

What Happened? vs. Why It Happened?
Young Argentineans Remember Terror

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“*Es como que se quedaron con el miedo de hablar.*” (“Nora”)

“*No sabemos mucho porque nadie nos dice nada.*” (“Héctor”)

“*Nunca escuché tampoco hablar de las razones. [...] Siempre la historia pero nunca el porqué. [...] También hay veces que si preguntás nadie sabe.*” (“Gloria”)

Buenos Aires, 1998

Young Argentineans are very explicit in describing how they perceive in their elders the palpable long-term effects of the terror that paralyzed society during the dictatorship (1976-83). They point to the main consequences of a persistence of silences: the little information that has been transmitted to them, their elders' incapacity to answer their questions, and their generation's limited knowledge about this historical period.

This paper explores the aftermath of political violence focusing on how societies remember, specifically through young Argentinean's knowledge about the dictatorship, as conditioned and shaped by the intergenerational transmission of fears and silences.¹ It looks at how this legacy has resulted in a fragmented and decontextualized knowledge of what happened and how this seemed to be shaping this new breed of citizens' opinions and actions regarding issues of human rights abuses, truth, and accountability.

My analysis is based on empirical data collected through conversations with young *porteños*² in the year 1998. I focus on young people's representations of the dictatorship, their "post-memories," defined by Hirsch (1999:8) as a second-generation memory, characterized by displacement and belatedness, which is the memory of the children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma. Descendants remember their parents' experiences through images they have seen and stories they were told. Thus, I analyze a historical period through what people experienced, remembered, and transmitted to their descendants. This is a way to understand which history Argentineans are reconstructing (what happened, why, who are the victims, who those responsible), which facts are being remembered, and which ones edited out.

I am concerned with how memories are shaping the way in which young people are inserting themselves in this historical process, either as participants or bystanders. I am talking of a memory aimed at pursuing truth and challenging *impunidad*. I rely on Todorov's concept of "exemplary" (*exemplaire*) memory, meaning a way of remembering in which the past becomes a principle for action in the present. Since memories are the representations we have of the past, our knowledge of it, I am interested in the link between knowledge and political participation, if

silences result in ignorance and ignorance in a lack of participation—I do not talk, I do not know, therefore it is really simple to take no action.

My presentation is organized as follows. I first comment on the participants of my study and the political environment at the time of fieldwork. Second, I analyze knowledge of the past through answers to the question “what happened?” I identify the main facts transmitted and which kind of information seemed to have been assimilated better by the younger generation—particularly a focus on the details of horror that often lacks contextual information. Then, I explore society’s awareness of what was going on at the time through what their elders had told participants that they knew during those years. I seek to assess how the witness generation was positioning itself in the eyes of its descendants. I continue with an analysis of stories about disappeared people known to participants’ families or friends. These accounts allow estimating how close the bullets were felt by the average family.

Third, I look at causes and responsibilities for the repression through answers to the question “why did it happen?” I start by identifying the pivotal ideological explanation, what is known as “*la teoría de los Dos Demonios*”—the keystone of the culture of denial. I theorize on the implications that this has, including the contested and blurry line between guilt and innocence—a point that deserves particular attention because the assignment of “guilt” might affect how human rights violations are perceived. As my discussion on the genesis of state terrorism shows, this is one of the areas of weakest knowledge about this period. The generalized ignorance is contrasted by historical explanations advanced by a few participants that refuse to simplify the complexity of the interests that were at stake during that period.

In conclusion, I analyze participants’ opinions on the role played by different actors and institutions in this terrible history. This includes the assessment of the support given to the dictatorship by diverse sectors of society such as politicians, the Catholic hierarchy, or the population at large. By exploring the limited awareness that there were other players beyond the military and the “subversives/terrorists” I aim to provide hints as to why certain historical explanations have become accepted and what this means for the present and the future.

THE STUDY: PARTICIPANTS AND ENVIRONMENT

The participants of this study were 63 young people from Buenos Aires who were born during the dictatorship or afterwards and had an entirely mediated knowledge of that historical period. With a few exceptions, their ages ranged between 15-22 years old.³ They can be arbitrarily situated in what I have labeled a “gray zone,” meaning by this that they were politically

quiescent and were not “directly” affected by the repression (e.g., daughter of a *desaparecido*). My intention was to assess better how this past was being processed in wider sectors of society. Most participants were from different sections of the middle class, although a few of them were born and lived in “shantytowns” or belonged to the upper class and resided in exclusive neighborhoods.⁴ They were high school or college students and employees. (See Appendix for information on interviewees quoted).

Fieldwork took place in Buenos Aires in 1998 at a moment where this past decisively intensified its presence in the public sphere. Former dictator Videla was jailed for the kidnapping of babies born in captivity. The children of the disappeared were very active with their *escraches* (demonstrations against former torturers and killers).⁵ *El Mundial [de fútbol]* was taking place in France and discussions about it prompted comparisons with the 1978 *Mundial* that took place in Argentina at the peak of the repression. There were trials against military officers conducted in Spain and other European countries, debates over the revocation of amnesty laws, the opposition to president Menem’s decree to turn the infamous ESMA (the Navy’s torture and extermination camp) into a monument to “national unity.” There was extensive media coverage of all these events, making headlines in the major newspapers and being discussed in television programs. In sum, it was almost impossible for a person who watches television, listens to the radio, or reads some magazines to have been unaware of the human rights violations committed or issues of legal retribution and impunity.

KNOWLEDGE OF THE PAST. WHAT HAPPENED?

One of the typical initial questions asked to participants was: According to what you have been told, how would you describe to a foreigner, who knows very little about this country, what happened here at the political and social level in the second half of the 1970s? What participants would tell the imaginary foreigner revealed what they had concluded were the most important facts about that period. There were brief summaries highlighting the brutality of the repression and its apparent arbitrariness, some accounts that revealed a deeper knowledge about the period, and other stories showing how the lack of contextual information made this past confusing for some of the young interviewees. The main differences in knowledge were between those participants with political activists in their family, and the rest. I am referring to differences based on how much and what was spoken as opposed to what was shrouded in silence.⁶

Everybody Knows (from “nadie sabía” to “todos saben”)

Every single one of the young people with whom I talked was aware of atrocities committed during the dictatorship and had a pretty good idea of what happened. Without exception, participants knew about persecutions, tortures, disappearances, or kidnapping of babies. The differences were the context, the details, and the reasons behind. As “Mónica” summarized:

Todo el mundo sabe, todo el mundo. Es inevitable no saberlo. Porque o en tu casa, o en la tele, o en un libro lo encontrarás. Constantemente lo escuchás [...] te llega la información, es inevitable. [...] Siempre va a salir el tema, siempre va a haber alguien que lo vivió, o alguien que escuchó, siempre.

However, participants were not usually very clear on why these atrocities took place. The consumption of horror stories seems to have taken priority over the analysis of why the horror occurred in the first place. This has meant that knowledge is centered on terror and human rights abuses but disregards causes and context.

Knowledge about the extent of the repression was often linked to the commencement of civilian rule (1983). We could talk of a switch, from “nadie sabía” to “todos saben.” During the repression, many people adopted ignorance believing that the less a person knew the safer she was. Silence and fear conditioned knowledge. According to one young woman, society was divided in three groups: those who knew, those who did not know, and those who did not want to know (“Laura”). The category of those who did not want to know is the most interesting for me because it is an effect of terror. It defines those who were permanently living in a dual reality of knowing but denying. Their memories may reflect these contradictions as well as matters of responsibility and guilt. “No sabíamos” is the message that many parents had transmitted to their children. But, in general, their accounts reflect the confusing paradox of not knowing but knowing. They also provide hints on the process of discovering what really happened, of coming to know, and on how they had chosen to explain this transformation to their children. Let me illustrate this with some examples.

Some participants had received versions indicating that society was aware of the repression. In those cases, I heard different explanations about people’s apparent ignorance. Most accounts affirming that people knew make references to fear. “Eugenia”’s parents had told her that most people knew but were afraid:

La gente sabía y se callaba [...] hablaba dentro de sus casas, pura y exclusivamente [...] Pero aún así uno siempre estaba con la duda si no había alguien espíándolo, si no habían puesto un micrófono en algún momento que uno se había ausentado de la casa [...] eran cosas que podían pasar.

There was also talk of self-denial as a protective shield. Some comments refer to the risks of knowing more than what the official information admitted. “Flor” described how fearful people avoided sharing knowledge:

La gente en verdad, pienso yo, lo sabía y lo negaba, se lo negaba a si mismo. No lo quería pensar. Por ahí te contaban algo y es como que vos no podías contar algo porque comprometías al otro. Y al mismo tiempo entre amigos se contaban todo y no se contaban eso. Y era como que no pasaba nada pero cada uno sabía que pasaba.
(My emphasis)

The very limited information to which people had access was also cited as cause for ignorance. Although the dictatorship imposed tight censorship, rumors of terrible things circulated quite widely. This contradictory information added to people’s confusion. Censorship, therefore, is the justification that people could only know bits and pieces. “Silvia” explained that her mother always told her that, “*en aquel entonces nadie sabía.*” According to “Analia,” “*mis viejos me contaron que ellos realmente no sabían nada de lo que estaba pasando.*” “Mercedes” reasoned that, probably, a significant portion of society barely intuited what was going on:

Yo diría que en base a lo que vivieron [mis padres] la mayoría de la gente vivía como en una especie de nebulosa. Que algo podía ser que estuviera pasando pero no tenían mucha idea de que era, y de la magnitud que tenía. En el 84, con el advenimiento de la democracia, ahí se dieron cuenta realmente de lo que era. [...] Ellos lo que me dijeron era eso, que no tenían idea de que acá realmente estuviera pasando lo que estaba pasando. [...] Mis viejos y la mayoría de la gente no son ni economistas, ni licenciados en política, ni nada por el estilo como para analizar toda la política que estaban implementando. Así que lo de ellos se quedaba muy en la superficie y era que en general no sabían. Claro, los diarios no informaban, la televisión tampoco.

Several participants talked about what the international community knew at that time as opposed to what Argentines ignored. This needs connecting with the fact that, during the dictatorship, certain sectors of society enjoyed an economic bonanza. While thousands were tortured and disappeared thousands of others traveled and shopped around the world.⁷ So what was known overseas is important to evaluate people’s actual level of ignorance. The many Argentine travelers had access to this information. Either they never looked for it or decided to dismiss these reports as the “anti-Argentine” campaigns that the military denounced.⁸

Thus, claims of ignorance seem rather clearly to be signs of denial. People apparently did not know that many details but, as I show next, the extent of the campaign of terror was such that few social groups were left totally untouched. Through an inquiry into people’s knowledge of a

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disappeared person, it is possible to have a good idea of how many people were actually taking note of the repression.

Knowledge of a Disappeared Person.

We may never know the exact figure of how many people disappeared or their name, age, occupation, education, class, or political affiliation. Disappearances happened all over the country and within a wide spectrum of groups within society.⁹ Several years ago, Duhalde (1983:202) argued that the whole society was within the circle of the expansive effect of the terrorist state policies; that there was no Argentine citizen of the middle class or working sectors who did not know, directly or indirectly, of at least one case of disappearance. Talking to younger people fifteen years later provided the opportunity to test the accuracy of his statement.

One of the questions asked of participants was if they or their families knew of anybody who had disappeared, or who had a *desaparecido* in the family. While they searched their memories, several stories flowed about uncles, friends, or the woman next door. In some occasions, as during my discussion with four young women, all of them had a story of disappearance from relatives or friends:¹⁰ “*Mi mamá tenía una familia amiga, los hijos desaparecieron porque estaban en la facultad y una noche entraron a la casa, a los padres les pegaron y a los hijos se los llevaron*” (“Patricia”). “*A una de las compañeras de trabajo de mi mamá, le llevaron a la hija y nunca más la vieron*” (“Graciela”). Although this study does not allow for the quantification of experiences in relation to class, it is important to identify data showing how repression crossed socioeconomic levels. I talked to three upper-class young women who go to a very exclusive private school. Two of them had someone in the family who had been killed for being a guerrilla.¹¹

I heard from several young people who had known stories of disappearances since they were children. In those cases, stories of repression within their families or friends have usually triggered the talk about the past. Stories of disappearances of relatives or acquaintances help put a face and a name to terror; make it more real because it is something suffered by those close to them. As “Cristina” told me: “*El primo de mi mamá que desapareció y después que terminó todo lo encontraron en una zanja con el auto todo quemado. Ese es el único familiar, después hay muchos amigos de mi mamá y de mis tíos.*” “Lucia” explained how disappearances hit her extended family, her mother’s friends, and her friends’ homes:

Mi abuela tiene dos hijos desaparecidos. Lo que pasa es que tengo una abuela que no es realmente la mamá de mi mamá pero yo la tengo como mi abuela desde que nací.

Y supuestamente tengo dos tíos desaparecidos. [...] Además mis amigas tienen padres que tienen conocidos desaparecidos. Mi mamá tiene conocidos desaparecidos.

Although it is not very clear how some details of her account are known if everybody ended up dead, this is the story circulating in “Teresa”’s family:

Yo tengo un pariente que también es desaparecido. Y bueno, me empezaron a contar que unos primos lejanos eran de los que iban a los colegios y pintaban todas las noches las escuelas, y después eran totalmente perseguidos. La mamá de estos primos fue desaparecida, fue violada adelante de estos chicos [...] después los mataron a los chicos.

Losing someone important was not limited to a relative or a friend. I heard stories of disappearance of professors, teachers, and mentors that obviously affected the young people around them, respondents' elders in these cases.¹² There are some schools where there were many disappearances and those events that had made memory marks in these institutions. Students there seemed to be highly politicized.¹³ Some interviewees told me that they had heard many stories through classmates whose parents went into exile. I also heard stories that show how people were keeping the memory alive of their disappeared relatives and friends. One such way is naming their children after them. In those cases, the story of the *desaparecida(o)* in particular and of the repression in general is transmitted to the children from the time they are very young. “Sara” told me about her mothers’ classmates:

Mamá me contó varias veces que ella tenía un amigo, por eso mi hermano se llama Pedro, tenía diecinueve, veinte años y que era uno de los pocos de sus amistades que no militaba en nada. Y fué uno de los primeros que se llevaron y nunca lo volvieron a ver. Lo quería muchísimo, y bueno, mi hermano se llama Pedro por eso.

Summarizing, the large selection of accounts of disappearances that I heard challenges the affirmation that society did not know what was going on. The majority of the young people with whom I talked had heard of at least one concrete case of disappearance. Their elders knew the stories at the time they were happening. The expansive effects of the terrorist state policies that Duhalde analyzed were visible and had been intergenerationally transmitted.

HISTORICAL EXPLANATIONS. WHY DID IT HAPPEN?

Let us now turn to what participants had to say regarding the genesis of and the responsibility for the repression. It is in their assessment of why it happened where the fragmented and decontextualized knowledge becomes evident. Very few of them seemed to know the reasons that led to the military coup and to the imposition of state terrorism. The same applies to the assignment of guilt and responsibility. Most participants lacked information on the politicians,

the Church hierarchy, union leaders, business and financial sectors that collaborated with the dictatorship. I heard many variations of “*No había orden, como que se necesitaba algo para que se vuelva a reorganizar. Por ahí resultó peor el remedio que la enfermedad, pero había que buscar algún modo de reorganizar.*” (“Josefina”).¹⁴ This suggests that stopping the chaos in which society was immersed during Isabel Perón’s government may be the only explanation many participants had received.

Some participants mentioned that there were no reasons for the repression. As “Luis” candidly stated: “*A mi me explicaron que no había un porqué, que no había una excusa, ni nada. Los agarraban y los torturaban así por nada.*” Now, undoubtedly, there is no justification for human rights abuses. But the campaign of extermination of dissidents was part of a political project and the comment shows how information about the terror, whose details seem to be well known for all, has been separated from any contextual content.

I also heard remarks that the reasons why terror happened are only known by a few: “*Yo pienso que tiene alguna explicación, pero que no la quieren mostrar. Que no quiere salir, en algún lugar debe estar, en una oficina, en una carpeta, no sé*” (“Miguel”). There were indeed rumors of secrets files kept by the military and human rights activists continue to struggle for the disclosure of any available information. But young people should not believe that to understand what happened society must wait for the perpetrators to open their files and give their explanation. It is a perception of a society lacking the credentials and capability to analyze and judge historical processes, and the power to force the disclosure of this information.

Many interviewees noted that talk about this past was limited: “*No sabemos mucho porque nadie nos dice nada. Si me trajeran libros, pudiéramos hablar una vez por semana, en el colegio*” (“Héctor”). Others blamed the way history is taught. For “Gloria”:

A mí no me hablaron de las razones. Ni nunca escuché tampoco hablar de las razones. [...] Siempre la historia pero nunca el porqué. [...] También hay veces que si preguntás nadie sabe porqué [...] te cuentan toda la historia pero nunca te dicen “por esto fué”.

The lack of information does not mean that participants could not articulate explanations for the dictatorship, and identify causes and responsibilities but may be the reason why certain historical accounts had been widely accepted.

The Theory of “Los Dos Demonios): The Keystone.

With few exceptions, the theory of “*Los Dos Demonios*”—the violence of the state as a response to the violence of the guerrilla forces, the two *demonios* that terrorized society—emerged as the

keystone in what has passed as a historical explanation for the “dirty war.”¹⁵ The theory reaffirms the concept of “war” claimed by the dictatorship and identifies the transition as a “postwar” period. It separates society from an apparently insulated conflict between the military and guerrilla forces (Montoneros and ERP were the main ones). In this view, this society “convulsed” by terror did not have no participation, no responsibility, nor has any role to play in the present in demanding truth and justice. Moreover, this explanation does not call for an evaluation of the role played by large sectors of society that, either for fear, ignorance, or convenience, remained—and remain—witting bystanders but not protagonists.

Furthermore, a “postwar” scenario calls for the reconciliation between two armed adversaries. Estimates on the size of guerrilla organizations range from 1,300 to 4,000. There are an estimated 30,000 disappeared. The figure of victims murdered by the guerrillas in the period previous to and during the dictatorship is 687, most of them military or security forces personnel.¹⁶ Which are the two armies? Where does society in general fit in this equation? Are discourses of reconciliation encouraging people to forgive torturers and assassins? Why should they? What are torturers and killers giving society? Argentineans have not yet witnessed major human rights abusers showing a sincere repentance and/or helping in the disclosure of the truth.

Dos Demonios has had well-defined phases over the years. This has contributed to frame under it several significant steps of the historical process initiated with the dictatorship. The first phase of the “war” was followed by the second phase of blaming both sides and jailing military junta members and a couple of guerrilla leaders at the commencement of civilian rule. The third step was marked by the presidential pardons to both “*demonios*.” The fourth step were the *mea culpas* of *teniente general* Balza (*Jefe del Estado Mayor del Ejército*) and Firmenich (leader of Montoneros) who in 1995 broadcast their confessions in the same television program within one week of each other. Ciancaglini and Granowsky (1995:340-1) refer to this as a version of the theory that could be called “*Los Dos Angeles*,” where both sides metaphorically shake hands—while sidestepping society and strengthening its bystander role.

I also asked who the responsible agents were. *Dos Demonios* was seldom explicitly mentioned but many interpretations of the repression underpinned it. References to war, enemy armies, and opposite ideologies were constant, with “bad guys” and victims from “both” sides. The notion of two “guilty parties” was rarely questioned. The variations were in the type of analysis or the facts considered—“*estuvieron mal los dos*,” “*sufrieron los dos*.”

Descriptions of life under terror often assigned responsibility and suffering to two armies, each one the victimizer and victim of the other. “Mario” was one of the few participants who took great care in stressing the losses suffered by the military and civilian targets of the guerrilla forces when, in fact, there were few casualties among civilians. He disagreed with his four classmates with whom I was leading a group discussion and justified the repression with his insistence on a war between military and communists. “Mario”’s position aimed to present a “balanced” appraisal of the period, a pattern found in several accounts:

Yo creo que sufrieron las dos partes, los dos bandos. Siempre hubo dos bandos. [...] Yo creo que se sufrió de los dos lados. Murieron gente, por ejemplo milicos, o sea gente que estaba haciendo el servicio militar, chicos de dieciocho años, hasta chicas, nenas de cinco años.¹⁷ [...] Hay gente que te va a decir que los militares eran una mierda, y hay gente que te va a decir que el comunismo también es una mierda. Porque murieron de todos lados. [...] Porque una bomba tiene una onda expansiva. En todos lados, en Cordoba, pusieron una bomba en pleno centro. Murió toda clase de gente. ¿Tenían la culpa? nadie tenía la culpa. [...] A mi me molesta la gente que dice que hubo un bando solo, que siempre hubo un bando solo. Y no es así. Yo creo que hay que ser neutro en la historia. Ese es mi punto de vista.

“Verónica” used the theory to express differences of opinions within her family:

Yo del golpe se bastante por mis papás. Porque mi abuelo, que se murió cuando mi papá era chiquitito, era militar. Entonces mi papá es partidario de los militares y mi mamá es totalmente partidaria de los guerrilleros. Ninguno de los dos es como que participó en nada así porque son totalmente pacíficos. No es que son partidarios, partidarios, porque creen que los dos estuvieron mal. Porque los dos usaron la violencia, y los dos torturaron y los dos se devolvieron con la misma cara y todo así. [...] Los dos igual se pusieron de acuerdo que el golpe era necesario y que los militares tenían que poner algo porque Isabel estaba haciendo cualquier cosa y que era necesario. [...] Pero ese no fué el modo porque se pagó con la misma moneda.

“Alicia” was very explicit in assigning blame to confronting armies:

Para mí hubo responsables de los dos lados, tanto de los militares como de los subversivos. O sea también hay alguien que fue la cabeza de los Montoneros, también hubo un responsable. Hay realmente gente que es culpable en los dos bandos. Lo que pasa que, claro, lo que más surge son los militares por una cuestión que, es como que ellos eran los legales, por decirlo así. Pero no, yo creo que hay culpables de los dos lados. Aunque los Montoneros no sé muy bien si se va a descubrir algún día o si se va a sacar a la luz quien realmente fué la cabeza pensante, el que organizó todo, o en el ERP.

The idea of the two armies was also present in accounts of participants whose relatives were political activists. In “Andrea”’s words:

Yo no justifico que se mate a nadie, sea o no sea militar, sea o no sea subversivo, como se decía antes. Mi tía era Montonera. [...] [mis padres] militaban y creo que

cuando mi hermano era chico dejaron de militar, pero no militaban en Montoneros. [...] mi papá me decía “si en esa época no matabas, te mataban.” (my emphasis)

Dos Demonios also emerged as the rationale to defend the need for objectivity. While the explanations of an historical event would undoubtedly vary depending on the perspectives of those writing the account, I heard opinions that seek to counter versions critical of the “military” by calling for a criticism of the “guerrilla” but ignoring other actors. During a discussion on how to teach about this historical period, “Alicia,” who was studying for her teacher's certification, suggested that use of the theory by recommending that explanations should detail:

Como surgió, el porqué, no dejar a ninguna de las partes como malos ni buenos, sino mostrar las cosas que hicieron ambos. [Detalles de terror y tortura] sirven para ver lo malo que hicieron los militares. Ahora también habría que conseguir algo que sirviera para mostrar que los Montoneros o el ERP también hicieron sus estragos. Digamos que hubo gente inocente que murió y gente que no era inocente, o no era tan inocente. Yo creo que habría que llegar a un equilibrio entre los dos lados. No pintar a los militares como malos ni a los subversivos como malos. Lo que pasa es que es muy difícil.

Guilty or Innocent?

Issues of guilt and innocence also have to be seen as a related outcome of framing the dictatorship under *Dos Demonios*. During the dictatorship, authorities campaigned to convince the population that society was divided into friends and foes.¹⁸ When a person was taken away, it was common to hear comments that were variations of “*por algo será,*” or “*andaba en algo*”. The counterparts were the innocent people, those described with statements such as “*no andaba en nada.*” Note the use of all-inclusive but imprecise terms of multiple meanings and interpretations. But these vague statements summarized the idea that abductions, tortures, killings, or disappearances were the victims’ responsibility. As many of the comments that I heard suggested, this was probably a result of the firmly grounded perception that “no involvement” meant “nothing to fear.”¹⁹

Blaming the victim for her disappearance, and consequently for the suffering inflicted on their relatives and friends, is a belief that was apparently engraved in society and, as its recurrence throughout the interviews indicates, transmitted to the younger generation. This is undoubtedly a triumph of the dictatorship’s discourse. As “Nora”’s mother told her: “*Los militares no eran tan malos. Si vos no eras loquita, no estabas metida en nada raro no te pasaba nada raro.*” Or, as “Mario” explained: “*Yo tengo amigos militares. Si vos hablás con un hijo de militar te dicen que los pibes de antes eran quilomberos. ... Se la buscaron.*”

One form in which this belief manifests is in comments implying that the fact that a person is alive and nothing happened to her proves that for those not involved in "subversive" activities there was nothing to fear. That the victims were guilty is often explained with arguments implying that they had committed bad actions—e.g. “*no eran ningunos santitos.*” These ambiguous allegations seldom specify what the “sins” were that caused the fall of that person from a state of holiness into the inferno of the torture chambers. “Carmen”’s mother saw many positive angles of the dictatorship and what she had told her daughter illustrates well the assignment of guilt:

Lo que yo siempre escuché es “por algo se los llevaron, en algo tendrían que haber estado metidos porque si no, no te van a llevar”. “Yo no me metí en nada”, me dice mi mamá, “y a mí nunca me llevaron”. [...] Me dice “no te olvides que había muchos que tiraban bombas, que esto que el otro, que no eran santitos. No era que iban a la facultad. No. Se juntaban para armar, para ver donde ponían la bomba, donde hacían esto”. [...] Era una época muy revolucionaria, porque eras de dos bandos, el bando de la guerrilla y el bando de los militares. Pero si vos no estabas en ninguno de los dos nadie te hacía nada. Es como que vos estabas limpio, no tenías nada.

Acceptance of the clash between two armies implies that those victims who were not military or guerrillas were the "innocent" ones. But, what is the meaning of “innocence” or what made a victim innocent or guilty? I want to address two of the many issues raised by this dichotomy guilty/innocent. First, human rights abuses cannot be judged based on the culpability of the victims. This could imply the recognition that the “guilty” had received a too harsh but maybe deserved punishment, the "excesses" that the military referred to. It also opens the possibility that outrage for the atrocities can be limited to the fate of the “innocents,” the "mistakes" admitted by the dictatorship.²⁰ (I should point that most participants thought that whatever the crime committed nothing justified what was done to thousands of people). Second, one of the discourses transmitted was that anybody could be taken away and disappear. Although this is truth, the perception reveals a lack of awareness of the political activism of most of the *desaparecidos* and shows how little had been transmitted of the social struggles of those times.

Recognition that the *desaparecidos* were active in many political fronts: as workers, students, artists, within churches or community organizations, and included those who gave them shelter or medical assistance, would clarify that state terrorism targeted all these fronts and massacred all its enemies, involved or not in armed struggle. Anybody could disappear, but mostly because many qualified for the label of “terrorist” assigned to them.²¹ Society could benefit from admitting that the great majority of the *desaparecidos* were taken away because they wanted to

change the system, “*por andar en algo.*”²² “*Algo*” was political participation in a variety of capacities, tasks, and environments, be it the neighborhood, the workplace, or the school—struggles that have often been smeared with the labels of terrorism, anarchism or communism.²³

Rival Historical Explanations.

The prevalence of *Dos Demonios* does not exclude the circulation of rival explanations. A few participants were well informed about several political, social, and economic reasons for the coup, and revealed awareness of the broader scope of the repression, either replacing the dichotomy military/guerrilla or linking it to other players. Most of them have had access to more information. This suggests that ignorance influences the acceptance of explanations as *Dos Demonios*. Many of these comments, however, incorporated different elements but did not necessarily provide facts to substantiate the arguments. My impression is that the knowledge was often superficial and, at times, not well articulated. But it would be unfair to state this without pointing out that I did not have the opportunity for second interviews to explore if participants knew more than they presented in the course of our first conversation. Let me share these rival explanations.

Destroying a political movement. This is the primary argument against that of *Dos Demonios*. In those accounts, all those whom the dictatorship saw as its enemies replace the guerrilla forces. There are references to armed combatants and activists in many fronts, who were labeled “subversives” by the dictatorship. Variations center on what was the threat posed by the movement targeted for extermination and on the identity of those who were part of it.

In some accounts, the victims are defined as those individuals who had political projects that were a potential obstacle for the dictatorship’s plans. Repression was therefore based on ideological grounds. Those who could eventually turn into influential leaders and mobilize other people would then embody the threat. “Irma”’s comments illustrate this:

Creo que en ese momento la gente que quería gobernar quería estar ahí, no le interesaba la gente que pensara. Y que uno al pensar y desarrollar ideas podía llegar a un gobierno democrático y hacer mejores cosas. Y a la gente que estaba en ese momento eso no le interesaba. Digamos, quería a través de la fuerza, no le importaba la manera, pero quería entrar al poder y manejar a toda la gente, matando. Porque en realidad lo que hicieron fue matar a toda la gente inocente que pensaba y quería lo mejor para el país. Los llamaban subversivos o les ponían cualquier clase de apodo con tal que de que la gente esa no pensara, no avivara a la demás gente, porque eso no les convenía. Como ahora no les conviene la gente que piensa y no les conviene la gente que estudia.

(Interestingly, she uses the word “innocent” to refer to those who were involved in a political project). According to “Andrés,” the dictatorship aimed to exterminate a generation of young activists:

Era una época de mucha pelea. [...] se peleaba por un montón de cosas. [...] Y era como que todos estaban en la lucha. Querías algo y no te podías quedar sentado. Era una época que la gente luchaba. Especialmente los jóvenes, por eso se llevaron a tantos jóvenes. [...] [Necesitaban] que esa sociedad que había peleado o que estaba peleando por algo no existiera. Para que no le pueda enseñar nada a los demás ni contarle nada a los demás.

To restructure economic priorities toward a neo-liberal policy. Historical explanations that considered economic factors were very few. I talked, however, to one group of classmates who produced a community radio program and had researched the period for a school assignment.²⁴ For them, the dictatorship was linked to the imposition of an economic policy similar to the neoliberalism being implemented in the 1990s. Their comments revealed an insightful view of motives that were not so clear for most participants and illustrated well how educators can foster other levels of knowledge. Another important point that their arguments made related to their skepticism toward the democratization process. According to “Victor:”²⁵

Los que lo llevaron a cabo [al golpe] eran los militares, policías, ejercito, marina, todo lo demas. Pero los gestores, yo pienso que es como siempre, como los que mandan el pais. Son los que mueven los hilos de las marionetas, son los grandes empresarios. [...] Gracias a esa época se empezaron a privatizar cosas, que en ese entonces no se pudo pero que fué lo que inició Martínez de Hoz, lo fueron siguiendo hasta Cavallo que es el alumno pródigo de Martínez de Hoz. Cuando hacés el trabajo y te ponés a estudiar sobre el plan económico de Martínez de Hoz, te empezás a dar cuenta que no es solamente en tal época pasó esto y ahora está Menem y está todo bien. Es lo mismo pero con lo que llaman democracia. (My emphasis)

Along the same lines, “Elvira” argued that repression was the tool to crush opposition to a major restructuring of the economy and noted inconsistencies in what is considered democracy:

La diferencia es que antes quizás la gente era más nacionalista, defendía lo suyo. Quizás si venía alguien y decía “privaticemos todo” en ese momento no se iba a querer. El pueblo quizás se iba a alzar. Entonces había que, me imagino yo, que tenían que hacer todo esto para empezar a privatizar todo y que quizás el pueblo no dijera nada. [...] Se vota, tenemos democracia, pero la gente se muere de hambre.

Regional and international influences. This explanation focused on the regional scope of the repression and the perception that there was either an external cause or a careful coordination among many countries, including the United States' role in orchestrating the repression to deter

communism. “Silvia” expressed this position and, illustrating a common pattern, her explanation introduced generalized vague conspiracy theories:

Digamos que el ejercito es el poder formal. Y el poder real lo tenía otra persona, que obviamente estaba afuera. Porque si uno hace un recuento de todos los golpes militares que hubo en toda América te das cuenta que obviamente alguien los tuvo que manejar, o se pusieron de acuerdo para que fuera así. [...] Recuerdo que con alguien lo hablé. Que no era casualidad que en todos los países hubiese pasado esto, que todos estaban gobernados por militares.

“Ricardo,” whose parents had been members of the Communist Party, made reference to a backlash against revolutionary struggles throughout the continent:

Fué una época en que era típico en latinoamerica ver golpes de estado en todos los países. Si uno se pone a pensar en todos había golpes de estado. Y era muy común que en la Argentina también porque era uno de los países que había focos de revolución. [...] no estan aislados los golpes, fueron todos muy parecidos.

Collective national guilt and/or responsibility.

As a bridge between different historical explanations and the role played by different actors and institutions, I want to briefly comment on an emerging pattern that counters the military/guerrilla dichotomy by assigning collective guilt and/or responsibility. In Argentina, there are concrete cases of guilt and levels of responsibility but generalized statements have no basis. There are those who orchestrated the terror, those who benefited under it, those who tortured and killed, those who collaborated in various fronts, those who were terrified and did not offer any form of resistance. As Habermas (1994:7) argues, “there is no collective guilt” and “whoever is guilty must answer for it individually,” but “there is such a thing as collective responsibility for the mental and cultural context in which mass crimes become possible.”

To claim that all are guilty means that truth commissions or trials would have no purpose because everybody is to blame and it would be impossible to prosecute and punish all. And putting everybody at the same level of assassins and torturers is not fair for millions of Argentines. Ciancaglini and Granowsky (1995:335) note that the 14.756 *habeas corpus* presented during the years of terror prove that there were many people who dared to speak publicly for the disappeared. They cannot be accused of being responsible for the terror.²⁶

One of the most significant pleas to assume collective guilt was general Balza’s televised *mea culpa*. He stated that almost everybody was guilty for the clash between Argentines, either for action, omission, consent, absence, or excess; that the guilt was in the collective unconscious of the whole nation although it was easy to blame a few in order to avoid this

responsibility.²⁷ His words are key to understand the institutional endorsement of collective blame. For Balza, blaming a few is a way to evade collective guilt. On the contrary, Moreno Ocampo (1996:251) argues that to claim that everybody was responsible is a way to evade personal guilt. This could only benefit the perpetrators and their collaborators.

Although the discourse of collective guilt was being transmitted to the younger generation, this opinion was almost non-existent among interviewees, indicating that society is not willing to accept being blamed for these crimes and people are not ready to explore levels of responsibility.

Roles Attributed to Different Actors and Institutions

What happened in Argentina was not the product of an isolated bunch of cruel military. Between calls for assuming collective guilt and a society completely detached from any active role during the terror there are layers of responsibilities that need to be recognized. State terrorism does not happen without the support of large sectors of the population.²⁸ Pilar Calveiro (1998), who survived her disappearance, has written on the relationship between the concentration camps and society, arguing that repression and the camps cannot be seen as rare aberrations isolated from society. She claims that society was at the same time victim and victimizer. And, although she does not put everybody at the same level of a torturer, she maintains that every member of society had some degree of responsibility.²⁹

But what did young people know about all this? Who supported the dictatorship was a question I always made sure to ask and here are some answers to it.

Catholic hierarchy. The level of collaboration of the Catholic Church's hierarchy with the dictatorship was, at best, shameful. Most of it either condoned repression or remained silent while the military annihilated people, including nuns, priests, or lay Christian activists.³⁰ They even witnessed torture sessions to encourage confessions of those being tormented.³¹ But the Church's hierarchy has promoted "reconciliation" in several of its documents, appealing for love to encourage the direct victims and society to forgive the perpetrators, to forget what happened.³²

Several interviewees were or had been students at Catholic institutions; others participated in many activities within the Church, mainly as *catequistas* (educational work). Thus, their level of knowledge about what the Church did during the terror allows assessing how this past was being transmitted in Church circles. Overall, this knowledge was quite limited. The Catholic hierarchy's collaboration may explain why so little was told to the younger generation; ignorance had undoubtedly contributed to maintaining its untainted image. In most of the religious high schools attended by respondents, the Church's role during the dictatorship was never discussed.

In spite of these silences, several participants were aware of this institution's political power and that its position during the years of terror is subject to debate. Few doubted that the Church was aware of what was going on. But I heard different opinions regarding its actions.

Some participants had accepted the idea that the Church had no power to stop human rights abuses. Although the Church could have saved many lives, it seems that many Catholics are willing to forgive its crimes. According to "Carmen:"

En esa época dicen que la iglesia estaba enterada de todos los movimientos, pero que no podía hacer nada porque estaba con las manos atadas. Incluso dicen que las madres fueron a hablar con la iglesia y que la iglesia "si, todo bien" pero no, no hizo nada. Se lavó las manos.

Other participants highlighted that the Church acted in its own interests and avoided challenging the military authorities. "Eugenia" went to a convent school and linked silences in the classroom with the Church as an accomplice:

Las monjas nunca tocaron el tema de política. De ninguna política pero menos de esa. Me imagino por la relación que había en esa época de la iglesia con los militares. Nunca se tocó el tema. [...] Es un encubrimiento por parte de la iglesia el ver en los noticieros que estuvieron tomando la comunión, que esas son fotos bastante vistas, y después se sientan atrás de un escritorio y dan la orden de matar.

Bishops and generals together were widely documented in media images (throughout Argentina and the world) and, as "Eugenia" accurately pointed out, it suffices to decode the very explicit meaning of some images to understand the level of support given to the perpetrators.

A few participants talked about the nuns and priests who were eliminated while the Church's hierarchy remained silent. I also heard of more explicit collaborations: priests visiting concentration camps, bishops and priests who kept lists of prisoners, even speculations that priests may have tortured and killed. According to "Nelson:" *"Había un cura también metido. Un cura que los bendecía, los bendecía y después los mataba y los tiraba, algo así era."*

The harsher criticisms of the Church, and the best level of knowledge of its collaboration with the dictatorship, came from a few very religious participants. In "Diego"'s religious circles, the political role of the Church, past and present, had been a topic of discussion. For him, what the Church allowed to happen is what makes the institution guilty beyond any doubt:

Considero que hubo muchos tipos que convalidaron ese régimen, lo apoyaron, todo. [...] Vos llegás a una instancia de poder donde, una de dos, o sabés lo que pasa y sos cómplice de lo que está pasando, o sos estúpido y estás ocupando un lugar que no te corresponde. [...] Que lo hayan hecho o lo hayan dejado hacer para mí tiene la misma responsabilidad que aquel que apretó el gatillo.

Society at large. Is almost everybody guilty and is there guilt in the collective unconscious of the whole nation? Who are to blame? Several participants were aware that large sectors had supported or tolerated the regime since what went on could not have been the military's sole venture. We can talk of a call for the coup and the support for the dictatorship that followed.³³ Verbitsky (1995:124) explains that, in Argentina, all military coups are *cívico-militares* and there is civilian participation even when the military are the visible power. However, who were these civilians and why they had plot with the military was not very clear for most participants.³⁴

Contributing to this ignorance is the fact that it was hard to find people who openly defend what the dictatorship did—one of the battles it lost. However, this should not be taken as a sign that all those who supported it are now critical and would not allow or even call for a similar repression. For the lack of current public support may include those who are truly critical of what went on but also those who would not dare to take such an unpopular stance, even when they approve of what was done. Only time will show if these “shy voices” decide to speak out.³⁵

The idea that many people wanted the change promised by a coup was mentioned quite often. There had been so many military coups before that this seemed like a logical and inevitable next step. Another recurrent opinion was the notion that social class or economic power determined attitudes toward the dictatorship. According to “Eugenia:”

Yo creo que hubo gente que los reclamó en su momento, como que hacía falta poner orden y que se yó. También como que se creó el clima para que la gente los reclamara. El clima de desorganización, social, económico, político, todo lo demás. Y durante la dictadura la gente sí, por supuesto, la gente económicamente más poderosa estaba haciendo brillantes negocios. Pidieron enormes préstamos que después jamás tuvieron que pagar, así que estaban muy conformes con los militares. O sea que sí, creo que esa gente respaldó el gobierno militar.

In general, participants who talked of society's support made the point that this was based on either how the dictatorship was benefiting them or on indifference if the repression was not touching them. They talked about people who were amassing fortunes and the individualistic nature of the majority of the people for whom what does not affect them is not a matter of their concern—“*mientras no me jodan a mí que hagan lo que quieran*” (“Juan”). Popular endorsement of the Malvinas War and the *El Mundial* was also brought up as a proof of society's support of the dictatorship. And there were also explanations framed under *Dos Demonios*, where the population was seen as supporting one of the two sides rather than being indifferent. According to “Alicia”: “*El pueblo también estaba dividido en los dos. Vamos a ser sinceros.*”

Los que estaban bien, los que les convenia el golpe militar estaban con los militares y los que no con los llamados subversivos.”

“Mariana,” whose grandfather was in the military, was one of the very few including the political leadership among the supporters:

Creo que tal vez en parte la gente permitió que eso pasara, que se llegara a tanto [...] Para mí había mucha gente de la política metida, que permitió. Si bien cayó gente de la política por los militares había también mucha gente con los militares para que eso pasara.

Support for the dictatorship was also connected to present times. “Analía” talked about people who were electing military officers running for office:

Yo sé que hay mucha gente que estuvo de acuerdo con lo que se hizo. Tengo entendido que cuando fué el golpe militar, o sea el país de alguna manera aprobaba que eso sea así, esperaba que venga un golpe militar porque ya nadie se bancaba el caos de lo que era el gobierno antes. Sé que hay mucha gente que lo apoyó. Hace poco estaba el partido de Aldo Rico (Modin), evidentemente hay gente que sigue de acuerdo con que las fuerzas militares estén en el poder [...] pero es como muy loco [...] como decir que hay gente que todavía esta de acuerdo con lo que hicieron los nazis. [...] O sea que no sería raro que haya gente que todavía piense que lo que se hizo estuvo bien hecho.³⁶

This link between past and present support for human rights abusers is an insightful remark on Argentinean society. The idea that people are willing to elect torturers and assassins challenges the notion that they are elected because people do not remember what they did and suggests that people remember, approve, and want them back.³⁷

Concluding Remarks

I have analyzed knowledge about the dictatorship, which I argue has been conveyed in a fragmented and decontextualized mode. I see this as a direct consequence of the legacy of fears and silences. The unevenness in knowledge that I found was usually based on how much had been discussed or silenced within the family or at school, and on the different communication media to which participants had been exposed. This pattern seemed to cut across socioeconomic or educational levels.

Everybody knew what happened but few why it happened. While young people were conscious of the level of human rights abuses committed they were not very clear on either their genesis or their full impact. The consumption of the details of the atrocities has not been matched by an analysis of its causes. Contextual information about the ideological, political, or economic angles of the terror has been largely ignored.

The fragmented knowledge is also the result of what the witness generation knew at the time of the repression, learned later, and had transmitted. Although hard to believe for some of us who lived under terror, many parents had told their children that they did not know what was happening at that time. The explanations for this ignorance included censorship and misinformation. There was also a perception that self-denial was a protective shield.

There seemed to be little awareness of how society at large was affected by the repression. Comments that are variations of “*a mi los militares no me hicieron nada*” reflect a perception that only those persecuted, tortured, killed, or disappeared (and their relatives) suffered the effects of state terrorism. But the extent to which the entire national community was shaken by the violence can be easily estimated by the many stories of disappearances that I heard. Hence, the manifest pervasiveness of the repression contradicts the claim that people did not know and favors the assumption that ignorance was adopted as a survival tool.

With regard to the causes and responsibilities for the repression, there was a generalized, acceptance of *Dos Demonios*—violence of the state as response to the violence of the guerrilla forces. The military/guerrilla dichotomy continued to frame debates about the past, as evinced by blaming and punishing both sides, the pardons to military and some guerrilla leaders, and their subsequent *mea culpas*. Among the connotations of focusing on two main actors are the minimization of the role played by other sectors, and a simplification of guilt and responsibility whereby the individualized “two devils” are contrasted with “innocent” victims. This had resulted in a manifest confusion of the meaning of key concepts such as “guilt” and “innocence.”

Although most participants considered that, whatever the crimes, the repression was not justified, the victims were often blamed for their suffering. There had been a transmission of the belief that danger of disappearing or possibility of survival was based on “*andar en algo*” or “*no andar en nada*.” I see this vague definition of political activism as a triumph of the dictatorship’s discourse, with the potential effect of discouraging involvement in what is considered potentially risky.

A few interviewees challenged the dominant explanation and were aware of a number of factors that led to the dictatorship and of the participation of different actors. They talked about efforts to destroy a political movement, the imposition of an economic plan, or the regional and international context of the repression. But most of the young people with whom I talked ignored, minimized, or confused the role played by the different actors and institutions that supported the military juntas—the Church hierarchy, politicians who were their ambassadors or

mayors, corporations, journalists, intellectuals, and all those who profited under it. Knowledge of the degree of collaboration of civilian sectors was very limited, even when several participants implied that the dictatorship could not have happened without society's support or tolerance. This needs to be seen in relation to discourses assigning collective guilt. Blaming either a few or the whole society are both signs that the truth has yet to be disclosed and that society had not addressed its responsibility. It seems that the witness generation was not ready to confront young people's demand for a comprehensive explanation of why the horror happened and which was society's role during it. Ignorance was also revealed in the generalized lack of awareness of the political activism, in several fronts, of most of the disappeared.

The fragmented knowledge about the dictatorship, thus, has several implications. The lack of contextual information made it difficult for the younger generation to make sense of what went on, with the consequent risk of major distortions, even incredulity. Ignorance had translated in the perception of a society lacking the credentials to analyze and judge historical processes. The memories transmitted favored the predominance of a historical explanation (*Dos Demonios*) that simplifies the events and encourages a bystander role for society, specifically regarding citizen action and attitudes toward truth and justice. And this should be a cause of concern. What these young Argentines believed happened, their memories, might be more important than what actually happened. For what we think took place in the past informs and shapes our way of thinking and acting, or how we insert ourselves within a historical process.

APPENDIX

Participants quoted. Their code name is followed by interviewee # and age at time of the interview (1998)

- Alicia (#25) 19 years, studying for teacher certification. Her parents are police officers.
- Analia (#1) 20 years, college student at public university, communication major
- Andrea (#52) 15 years, high school student at public school
- Andrés (#41) 18 years, high school student at public school
- Beatriz (#44) 15 years, high school student at public school
- Cristina (#58) 17 years, high school student at public school
- Carmen (#30) 22 years, studying to be a history teacher
- Diego (#28) 21 years, very active in religious organizations
- Elvira (#40) 22 years, high school student at public school. Co-produces radio program
- Eugenia (#34) 22 years, studying pre-medical
- Fabiana (#46) 15 years, high school student at public school
- Flor (#4) 16 years, high school student at an elite public school
- Gloria (#17) 17 years, high school student at public school
- Graciela (#45) 15 years, high school student at public school
- Héctor (#13) 16 years, high school student at public school
- Irma (#38) 19 years, high school student at public school, co-produces radio program
- Josefina (#64) 16 years, high school student at an exclusive private religious school
- Juan (#35) 23 years, college student at public university, communication major
- Laura (#26) 19 years, was pregnant (Ricardo is the baby's father) wants to be a history teacher
- Lucia (#6) 15 years, high school student at one of the two top public schools of Buenos Aires
- Luis (#48) 15 years, high school student at public school
- Mariana (#5) 16 years, high school student at an elite public school
- Marta (#31) 22 years, student at public university, history major
- Mercedes (#36) 24 years, is studying to be a history teacher
- Mario (#61) 17 years, high school student at public school
- Miguel (#51) 15 years, high school student at public school
- Mónica (#15) 20 years, studying for teacher certification
- Nelson (#14) 15 years, high school student at public school
- Nora (#29) 18 years, high school student at public school
- Patricia (#43) 15 years, high school student at public school
- Ricardo (#27) 18 years, high school student at public school (Laura's companion)
- Sara (#7) 15 years, high school student at one of the two top public schools of Buenos Aires
- Silvia (#24), 20 years, studying for teacher certification
- Teresa (#53) 15 years, high school student at public school
- Verónica (#65) 16 years, high school student at an exclusive private religious school
- Víctor (#39) 21 years, finishing his high school, co-produces a radio program

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² *Porteños* are the people from Buenos Aires.

³ Fifteen years had passed since the return to civilian rule and twenty-two since the military coup, hence the reason for the selection of this age-bracket to secure participants from varying ages but who shared the fact of being born after the coup.

⁴ The middle class is important in Argentina. García (1995:329-30) talks about different opinions on the role this social group plays in regard to military coups—i.e. supporter of them according to José Nun; stabilizing factor (anti-coup) according to Amos Perlmutter or Kalman Silvert.

⁵ I have analyzed these demonstrations in Kaiser 2002.

⁶ The contrast was particularly evident when talking with children of disappeared who are human rights activists. Although they are not the focus of my study, my interviews and conversations with several of them graphically illustrated these gaps. I conducted interviews and had several informal conversations with members of H.I.J.O.S., the organization comprised by children of disappeared, political prisoners, and exiles. In *Ni el Flaco Perdón de Dios; Hijos de Desaparecidos* Juan Gelman and Mara La Madrid (1997) have compiled interviews with children of disappeared, whose voices present a compelling account of growing up having their parents disappeared, their relation with society at large, their activism.

⁷ This is known as the "*plata dulce*" period. Although I could not find comparative travel figures I witnessed this first-hand while working for the national Argentine airline in the midst of the repression.

⁸ There were many initiatives to improve the dictatorship's image. The government hired a US public relations agency (Burson-Marsteller) and created the Centro Piloto at the Argentine Embassy in Paris, this latter to counter the growing international networks of solidarity with human rights activists. Elsewhere, (Kaiser, 1993) I have analyzed the collaboration of media corporations, specifically Editorial Atlántida, which encouraged the readers of their various magazines to challenge this "campaign."

⁹ According to the CONADEP (Comisión Nacional Sobre la Desaparición de Personas), the only official estimate, the hardest hit sectors were workers and students. Other figures are Sex: Males 70%, Women 30%. Age: 10.61% (16-20), 32.62% (21-25), 25.90% (26-30), 12.26% (31-35), 19.61% (less than 16 and more than 36). Occupation: Workers 30.2%, Students 21%, Employees 17.8%, Professionals 10.7%. In addition to the absence of corpses, one of the difficulties of determining the exact number is that CONADEP's figures are based on public denunciations but exclude those who did not have anybody to denounce them or whose relatives were terrified to do so. For instance, three people whom I knew well remain disappeared—one of them my dear and good friend Marta Borrero—but are not included in the CONADEP's list. For me, it is not hard to believe that the official figure could be multiplied by three.

¹⁰ Participants "Patricia," "Beatriz," "Graciela," "Fabiana."

¹¹ "Josefina," "Inés," and "Verónica."

¹² CONADEP estimates that 5.7% of disappeared were professors and teachers.

¹³ I am referring here to the Nacional Buenos Aires and the Carlos Pellegrini, both prestigious public high school institutions within the network of the Universidad de Buenos Aires, whose students and/or alumni were badly hit by the repression and where there have been many activities to keep this memory alive—e.g. booklets, exhibits.

¹⁴ Dabénigno et al.(1998) found that the chaos during the Perón administration was one of the reasons why the coup was perceived as something inevitable and expected

¹⁵ For the specifics of the genesis of *Dos Demonios*, see Jauretche (1997:23-24). One of the first measures of the Alfonsín administration was to issue on 12/13/83 two decrees to prosecute the two devils. Decree No.157 gave the order to prosecute guerrilla leaders and Decree No.158 the military juntas. The foreword to "*Nunca Más*," the report of the official commission to investigate disappearances, gave official stamp to the theory by beginning with the words: "During the 70s, Argentina was shaken by a terror, which originated from both the extreme right and the extreme left," Perelli (1992), however, writes that by blaming both sides the theory aimed to facilitate the reprocessing of memory without widening the gaps separating Argentine society. Landi and Bombal (1995:189) note that the theory is a diagnosis, successfully established by the Alfonsín government, which dominated the "cultural trial" of the dictatorship. The cultural trial to which the authors refer is the one that takes place outside the courts, in public political discussion (p. 195).

¹⁶ Ciancaglini and Granowsky (1995:359) cite Emilio Mignone's estimate that between 5% and 10% of the CONADEP's figure of disappeared (8,961) may have been guerrillas, which means that more than 8,000 were not guerrillas; they give an estimate of 687 victims of the guerrilla and of 1,300 members of guerrilla organizations.

Bousquet (1983) quotes a figure of 4,000 guerrillas estimated by Varela Cid. Garcia (1995:405) estimates 800-1000 armed combatants combining ERP (Ejercito Revolucionario del Pueblo) and Montoneros, the two main guerrilla organizations. Verbitsky ("El oro y el fuego" *Página 12* on line, 6/6/99) notes that documents of the army intelligence estimated that, at its peak, the ERP rural guerrilla in Tucumán had between 120-180 combatants.

¹⁷ Many young conscripts were also victims of state terrorism. See D'Andrea Mohr (1998).

¹⁸ A good example of how society was classified and how people were warned of the consequences of being on the wrong side is the infamous statement by General Iberico Saint-Jean, de-facto governor of the province of Buenos Aires: "First we will kill all the subversives; then we will kill their collaborators; then . . . their sympathizers; then . . . those who remain indifferent; and finally we will kill those who are timid." (International Herald Tribune, Paris 5/26/77)

¹⁹ Moreno Ocampo (1996:174), who was public prosecutor in the trial to the military juntas, links this denial of the illegal repression to people's trust that there cannot be punishment without a crime.

²⁰ For documents issued by the dictatorship see

<http://www.redesweb.com/memoriadebida/index.htm>.

²¹ As dictator Videla stated in 1977: "a terrorist is not just someone with a gun or a bomb, but also someone who spreads ideas that are contrary to Western and Christian civilization" (*Nunca Más*, 1986:333).

²² The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo have consistently vindicated the political activism of their daughters and sons. According to Hebe Bonafini, its president, "No other organization or political party makes the vindication [as political activists] that we do of our daughters and sons." (Interview with author 5/6/91 in Kaiser, 1993).

²³ Landi and Bombal (1995:164) argue that the trials of the military junta impeded the political recuperation of the actions of the *desaparecidos*, who are seen only as victims.

²⁴ "Irma," "V́ctor," "Elvira," and "Andrés."

²⁵ Martinez de Hoz and Cavallo were Ministers of Economy of the dictatorship and Menem's first term respectively. Cavallo also was a *funcionario ṕblico* during the dictatorship and Minister of Economy in De la Rúa's government.

²⁶ However, I do believe that it would be highly beneficial for society if every Argentinean asked herself what she did during those years, and why. At a personal level, assuming responsibility for the torture and disappearance of 30,000 people is not a blame that I am willing to accept. I know where I was, what I did, what I did not do, what I could or should have done, and what reasons I had to act the way I did. I cannot accept being put at the same level of a Videla or a Massera.

²⁷ Declaration of General Mart́n Balza, 4/25/95,

<http://www.redesweb.com/memoriadebida/index.htm>)

²⁸ Many authors have analyzed this issue. Wilhelm Reich (1970) explored civil society's complicity with Nazism. Goldhagen (1996) analyzed ordinary soldiers' and citizens' support of the Holocaust. Verbitsky (1995) traced an overview of sectors whose support was crucial for the dictatorship, specifically in reference to a supplement published by the newspaper *La Opini3n* in March 1977, "El Silencio de los Poĺticos," which presented opinions from the main politicians from different parties that reveal the political class' complacency with the coup, including their worries for the bad image that the dictatorship might have had internationally. Pawlosky (1999) commented on the many Argentineans who, even without supporting the military junta, functioned as a "large acritical social mattress" whose indifference allowed the atrocities and countered the horror with the image of a happy country

²⁹ Calveiro's book, *Poder y Desaparici3n* (1998), is a compelling account of life during terror from inside the concentration camps, of everyday life, of solidarity and resistance, of torturers that are at the same time monsters and ordinary guys, of society seen from inside the inferno.

³⁰ Angelelli, from the province of La Rioja was one of the four out of eighty bishops who publicly denounced the military (Matarollo, 1986). The other three were de Nevares, Novack, and Husayne. Angelelli was murdered in a fake car accident and, in another very suspicious accident, died Bishop Ponce de Le3n from San Nicol3s de los Arroyos, (*Nunca M3s*, 1984:357-60)

³¹ Emilio Mignone, whose daughter remains disappeared, has written the most detailed account of this collaboration in *Witness to the Truth: The Complicity of the Church and Dictatorship in Argentina*, (1988.) Information on repression targeted to religious sector and the hierarchy's collaboration can also be found in Duhalde (1983); *Nunca M3s* (1984); Paoletti (1984)

³² Duhalde (1983) and Mignone (1988) provide good information on the bishops' calls for reconciliation.

³³ Dabenido et al.(1998) researched attitudes toward the coup and the repression.

³⁴ For an analysis of the diverse social forces that supported the dictatorship and their reasons for it, see (Garcia, 1995:329-332).

³⁵ Alberto Heguy, top polo player and *estanciero*, declared in an interview in *El Gráfico* (largest circulation sports magazine) that he was proud of and grateful to his hero Videla, a pagan Christ. (*Noticias*, April 30, 1999, pp.86-88. Actress turned politician Elena Cruz claimed that 30,000 *desaparecidos* was an invented figure to give an Oscar to an Argentine film (*La Historia Oficial* in 1986). (Silvina Frieria "Elenita, amiga del Che, defensora de Videla," *Página 12* on line 4/9/00. In declarations to the magazine *Gente*, dictator Massera claimed that society was a chameleon, that people were now silent and horrified but at the time encouraged the destruction of the enemy. Without identifying who these people were Massera said he was told: "*Almirante, vaya y mátelos a todos. Persígalos hasta sus guaridas y mátelos.*" (Ciancaglini and Granowsky (1995:354). Aberg Cobo tells of witnessing how a man approached in the street his good friend Astiz and thanked him for everything he had done for the country, and how the visible touched naval officer drop a tear when they continued walking (Goñi, 1996:208).

³⁶ Aldo Rico, the leader of the 1987 uprising and participant of the 1988 rebellion against the first civilian government, was eventually elected mayor of San Miguel (a town in the province of Buenos Aires) and was named Minister of Security by Duhalde (Peronist Party) who was elected governor of the province of Buenos Aires in the 1999 elections.

³⁷ For example, Bussi, who terrorized the province of Tucumán during the dictatorship, was eventually elected as "democratic" governor of the same province.