution deemed to have a high degree of criminal responsibility for the dictatorship's mass human rights violations. Between 2012 and 2018, van Roekel immersed herself in the trials, establishing especially close research relationships with twenty-six people: some of whom had survived periods of illegal detention and torture, and/or had loved ones 'disappeared', while others were indicted military officials. She also interviewed judges and engaged more casually with other legal experts involved in the crimes against humanity trials (pp. 15-19). The result is a rich overview of the trials' impact on people from different sides of the conflict.

Following a brief prologue, the first chapter, 'Phenomenal Justice', outlines van Roekel's theoretical and methodological approach, and provides readers with some brief historical context. Subsequent

1 See, for example, cultural anthropologist Antonius C.G.M Robben's book, *Political Violence and Trauma in Argentina*, which considers escalating episodes of political violence from 1945 to 1990, and social anthropologist Jill Stockwell's *Reframing the Transitional Justice Paradigm: Women's Affective Memories in Post-Dictatorial Argentina*, which more specifically uses oral testimonies to centre women's experiences of and emotional responses to four periods of guerrilla violence and dictatorship between 1969 and 2003. Antonius C.G.M Robben, *Political Violence and Trauma in Argentina* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); and Jill Stockwell, *Reframing the Transitional Justice Paradigm: Women's Affective Memories in Post-Dictatorial Argentina* (Cham: Springer, 2014).

chapters are then organised thematically. Chapter Two, 'Things That Matter,' immerses the reader in the materiality on display during the trials: from the body language people demonstrated in response to the physical evidence of torture brought up during the hearings to the objects that people showed during the trials to reinforce their testimonies or demonstrate solidarity, among other purposes. The third chapter, 'Time', then shifts to the complex, deeply personal, and often temporally jumbled ways that different parties prioritised, remembered, and narrated their past experiences of conflict and subsequent struggles in response to the broader cultural and political contexts in which they were embedded. 'Trauma', the fourth chapter, analyses the impact of trauma — resulting from the atrocities and subsequent encounters with Argentina's transitional justice mechanisms — on survivors, with particular attention paid to their efforts to exhibit a kind of heightened morality amid lingering negative emotions, such as survivors' guilt. Next, the fifth chapter, 'Disgrace', then highlights how the indicted officers tried to challenge the trials' legitimacy due to their perception of the atrocities as 'irregularities and mistakes' within an otherwise 'just war' (pp. 97, 99). This is a direct result of their efforts to maintain a sense of themselves as loyal soldiers, even as they sometimes privately acknowledged feeling shame for having played a part in these atrocities. The sixth chapter, 'Laughter and Play', takes a somewhat unusual turn for a study of political violence to consider the added importance and 'moral messiness' of humour and satire, celebration, and other coping mechanisms that people from all sides of the conflict used to negotiate uncertainties and confusion surrounding their experiences of the trials (p. 142). The seventh and final chapter, 'Where Justice Belongs', concludes with a discussion of how, rather than embracing the stated goals of the transitional justice mechanisms — particularly to promote closure — following the conclusion of the trials, people who had participated in the trials often preferred to hold on to the diverse, often difficult, and at times competing emotions that they had experienced during the trials, due to the perception that such emotions were integral to their ability to rebuild moral lives.

Underpinning this study is an innovative theoretical framework that van Roekel developed to make sense of the experiences and perceptions that people shared with her during her fieldwork. At its heart, the book is a contribution to the anthropology of emotion sub-field,<sup>2</sup>

2 For useful overviews of the anthropology of emotion sub-field, see, for example, Andrew Beatty, *Emotional Worlds: Beyond an Anthropology of Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

out of respect for the realisation that in Argentina feelings are ‘vibrant social matters’ (p. 10) integral to how people make sense of their experiences. Van Roekel further argues that in-depth analysis of emotions can further facilitate enhanced understanding of the diverse physical and psychological effects that social experiences can have on people’s everyday lives (p. 11). As the book’s title suggests, van Roekel further brings her analysis of emotions into the conversation by integrating interdisciplinary literature on phenomenology (pp. 11-14), in which the phenomenal is not what is remarkable or extraordinary in people’s lives, as the term is often used in popular culture, but rather ‘what is explicable in the way we encounter the immediate world’ (p. 4).<sup>3</sup> The relevance of this theoretical framework is supported with ethnographic vignettes that respectfully centre key interlocutors and the emotion with which they reflected upon and communicated their experiences and perspectives of the trials.

Indeed, it is van Roekel’s theoretical framework and associated in-depth analysis of emotions surrounding the trials that is arguably this book’s most significant contribution to the field of Perpetrator Studies. While van Roekel’s study incorporates the perspectives of perpetrators, particularly in Chapter Five, her study does not focus solely on perpetrators nor does she use the term ‘perpetrator’ much in her writing; she instead typically refers to ‘indicted military officers’ when writing generally and otherwise mentions officers by name, as she does when writing about other interlocutors. Furthermore, where she does focus on indicted military officers, she does not engage with the broader field of Perpetrator Studies, though she has done so in subsequent publications.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, scholars and practitioners in this field would likely benefit from exposure to van Roekel’s in-depth analysis of the emotions experienced by different parties to the crimes against humanity trials. She challenges readers to think beyond the negative feelings of

2019); and *Mixed Emotions: Anthropological Studies of Feeling*, ed. by Kay Milton and Maruška Svašek (London: Routledge, 2005).

- 3 Anthropologists Kalpana Ram and Christopher Houston offer a preliminary definition of phenomenology as ‘an investigation of how humans perceive, experience, and comprehend the sociable, materially assembled world that they inherit at infancy and in which they dwell’. Kalpana Ram and Christopher Houston, ‘Introduction: Phenomenology’s Methodological Invitation’, in *Phenomenology in Anthropology: A Sense of Perspective*, ed. by K. Ram and C. Houston (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), pp. 1-25 (p. 1).
- 4 See Eva van Roekel, ‘Getting Close with Perpetrators in Argentina’, in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 115-136; and Eva van Roekel, ‘On the Dangers of Empathy with the Military in Argentina’, *Ethnos*, 86.4 (2021), 616-631.

revenge and anger, assumptions of trauma, and discourses related to retribution, forgiveness, and healing that dominate many transitional justice scholars' analyses of people's encounters with transitional justice mechanisms. Instead, van Roekel acknowledges a broader emotional spectrum that includes positive feelings, such as humour and joy.

Regarding her discussion of indicted military officers, her study exposes an important tension between the loyalty and obedience to orders that they preferred to associate with their years of military service — and in which they tried to take pride — and the subsequent disgrace with which they were regarded by the Argentinian society as information about the atrocities they committed came to light and survivors sought evidence of their guilt and remorse. Van Roekel reveals that their military training inculcated them with an awareness that negative emotions, like fear and fatigue, were formally 'disapproved of' (p. 105), but it did not acknowledge or prepare them for other potential negative feelings or demonstrations of guilt or remorse, for example, or the sense that the military institution for which they had once sacrificed had abandoned them or lost credibility. For many indicted officers, this tension prompted silence or a refusal to defer responsibility for their crimes to the superiors whose orders they followed, at least in public contexts, and a tendency to condemn those officers who publicly apologized or expressed remorse as disloyal. By bringing this tension to light, van Roekel's point that researchers, in their efforts to render perpetrators' criminal actions and how they make sense of these crimes understandable, 'tend to overlook the idea that various moralities and self-images coexist uneasily in perpetrators' lives' is well taken as something future researchers should strive to avoid (p. 121).

Thus, while *Phenomenal Justice* does not engage extensively with the field of Perpetrators Studies, it nonetheless offers important theoretical insights for scholars and practitioners in the field. Furthermore, the book is nuanced, theoretically sophisticated, and people-centred, and clearly evidences the often messy and emotionally charged ways that Argentinians from different sides of the conflict engaged with and reacted to the crimes against humanity trials. It also raises provocative questions regarding how studies of perpetration, transitional justice, and related fields might benefit from considering a broader spectrum of emotional responses to political violence in contexts beyond Argentina, offering a model that hopefully future researchers will be keen to build upon.

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Erin Jessee is a Senior Lecturer in History at the University of Glasgow. She is a genocide scholar with over 15 years of experience conducting oral historical and ethnographic fieldwork with conflict-affected people, particularly in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina. She is the author of *Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda* (Palgrave, 2017) and co-editor of *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2020). She also serves on the editorial teams for the *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, *Oral History Review*, and Oxford University Press' Oral History series.

## Christian Chaplains and the Holocaust

REVIEW OF: Doris L. Bergen, *Between God and Hitler: Military Chaplains in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge University Press, 2023). ISBN: 978-11-084-8770-2, \$35 (online edition), 334 p.p.

Catharine Aretakis

Though criticisms of the myth of the ‘clean’ Wehrmacht began appearing in the mid 1960s, since the end of the *Historikerstreit*, a scholarly consensus has formed on the Wehrmacht’s involvement in the crimes committed by the Third Reich.<sup>1</sup> In the process of reaching this consensus and after its concretization within the historiography, the role of the Wehrmacht in the Nazi Regime’s genocidal violence, as with every other topic concerning the Holocaust has been the fount of countless and increasingly specialized scholarly work. Not all the nooks and crannies of the topic have yet been covered, however, as is evidenced by Doris Bergen’s recent book on the approximately 1,000 men holding the position of military chaplain in the Wehrmacht (Bergen, p. 2).

Despite what seems like a rather limited scope of analysis, Bergen uses the Wehrmacht chaplain as a conduit to ‘analyze the failure of Christianity’ as a whole ‘in the midst of massive violence’ (p. x). This more conceptual topic characterizes Bergen’s book which takes an explicitly cultural, integrated, and gendered approach to a subject traditionally favored by conventional political history. Anyone familiar with the tomes of political history about the Wehrmacht and unfamiliar with Bergen (a scholar deservedly well-known for her advancement of integrated approaches) might have seen the title of this book and expected a dry military history that, though condemning the perpetrators, recreated their gaze. Instead, the book painstakingly seeks to continually reassert the humanity and lived experiences of the victims of the violence Bergen describes. Furthermore, *Between God and Hitler* does not lose sight of the explicitly gendered aspects of the role of the Wehrmacht chaplain and of weaponized Christianity more broadly. *Between God and Hitler* is a reminder that writing integrated history is not topic-dependent but something that, in 2023, should be a historian’s responsibility.

1 Ben Shepherd, ‘The Clean Wehrmacht, the War of Extermination, and Beyond’, *The Historical Journal*, 52.2 (2009), 455–73.



Unfortunately, however, this integrated approach was not complemented by the material Bergen collected on the Wehrmacht chaplains which, it became increasingly evident while reading, was far too little to convincingly prove her conclusion that 'Christian chaplains were essential components in a system of ideas, structures, and narratives that protected and rewarded the perpetrators of genocide' (p. 232). Components they might have been, but whether they were *essential* components, based only on the arguments and evidence set forth by Bergen, seems implausible. A few decisive, interwoven issues contribute to this failure to prove that the Wehrmacht chaplains were truly key figures in legitimizing the genocidal violence perpetrated by the Wehrmacht. The first is the aforementioned paucity of primary source materials written by chaplains or that directly mention chaplains. Bergen herself identifies this issue in the preface and asks whether she was 'stretching the evidence' (p. x). Over the course of the book, it became clear that she was. As a result, fascinating and necessary reflections on gender, victim experience, and even photography felt like unrelated asides to fill space and live up to the integrated approach rather than truly incorporated discussions contributing to the reader's understanding of the role of the chaplains.

The second issue is that the scarce source material directly mentioning chaplains (and even those written by the chaplains themselves) lead to the conclusion that the Wehrmacht chaplains were the precise opposite of essential – *irrelevant*. Bergen brings this up in passing as well, quoting Wehrmacht veteran Wolfgang Schrör: 'Among my fellow soldiers, there was dead silence around the subject of God. [...] In my entire time as a soldier I never met a single priest. We had no conversations about the meaning of the war' (p. 205). Bergen does not reflect further on this charge of irrelevance. The paragraph begins and ends with this reflection and is not subject to any form of analysis despite the fact that if this reflects the experience of the majority of Wehrmacht soldiers (as the remainder of the book leads the reader to believe it was), it completely disproves her assertion of the chaplains legitimizing genocidal violence for the soldiers as representatives of Christianity.

The lack of material specifically regarding chaplains to support Bergen's hypothesis leads her to fall back on analysing the role of Christianity as a whole, while superficially attaching chaplains to these arguments despite there being no evidence to show that either soldiers or civilians saw chaplains in this light (pp. 171, 175). Perhaps the most troubling result of this lack of material is that Bergen, on occasion, makes

unfounded statements that amount to conjecture and puts words in the mouth of both chaplains and victims. One example is this remark towards the end of the book: 'Unfortunately, Laasch's text is not in the file. One can speculate that he found a similar answer to the question [...] as his counterpart, Wehrmacht chaplain Dr. Hugo Gotthard Bloth' (p. 202). Similar statements are found throughout the book (e.g., pp. 178, 193).

An explanation for why Bergen makes such bold conclusions without much evidence to support them can perhaps be found again in the preface. Here, Bergen mentions that she had already made her conclusions decades before writing the recently published volume: 'I decided my story was a moral tale, about the chaplains' failure, their weakness, and their efforts to uphold Christianity that ended up serving the cause of genocide' (p. x). And again: '[I] knew what I wanted to say: the Wehrmacht chaplains were witnesses to the murder of Jews, they were complicit in the Holocaust' (p. x).

In the end, though Bergen was able to 'situate chaplains with some of the most murderous units of the war' and, therefore, passively prove their complicity as witnesses, the book does not prove that 'their presence helped normalize extreme violence and legitimate its perpetrators' nor that they 'played a key role in propagating a narrative of righteousness that erased Germany's victims and transformed the aggressors into noble figures who suffered but triumphed over their foes.'<sup>2</sup> Despite this, I can wholeheartedly recommend this book for anyone looking to examine how religious leaders and institutions operate and position themselves within genocidal regimes or those interested in Christian masculinity during the Holocaust.

2 Cambridge University Press, 'Book Description: Between God and Hitler: Military Chaplains in Nazi Germany', 2023 <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/between-god-and-hitler/59D40311ABD58AF74889ABBF5E36ADB7#fndtn-information>>. [accessed 30 November 2023]

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**Catharine Aretakis**, Doctoral researcher, Utrecht University.



