

*Recovering the Children: Trauma and Memory in the
Aftermath of the Argentine Dirty War*

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Introduction

Children often are the innocent victims of humankind's brutality. Between the years 1976 and 1983, the nation of Argentina lived under a military dictatorship that utilized state-sanctioned torture, kidnapping, and terror in order to rid the nation of what its armed forces termed "subversives" and "traitors to the Argentine way of life." The armed forces carried out a ruthless battle they called the "Dirty War" because, in their opinion, they needed to cleanse their nation of the so-called enemies of the state: socialists, atheists, and those who dared to say disparaging things against military rule. One group that was a target of the military was the children of the so-called subversives. When the government stormed into the dwellings of people whom it had targeted for kidnapping or murder, their plans often also included some type of action against the children of their supposed enemies as well. The range of what would happen to these children, or *niños* in Spanish, included abduction, torture, and even execution. Although democratic rule returned to Argentina after 1983, making this particular military dictatorship fairly short-lived, the trauma caused by it still affects Argentine society.

What exactly does it mean to be a disappeared child (*niño desaparecido*)? According to the Grandmothers of the Plaza (*Abuelas de la Plaza*), a group of women who search for the missing children, "to be a disappeared child is, in the first place, to not know who you are."¹ According to the grandmothers, there are approximately 260 disappeared children, of which 64 have been found.² The Grandmothers of the Plaza was a splinter group whose initial members came from another women's organization called the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (*Madres de*

¹ *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, Niños desaparecidos, jóvenes localizados en la Argentina desde 1976 a 1999* (Buenos Aires: Temas Grupo Editorial, 1999) 15.

² Arditti 17. There is no agreed upon number of all the disappeared. In its research, CONADEP estimated that there were almost 9,000 disappeared victims during the Dirty War. In addition to this, some groups count pre-1976 victims of the military as well, thus increasing the number. Since the mid-1980s, though, further research has shown that that number is much higher, possibly 12,000-30,000.

la Plaza de Mayo). Every Thursday since 30 April 1977, the mothers have marched through the Plaza de Mayo starting at 3:30 in the afternoon demanding to know what happened to their missing loved ones.³ As the state had outlawed all public gatherings, the women walked slowly for thirty minutes around the plaza wearing white handkerchiefs on their heads and often carried pictures of their missing children. Unlike the Grandmothers of the Plaza, who seek out their grandchildren, the mothers search for answers about their missing adult-age children, who also were victims of the military. The Grandmothers of the Plaza grew out of the mothers' organization in late 1977 as the grandmothers wanted to solely focus on their grandchildren (*nietos*) as this group had the greatest possibility of still being alive.⁴ Because of this move, some of the mothers criticized the grandmothers for supposedly giving up on their children when only focusing on their grandchildren. One of the grandmothers said “. . . because we were looking for our grandchildren [some thought that] we were abandoning our children. But that was not the case, we never forgot our children.”⁵ Although they never forgot their children, the grandmothers decided that they should focus on those who still could be found: the children. Since there already was a group, the mothers, that was dedicating itself to looking for to disappeared adults, the grandmothers believed that people needed also to look for the children who, unlike adults, may not know that the military kidnapped them or that the person they call father and mother are no biological relation to them.

This thesis is about trauma and remembrance in relation to the missing children. For the purposes of this essay, “to remember” is to recall something from the past such as an event or a person. Thus, memory is the ability of an individual or group of individuals to remember and

³ Rita Arditti, *Searching for Life: The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Disappeared Children of Argentina* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 2. The Plaza de Mayo (May Plaza) is the central plaza in Buenos Aires and is flanked by governmental buildings.

⁴ Arditti 35.

⁵ Arditti 55.

memories are collected remembrances. Since the 1980s, historians have increasingly studied how societies or subsections of societies remember certain events and a new field, historical memory, has come into being. Historical memory grew out of the theory of collective memory which is that an individual recollects certain events through the influence of his society and what it has jointly decided to remember. French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945) was the first scholar to assert that a person's society or collective influences how she recalls the past. In *On Collective Memory*, Halbwachs wrote that ". . . there exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory; it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection."⁶ In more recent times, historians have pondered why groups only remember certain events and not others. For example, why did Southerners in the United States incorporate the memory of the Civil War into their cultural life through the creation of monuments, battlefield preservation, and public display of Confederate flags?⁷ These scholars also assert that traumatic events such as wars, acts of terrorism, genocide, and plagues are never forgotten by societies or other groupings of people. These shared memories are passed on to the next generation—in a sense, groups construct history. Historian David Thelen, who studies the American Civil War, wrote:

The historical study of memory would be the study of how families, larger gatherings of people, and formal organizations selected and interpreted identifying memories to serve changing needs. I would explore how people together searched for common memories to meet present needs, how they first recognized such a memory and then agreed, disagreed, or negotiated over its meaning, and finally how they preserved and absorbed that meaning into their ongoing concerns.⁸

⁶ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. by Lewis. A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 38-39.

⁷ Extensive work on has been done on the Civil War and historical memory. An excellent introduction to this topic is David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁸ David Thelen, "Memory and American Memory." *The Journal of American History* 75 (March 1989): 1123.

For scholars who study historical memory, the operative phrase is not “he said” but, instead, “he recalled”; humans do not always remember everything and what they do recall is not usually fully accurate.⁹

Specifically, this essay compares how two groups dealt with their traumatic memories of disappeared children in post-dictatorship Argentina. Paul Lerner and Mark S. Micale, historians of trauma and history, asserted that Westerners are currently obsessed with discovering “the appropriate ways to record, remember, and memorialize . . .” brutal events such as the Holocaust.¹⁰ One method of remembering is through literature. For example, the post-dictatorship Argentine government sponsored the publication of a truth report entitled *Nunca Más: Report of the Argentine Commission on the Disappeared*. This report was created by the Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared (CONADEP), an advisory committee formed in 1983 which was composed of both citizens and government officials. CONADEP’s mission was to investigate the disappearances that occurred between 1976 and 1983.¹¹ In *Nunca Más*, which focuses on all of the disappeared and not just the missing children, the main method of keeping alive the memory of the victims was through confronting readers with the stories of

⁹ For readers wishing to gain an introduction to historical memory, the best place to start are two issues dedicated to historical memory: *Journal of American History* 75 (March 1989), especially the article by Pierre Nora and *Representation* 26 (Spring 1989), especially the articles by David Blight and David Thelen. Other pieces include Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7-24. Peter Fritzsche, “The Case of Modern Memory,” *Journal of Modern History* 73 (March 2001): 87-117, Noa Gedi and Yigal Elam, “Collective Memory – What is It?” *History and Memory* 8 (1996): 30-50. Barbie Zelizer, “Reading Against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communications* 12 (June 1995): 234-235, and Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, “Social Memory Studies: From ‘Collective Memory’ to the Historical Mnemonic Practices,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 105-140.

¹⁰ Paul Lerner and Mark S. Micale, “Trauma, Psychiatry, and History: A Conceptual and Historiographical Introduction,” *Traumatic Pasts: History, Psychiatry, and Trauma in the Modern Age, 1870-1930*, ed. Mark S. Micale and Paul Lerner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 3-4.

¹¹ The Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared, *Nunca Más: The Report of the Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared*, trans. Writers and Scholars International Ltd (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1986). The citation for the original Spanish version is: Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, *Nunca más: informe de la Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1984). All references to *Nunca Más* in this essay refer to the 1986 English language translation of the work. Also, there is today an online version of *Nunca Más* available at www.nuncamas.org.

torture and abduction. *Nunca Más* thus used testimonials about various disappeared persons to burn these images into the minds of Argentine readers. The other set of literature that focused on the children was written by the Grandmothers of the Plaza. Through their publications, the grandmothers defied the commission's "official" method of and created their form which implied that searching for the children was the only way to fully dealing with the trauma of their disappearance. The grandmothers' books do not give many stories or testimonials about the missing children. Instead, they present biographies of the disappeared children and explain the process of finding and restituting them to their families.

Both the writings of CONADEP and the grandmothers are examples of collective memory. *Nunca Más* and the works of the grandmothers show ways in which two groups dealt with the traumatic events of the Dirty War. The historian Pierre Nora, a theorist of collective memory, said that painful events that affect more than a single individual cause people to form long-lasting group memories of them. Nora used the example of the Jews. For him, the centuries of suffering that the Jews endured led them to form a shared sense of history and memory.¹² For example, Jews who were victims of the Nazis have been active in keeping the memories of what happened alive through books, movies, stories, and other media with the hope that knowledge of such a horrific past will inhibit people from committing such acts again.¹³ Like European Jews of the 1930s and 1940s, so-called subversive Argentines suffered at the hands of a brutal government that used torture and execution on a daily basis. Additionally, like Holocaust survivors, many Argentines felt that the events of 1976-1983 must never be forgotten because they are an integral part of their history. The grandmothers said that what happened to the children must never happen again, in Argentina or anywhere else in the world. Both *Nunca*

¹² Nora 8.

¹³ A work that studies Jewish Collective Memory is Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. 2nd ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press. 1996).

Más and the works of the grandmothers came about because Argentines, whether on a government-appointed committee or a women's group, declared that what happened to the children and other disappeared persons must not be forgotten; those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it.

Scholarship on the late twentieth century and the Argentine Dirty War has traditionally focused on the politics of the military regime.¹⁴ Scholars such as David Rock and Paul Lewis have researched and theorized about issues such as how the political situation in Argentina in the 1960s and 1970s led to the military takeover, what tactics the armed forces used to gain credibility for their government, and how they secured support for their policies from the Argentine people.¹⁵ Paul Lewis, a Latin Americanist and professor of political science at Tulane University, asserted that the military of the late 1970s truly believed the old Argentine adage that the armed forces are the true guardians of the constitution. It was this belief, in his opinion, that allowed the army, navy, and air force to defend their takeover of the government, to the populace, on 24 March 1976 when they took the presidential palace from then President Isabel Perón. In place of a democratically-elected government, they installed a junta composed of generals from the navy, army, and air force respectively.¹⁶ Another theme closely related to that of "protectors of the constitution" is that of "saviors of the nation." Paul Lewis described this concept as the armed forces' assertion that Argentina was riddled with socialists and guerillas who wanted to destroy the state and Western civilization.¹⁷ The soldiers, as the strongest

¹⁴ These works include: David Rock, Authoritarian Argentina (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Peter G. Snow and Luigi Manzetti, Political Froces in Argentina (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1993). Deborah L. Norden, Military Rebellion in Argentina (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996). Robert A. Potash, The Army & Politics in Argentina, 3 vols. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1969), and David Pion-Berlin, The Ideology of State Terror (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1989).

¹⁵ Paul Lewis, Guerillas and Generals: The "Dirty" War in Argentina (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2002) 97-131.

¹⁶ Lewis 132-134.

¹⁷ Lewis 133-134.

organized group in the country, were the only ones, according to their justifications, who could save Argentina from becoming a place of anarchy.¹⁸

This idea that the military saw itself as the true guardians of all that is good in Argentina is also present in *The Disappeared* by John Simpson and Jana Bennett. These scholars argued that the military put forth this position every time it has stepped into power during the twentieth century. Usually, though, the armed forces' actions are based more on their fear that the increasing power of labor groups and leftist political organizations, such as the Peronist Party, would lead to the country turning left politically. Nevertheless, the notion on the part of the military that it was the only group capable of protecting Argentina from its internal and external enemies is prevalent in the secondary literature as the reason why the armed forces instigated a coup.¹⁹

Another theory based on the experiences of the Dirty War is that of ritual sacrifice and the surrogate victim. According to Frank Graziano, in the eyes of the military, the late 1970s and early 1980s were a period in which the people of Argentina needed to sacrifice their rights and much of their freedom. The reason for this was that it gave the armed forces a free hand to cleanse the nation of those who threatened it internally. Graziano took his theory a step further and claims that the military used torture as a means to change their natural disadvantage, namely overcoming the distrust of the Argentine people due to their dissolving the elected government, into an advantage by creating enemies of the state for the citizenry to fear.²⁰ Also, in relation to the children who "were disappeared," Graziano put forth a unique hypothesis. He asserted that

¹⁸ A more thorough discussion about the events leading up to the military take over of 1976, the ideology of repression, and the motivations of the military is contained in chapter 1.

¹⁹ John Simpson and Jana Bennett, *The Disappeared: Voices from a Secret War* (London: Robson Books, 1985) 43-53.

²⁰ Frank Graziano, *Divine Violence: Spectacle, Psychosexuality, & Radical Christianity in the Argentine Dirty War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992) 191-194.

the children whom the military took hostage, especially infants, were actually spoils of war. He wrote, “The justifying rationale for separating a child from its natural family resorted to the messianic sense of responsibility, which in this application provided that the newborn children of ‘subversives’ would be more appropriately reared in the values of ‘Western and Christian Civilization’ if they were adopted by a childless couple affiliated with the repressors.”²¹ So, these children, according to this supposition, would receive a proper upbringing in the households of armed forces personnel.

Scholars argue whether the armed forces believed such rhetoric. David Rock, for example, is in the camp of historians that argues that the soldiers and officers of the Dirty War actually were followers of what Lewis termed the ideology of repression. An example of this is when Rock said, “In the 1980s, many of Argentina’s generals remained convinced that during the ‘dirty war’ they had saved society from subversion,” which is essentially the same position taken by Paul Lewis.²² He, like Rock, asserted that the armed forces, for the most part, believed their own rhetoric and felt that they truly were the saviors of Western civilization in Argentina.²³ Although this opinion appears to be the prevailing one among historians and political scientists who study this period, there still is some doubt. For example, David Pion-Berlin, a political scientist, argued that although the armed forces valued their conservative ideas and put these at the forefront of all governmental policy decisions, they were actually more interested in merely gaining power rather than fulfilling some lofty goal of saving the country from communists and

²¹ Graziano 37.

²² Rock 232.

²³ Lewis 137-143.

terrorists; the persecution of leftists and the eradication of guerilla fighters just helped them attain their goal of gaining control over every aspect of Argentine society.²⁴

What is missing from the scholarship done on the Dirty War, which mostly focuses on the politics of the period and adult victims of the military's repression, is an in depth look at the smallest group of sufferers: the children.²⁵ The story truly begins with a spark that sent not only the grandmothers, but the Mothers of the Plaza as well, into a writing fury. What upset these women was that the first major work that focused on the disappearances, the Argentine truth report entitled *Nunca Más*, paid little attention to the ultimate fate of the disappeared, including the children. It all began in the aftermath of the military dictatorship in 1983 when the newly-elected President, Raúl Alfonsín, created the Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared (CONADEP) with the purpose of investigating the disappearances that occurred during 1976-1983.²⁶ After the commission collected the data, the Ministry of Justice would use the evidence to prosecute the "Dirty Warriors:" the military officers and soldiers who ruthlessly tortured, harassed, and executed innocent Argentines. Although the commission itself was only a 16-person panel with advisory power, it had over 100 employees who worked literally day and

²⁴ David Pion-Berlin. "The Fall of Military Rule in Argentina: 1976-1983" *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 27.2 (Summer 1985): 55-76.

²⁵ Works that focus on the victims of the Dirty War and center on so-called adult subversives and their families include: Marjorie Agosin, *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo: The Story of Renée Epelbaum* trans. Janice Malloy (Trenton, New Jersey: The Red Sea Press, Inc., 1990). Eric Stener Carlson, *I Remember Julia: Voices of the Disappeared* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996). Noemí Ciollaro, *Pájaros sin luz: Testimonios de mujeres de desaparecidos* (Buenos Aires: Planeta: Espejo de la Argentina, 2000). Andrew Graham-Yooll, *A State of Fear: Memories of Argentina's Nightmare* (Trowbridge, Wiltshire: Eland & Hippocrene Books, Inc., 1986). Matilde Mellibovsky, *Circle of Love Over Death: Testimonies of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* trans. Maria & Matthew Proser (Willimantic, Connecticut: Curbstone Press, 1997). Alicia Partnoy, *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival* trans. Alicia Partnoy with Lois Athey and Sandra Braunstein (San Francisco, California: Cleis Press Inc., 1998). Ludmila da Silva Catela, *No habrá flores en la tumba del pasado: La experiencia de reconstrucción del mundo de los familiares de desaparecidos* (La Plata: Ediciones Al Margen, 2001). Jacobo Timerman, *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number* trans. Toby Talbot (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981). An Argentine movie that tells a fictional story about a disappeared child is *La historia oficial*, dir. Luis Puenzo, perf. Norma Aleandro, Hector Alterio, Analia Castro, and Chunchuna Villafane, Videocassette, Image Entertainment, 1986.

²⁶ No one has written extensively about CONADEP or its history. The most detailed account of its operations and work is within the truth report that the commission published in 1984, *Nunca Más*. Other than that, there are only short pieces about it in various monographs on the Dirty War and in periodicals.

night, seven days a week for nine months interviewing victims and witnesses, traveling to the actual torture sites, sifting through documents, and entering data into IBM computer systems. When CONADEP finished its work in 1984, it published *Nunca Más (Never Again)*, a 500-page book that described the forms of repression, the stories of some of the victims, the lack of a democratic judicial system during the dictatorship, and presented recommendations for dealing with the military criminals. The book was an instant bestseller and had sold over 200,000 copies after only a couple weeks on the market. Even though *Nunca Más* was a great success, in the minds of the mothers and grandmothers, it only barely scratched the surface on the disappearances

Nunca Más's approach was to describe the nature of the repression and the disappearances and give examples of victims' plights. After a brief discussion on how wrong the actions of the military were, what follows is a selection of stories of several disappeared children. Focusing on its description of the children, nowhere in the book does it suggest that those who the military kidnapped or whose whereabouts are unknown could possibly still be alive; the same is true for missing adults. This "failing" of *Nunca Más* outraged the Mothers of the Plaza (Madres de la Plaza de Mayo). In the December 1984 issue of their periodical, *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, they lambasted CONADEP, its chief executive Ernesto Sabato, and the work produced by the commission, *Nunca Más*. This occurred in an article entitled, "CONADEP: Los Desaparecidos no se archivan" in which the mothers voiced criticism after criticism.²⁷ To begin with, although the mothers wanted a government inquiry into the disappearances, they thought that President Alfonsín should have created a commission whose members were senators and

²⁷ Madres de la Plaza, "CONADEP: Los Desaparecidos no se archivan." Madres de Plaza de Mayo (December 1984).

congressmen with the ability to compel witnesses to testify and punish those found guilty.²⁸ Instead of making a parliamentary panel with substantial power, though, the president made an independent committee which had only an advisory role and could merely request that people testify in front of it as it did not have the power to subpoena or to “compel testimony.”²⁹ In reaction to this, the mothers asked the question, “For what [purpose] does CONADEP serve?”³⁰ The Mothers even, refused to participate in the activities of the commission and accused its *jefe* (chief), the famous Argentine author Ernesto Sábato, of having dined with General Videla, one of the military leaders who led the coup, in 1976.³¹ The article, or manifesto, also raised the issue that the government might be pro-military or at least going “soft” on the torturers.

When rhetorically asking why CONADEP was not more assertive than it was in demanding that the “Dirty Warriors” defend their murderous acts, the mothers also stated that perhaps the answer lies in the possibility that CONADEP, and hence the Alfonsín government, was complicit with the military.³² This article also implies that the commission did not publish the names of disappeared victims or suspected Dirty War criminals to appease the armed forces and military leaders.³³ In fact, the article says that by not properly punishing the military and not arguing that the disappeared might still be alive and investigations into their whereabouts must commence, the commission was becoming an accomplice to the atrocities of 1976-1983; in a

²⁸ Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1994) 134 and Madres de la Plaza, “CONADEP: Los Desaparecidos no se archivan” 7.

²⁹ Bourvard 135. CONADEP’s lack of success in compelling Dirty War criminals to discuss their activities would set the tone for all future attempts to get the military to speak as well. Apart for their testimonies in court proceedings, which were always vague and lacking in detail, “Dirty Warriors” have never come forth and told their stories. One of the few exceptions is a man named Francisco Silingo, a junior naval officer who participated in the execution of so-called subversives by flying them over the Atlantic Ocean, after drugging them, and pushing them out of the airplane into the ocean. His story can be found in: Horacio Verbitsky, *The Flight: Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior* (New York: The New Press, 1996).

³⁰ Madres de la Plaza, “CONADEP: Los Desaparecidos no se archivan” 7. Unless other wise noted, all translations from Spanish language sources were made by the author.

³¹ Bourvard 135.

³² Madres de la Plaza, “CONADEP: Los Desaparecidos no se archivan” 7.

³³ Madres de la Plaza, “CONADEP: Los Desaparecidos no se archivan” 6-7.

sense, CONADEP disappeared the victims for a second time by denying them the chance to be found.³⁴ In addition to accusations of letting the military go punishment free, not acknowledging that the disappeared may still be alive, and of not being assertive enough in their interviews, the mothers argue that the information in *Nunca Más* was previously known and not groundbreaking. For what purpose, they ask again, was the publication of this book? With close to 9,000 files on different disappearances, why was only a 500-page work produced?³⁵ The mothers ultimately rejected the form of remembrance offered by CONADEP which mainly was an explanation of the repression and a presentation of some of the cases of disappearances; this would not be enough for them.

Like the mothers, the Grandmothers of the Plaza did not remember their loved ones merely by presenting stories of them; they have endeavored to find them so they can regain their true identity. Although they did not publish a manifesto against CONADEP, they too criticized the Alfonsín government for claiming that it would find answers to the disappearances and punish the guilty, but instead did neither of these tasks fully.³⁶ The grandmothers, both during and after the military regime, are actively looking for the disappeared children. After the dictatorship fell, they began to write and publish works on the disappeared, specifically missing children.³⁷ Yet, their approach was different than that of CONADEP. The grandmothers, beginning in the mid-1980s, printed books such as *Niños desaparecidos, Jóvenes localizados*

³⁴ Madres de la Plaza, "CONADEP: Los Desaparecidos no se archivan" 7.

³⁵ Madres de la Plaza, "CONADEP: Los Desaparecidos no se archivan" 8.

³⁶ Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo. Niños desaparecidos, jóvenes localizados (Argentina: Temas Grupo Editorial, 1999) 17-18.

³⁷ These works include: Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo. Restitución de niños (Buenos Aires: Eudeba S.E.M. 1997). Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, Niños desaparecidos, Jóvenes localizados (Argentina: Temas Grupo Editorial, 1999). Grandgrandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Missing Children Who Disappeared in Argentina between 1976 and 1983 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo. Niños desaparecidos y niños desaparecidos nacidos en cautiverio (Capital Federal, República Argentina: Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, 1990), Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo. Los niños desaparecidos y la justicia (Buenos Aires: Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, 1988), and Jorge Luis Berra, Banco nacional de datos genéticos: la identificación de los niños desaparecidos en la Argentina (Buenos Aires: Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, 1988).

(*Disappeared Children, Located Youths*) which contains the names, photographs, and short biographical sketches of all children who the government disappeared. These, along with works like *Restitución de niños (Restitution of Children)*, which describes how the grandmothers have tirelessly searched for disappeared children and endeavored to return them to their biological families, are representative of their work. Their books argue that the children deserve to know their true identities and who their real parents were. For the grandmothers, the military stole the identities of the children and forced new, false ones on them. Only through restitution can the Dirty War end for these children, as they are still, albeit unknowingly, suffering.³⁸ The works of the grandmothers do not tell the stories of missing children and then leave the reader wondering if there are adolescents that the military kidnapped survived. For the grandmothers, they are still battling the criminals of the Dirty War as they still have not been reunited with their grandchildren; they will not rest until they have found the last child and reunited her with her family.

The trauma of the Dirty War led to the creation of *Nunca Más* and the works of the grandmothers. Having been devastated by a government that disappeared family members, friends, and neighbors, Argentines in 1983 found themselves in a state of confusion. The military government had collapsed, thousands of people, including infants and children, were missing, and the economy was in shambles. Sociologists Noa Gedi and Yigal Elam argued that incredible pain leads groups to band together in order to share their agony. Also, more than anything else, sharing the memories of tragedy, loss, or oppression unite communities. Gadi and Elam use the examples of the Jews as this group, the memory of the holocaust must survive so future generations know how their forefathers suffered.³⁹ Similarly, Peter Fritzsche stated that

³⁸ Abuelas de Plaza, *Restitución de niños* 25.

³⁹ Noa Gedi and Yigal Elam 42.

“. . . an event is traumatic not because it is horrible . . . but because it cannot be assimilated by the individual's view of the world. Trauma is therefore . . . an affront to understanding.⁴⁰ The sharing of trauma binds groups together as confronting these memories and hearing those of others is often a type of therapy. In the wake of years of military oppression, Argentines wished to confront the memories of the past so they could move forward, confident that the horrors of the late 1970s and early 1980s would never be repeated again in their country. Both *Nunca Más* and the literature of the Grandmothers of the Plaza were ways for these two organizations to share and confront their memories, and present to their readers the notion that the disappeared children must not be forgotten.

⁴⁰ Fritzsche 112.

Chapter 1: Authoritarianism and Militarism

Deeply planted in the past of Argentina are the seeds of authoritarianism and militarism. A country whose remarkable economy in the early 1900s was the envy of the world also was a country where democratically-elected administrations were anomalies. There were six military interventions into the civilian government between 1930 and 1976.⁴¹ As elsewhere in Latin America, history pushed Argentina toward a strong military culture which, in the twentieth century, eventually led to the 1976-1983 dictatorship. Argentina's history includes, for the vast majority of its existence, a strong governing system whether the power rests in the hands of one person or a group of persons. In the early imperial period, Spanish authorities dictated much of the policy in the region and powerful elite viceroys and other authority figures ruled over the Argentine populace. After independence, this system further evolved with caudillismo, rule by "strong men," and later military dictators. In a broader context, the 1976 military coup, was not unusual in a twentieth century with a history of not only military rule, but by all powerful men going back to the colonial government of the 1500s through early 1800s. What is the extreme, though, is the use of state terror by the 1976 government. Certainly, though, by the late twentieth century, Argentina was a country where the military strong men had immense power because of the development of authoritarian rule beginning since the creation of the first colonial government by the Spanish.⁴²

A phenomenon that developed in nineteenth-century Argentina which contributed to the twentieth-century phenomenon of powerful military rulers was caudillismo. A caudillo, or strong man, typically was a landowner who had his own private army and peasants who were

⁴¹ CONADEP xi.

⁴² Guillermo A. O'Donnell. Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism (Berkeley: University of California, 1979) 117. For an excellent discussion on the historical background of authoritarianism, O'Donnell's book is the first place to turn, especially the chapter entitled, "Argentina: A Bureaucratic-Authoritarian System."

beholden to him. During the War for Independence, these men grew powerful through their participation in leading troops. After the hostilities had ended, they transformed the close personal networks they established in wartime into political networks.⁴³ The most infamous of the Argentine caudillos was Juan Manuel de Rosas who became president with dictatorial powers in 1835 and his period of rule, called by Argentines the First Tyranny, lasted until 1852. Rosas's administration, a reaction against the liberalism of the nineteenth century, instituted the execution of political enemies, censorship of the press, and the creation of a secret police that carried out assassinations. This type of authoritarianism would be commonplace during the twentieth century and many of the terroristic actions carried out by later military governments had their basis in the caudillo system.⁴⁴

After 1900, Argentina evolved into a unified country with a powerful economy, one of the most sophisticated bureaucracies in the Americas, and a strong middle class. It seemed that Argentina was on the road to gaining economic strength equal to that of the developed nations of the Western world as it went further in the direction of industrialization and modernization. Also, in the mid-twentieth century, political leaders enacted social programs and initiatives that they hoped would help the poor, break down class barriers, and provide better governmental services to the people. Beginning in 1930, however, Conservatives became dismayed at such radical changes that their country was experiencing under populism, an ideology where politicians reach out to the poor and working classes and use government programs to improve their lives.⁴⁵ Conservatives and military leaders equated any outreach to the lower classes as a

⁴³ James R. Scobe, Argentina: A City and a Nation (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) 91.

⁴⁴ Peter G. Snow and Luigi Manzetti, Political Forces in Argentina (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1993) 63.

⁴⁵ Colonel Juan Perón, President of Argentina (1946-1955) and (1973-1974) is perhaps the most well-known Latin American example of a populist leader. An excellent biography of Perón is Joseph A. Page, Perón: A Biography (New York, Random House, 1983).

sign that communism had infiltrated their country and felt that they had to strike back. In what would become a common phenomenon in twentieth-century Argentina, a military coup led by General José Félix Uriburu seized power on 6 September 1930; General Agustín P. Justo succeeded him in 1932. Nationalist sentiment was on the rise and leaders of this military-led political movement looked toward fascist Italy for inspiration.

The 1940s would see more militarism and, within this movement, the rise of Colonel Juan Domingo Perón. In 1943, the armed forces seized control of the government once again and generals Pedro Pablo Ramírez and Edelmiro J. Farrell, in succession, headed the new military administration. In February 1946, the people elected Perón as president.⁴⁶ Perón ruled Argentina with the support of his wife Eva Duarte Perón who was always at her husband's side until her death in 1952. The economy fared well during the early part of his presidency and he and his wife had huge popular support.⁴⁷ Juan Perón focused his attention on the workers of his country and spoke time and time again about the injustices in Argentina and how the poor were the ones the government needed to help. For him, "All forces can be used in our movement . . . It is our breadth that will enable us to triumph."⁴⁸ His wife, on the other hand, spent her time campaigning for the rights of women and the modernization of Argentine society.

During the mid-1950s, Perón's political enemies had gained sufficient power to challenge the Peronista Party and its government. By 1955, the mystique of Peronism had evaporated partly because Eva Perón had passed away and the spirit of the movement had stopped almost dead in its tracks. In 1955, the military once again stepped into politics, ousted Perón, and took over the government. One of its first official steps was to announce that they would never again

⁴⁶ Peter G. Snow and Luigi Manzetti 91.

⁴⁷ David Rock, Authoritarian Argentina: The Nationalist Movement, Its History and Its Impact (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 157-158.

⁴⁸ Rock 158.

allow so-called dangerous leftists, such as the Perónists, into power. In order to prevent this, the military government adopted National Security Doctrine. This doctrine called for a war against both exposed and hidden “subversives” who were part of a world conspiracy of communists against the West. In addition, the military asserted the “right” to take control of the civilian government whenever it had been infiltrated by enemies of the state.⁴⁹ During the late 1970s the armed forces looked back to National Security Doctrine as the basis of their government’s legitimacy and as a way to justify the oppression against so-called enemies of the state.

In the 1950s, the United States began to assist in the training of military personnel throughout South America and a multitude of Argentine officers received formal instruction at the Inter-American Defense College at Fort McNair in Washington, D.C. This program received praise from North American officials such as Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense for Lyndon Johnson, and Nelson Rockefeller, who said that the armed forces were “the essential force of constructive social change [in Latin America].”⁵⁰ In addition to American support for the military, French officers who had been in Vietnam and Algeria during the colonial wars of the mid-twentieth century devoted resources and time to the training of the Argentine army. The chief of police for the Buenos Aires province (1976 – 1979), stated that he admired the French use of brute force and militarism to wipe out subversion. For the most part, the generals in Argentina combined what they learned from both the Americans and French to create their own deadly brand of repression.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Rock 195.

⁵⁰ Rock 11.

⁵¹ Rock 11.

One historian referred to the interim between the fall of Perón in 1955 to yet another military coup in 1966 as the “the stalemate.”⁵² After the fall of Perón, a military government was in place which had the self-appointed mission of “restoring constitutional order.”⁵³ Hence, the new regime was going to “erase” the changes that Colonel Perón’s government had brought to the nation such as strong labor unions and increased workers’ rights. This period was one of high tensions between the poor and the elites. The working class had gained more rights in the late 1940s and 1950s and had a strong voice in the political arena through their support of the Peronist Party.⁵⁴ On the other hand, the upper class and military feared the lower classes having too much power. In 1959, Fidel Castro seized power in Cuba and by 1960 he was aligning his country with the communist world. Argentina thus entered the Cold War and the military began to fear left-leaning and socialist elements in their country. Although members of the various socialist parties in Argentina reveled in the rise of communism in Latin America, the conservatives, especially in the military, did not.⁵⁵ The military feared that communist subversion could also “infect” their country and began to make plans to counter what they saw as the encroachment of communism.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, two civilian governments, ineffectively reformed the Argentine economy and social conditions for the people. Arturo Frondizi, democratically elected president in February 1958, promised economic development and better times for all Argentines. Perhaps his greatest impact on the political scene was the easing of restrictions on the Peronist Party, which did not please the armed forces as they equated Peronism with

⁵² Luis Alberto Romero. A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press. 2002). 134.

⁵³ Romero 131.

⁵⁴ Romero 134.

⁵⁵ Romero 134.

communism.⁵⁶ His government was succeeded by that of Arturo Illía, president from 1963-1966, who had little support from corporations, the labor unions, or the military. Although the Argentine parliament did have significant power during Illía's administration, it accomplished little to improve the economic and social ills of the country as no one was willing to compromise.⁵⁷ At this time, the military worried about what would happen to the country with ineffective leaders whom they saw as leftists and who, they believed, were sheltering communists in high government posts. The armed forces gained increasingly powerful in the 1960s and unified under one general, Juan Carlos Onganía, who believed that it was the military's responsibility to intervene when communist insurgency threatened Argentina. Viewing the easing of restrictions on Peronism and placement of left-leaning men into government posts as the work of communist traitors, he felt that socialism was gaining strength in Argentina. In 1964 when the Brazilian military took over their government, deposing the left-leaning President João Goulart, it was clear for both Onganía and the military at large that the battle against communism had started in South America.⁵⁸

On 28 June 1966, General Juan Carlos Onganía overthrew the civilian government and then turned publicly away from conservatism and in order to gain popular support for his regime presented himself to the citizens as a man who could offer "Peronismo without Perón" and equality to the working class.⁵⁹ Instead of actually helping the workers of Argentina, though, Onganía instead wanted to gain their trust so he could manipulate and subdue them. He endeavored to create a military dictatorship that operated on the principles of autocracy: power flowed from the top down. It ordered all political parties to end activities immediately, began to

⁵⁶ Romero 139.

⁵⁷ Romero 148-149.

⁵⁸ Romero 151-152.

⁵⁹ Rita Arditti, Searching for Life: The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Disappeared Children of Argentina (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 9.

reorganize the faculties and administrations of the national universities, used military troops to quell labor protests, and announced that the Onganía regime would stay in power indefinitely. The army and other branches of the military began to teach soldiers that the most dangerous enemies of Argentina did not exist beyond the country's borders, but within them. The communists supposedly wanted to destroy the Argentine way of life. By May 1969, Argentines had had enough of the regime and large-scale protest occurred in Córdoba (*El Cordobazo*) among university students and automotive workers. Although the demonstration did not cause the fall of the dictatorship, it was a precursor of larger events in the near future.⁶⁰

The next year saw even more turmoil in Argentina and the unexpected return of an old political demagogue. In 1970, the administration of Onganía began to collapse and General Roberto M. Livingston came to power. His regime, though, lasted only nine months before yet another general, Alejandro Lanusse, took over the government. General Lanusse promised democratic elections to the Argentine people, granted more freedoms to trade unions, and endeavored to silence the voices of right-wing extremists in the armed forces. The general stunned the nation when he lifted the twenty-year ban against Peronismo. Waiting on the sidelines, in Spanish exile, Juan Perón, with his third wife, Isabel, boarded a plane and headed home. Although long exiled, Perón was still popular and through democratic elections, he once again became president; his wife became vice-president.⁶¹ The stress and combination of health problems were too overwhelming for him and in 1974 he died of natural causes.⁶² The upper echelon of military officers had not reacted well to the return of Perón and they remembered all of the problems they had with his populist brand of government back in the 1940s and 1950s. Nor did they have any respect for the new president, Isabel Perón. The economy was in dire

⁶⁰ Arditti 9.

⁶¹ Lewis 88.

⁶² Lewis 95-96.

straits and the armed forces could not stand having a Peronist in power; the time was nearing for another intervention.

On Tuesday, 23 March 1976, the president received a warning that the military was preparing to overthrow her. She and loyalist friends fled the *Casa Rosada* (Rose House), the official presidential palace. A little after 3:00 a.m., on 24 March 1976, a junta composed of General Jorge Videla of the army, Admiral Emilio Massera of the navy, and Brigadier Orlando Agosti of the air force announced to the nation that they had dissolved the government and Videla was soon to become the president; the national congress was closed.⁶³ The junta froze all bank accounts, placed soldiers with automatic weapons on virtually every city street corner of Buenos Aires, and forbade all public demonstrations and strikes.⁶⁴ Even more ominously, the military declared that it would rid Argentina of all communists, subversives, and traitors to the state. Speaking about the military coup, General Luciano Benjamín Menéndez made the statement, “We are going to have to kill 50,000 people: 25,000 subversives, 20,000 sympathizers, and we will make 5,000 mistakes.”⁶⁵ The armed forces put an iron grip on Argentine society and closely followed National Security Doctrine, never rebuked since its inclusion in Argentine legal code, which allowed them, in their eyes, to cleanse their nation of those who were its enemies through brutal tactics including murder and kidnapping.

No single branch of the military ever gained supremacy in the dictatorship. All three developed a complicated system of shared responsibilities over the administration of the country and the fight against the so-called subversives. The planning and supervision of the operations of terror occurred in the top echelons of the military leadership.⁶⁶ If the command to target a

⁶³ Lewis 127.

⁶⁴ Lewis 127-128.

⁶⁵ Lewis 147.

⁶⁶ Romero 216.

certain group or individual was decided on high, those on the bottom executed the orders.

Preliminary acts of repression included following and recording people's movements, keeping lengthy files with photographs and information on their families, and basic acts of harassment such as threatening telephone calls late in the night.⁶⁷ These were just the beginnings of a terror which, if the armed forces deemed a person a threat to the Argentine state, only intensified.

Physical repression in 1976-1983 Argentina included kidnapping, torture, imprisonment, and murder. Kidnapping almost always occurred through a group known as *la patota* (the gang), who did their "work" at night and carried out the abductions usually by breaking into the victim's home. The kidnapers did not limit their operations to residences, however. They would just as often take people from their workplaces or even off the street. For those kidnappings, the military had a unique modus operandi. They had a specialized group of soldiers who drove green Ford Falcons and, when the soldiers parked, carrying weapons they would disembark, shouting loudly. This served the dual purpose of extracting the people whom they wanted and also frightening other citizens in the vicinity. Torture was widespread, in both military facilities and prisons. Guards tormented victims with electric generators, cattle prods, whips, razors, and water submersion. The ultimate objective of such a system was to destroy a person's resistance and to eradicate, in the words of historian Luis Romero, "their dignity and personality."⁶⁸ Often, the conclusion of the torture in an Argentine military institution was execution. Sometimes, though, officials in either the armed forces or what was left of the judicial system would decide to release abductees either for lack of evidence or because the military had "sufficiently" punished them. This system of oppression operated during the entire dictatorship but had its most brutal years between 1976 and 1980.

⁶⁷ Romero 216.

⁶⁸ Arditti 217.

Beginning in 1980, the power of the armed forces began to crumble along with popular support for the government. In March 1981, General Roberto Marcelo Viola replaced General Videla as president.⁶⁹ The economy was faltering and the new administration tried to reinvigorate the Argentine private sector. In addition to this, Viola began to talk to leaders within the regime about an eventual, albeit distant, transition to democratic rule. Due to ill health, Viola retired and was replaced by General Leopoldo Fortunato Galtieri who took over the office of president. Soon after his assumption of power, Galtieri and his administration devised a plan for the invasion of the *Malvinas* (Falkland Islands), over which Argentina had claimed ownership since the British first occupied them in 1833.⁷⁰ On 2 April 1982, the military invaded and successfully occupied the islands with little resistance from local inhabitants.⁷¹ What the Argentine military did not predict, however, was the strong British response. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher rallied support in Parliament and the government sent troops to the islands on 14 June 1982; greatly outnumbered, the Argentines surrendered. In the end, there were 700 Argentine soldiers dead or missing in action along with 1,300 wounded.⁷² The defeat at the Falkland Islands meant the end of the military regime— even though the armed forces still tried to negotiate the transition to an elected government.⁷³ Between 1982 and 1983, a series of strikes and demonstrations rocked the streets of Buenos Aires and finally, after democratic elections, President Raúl Alfonsín took the oath of office on 10 December 1983, as an eager crowd cheered him on in the *Plaza de Mayo* (Plaza of May).⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Arditti 240.

⁷⁰ Arditti 242.

⁷¹ Arditti 242-243.

⁷² Arditti 247.

⁷³ Arditti 249.

⁷⁴ Arditti 255.

The dictatorship of 1976-1983 and the use of state-sponsored terror against so-called enemies of the state had its roots in Argentine history. Unlike some other countries in Latin America such as Chile or Costa Rica, democracy was not a tradition but, instead, authoritarianism was. As such, the military had the long standing belief, instilled in them long before the formal creation of National Security Doctrine, that they were the protectors of the Argentine people. When popularly elected governments “failed” the people, it was the armed forces’ duty, in their minds at least, to step in and take power in order to correct the situation. This phenomenon was not uniquely Argentine though as almost every country in South America, not to mention Latin America as a whole, was under some variation of a military government in the 1960s and 1970s. After democracy returned to Argentina and the citizens once again had freedom of speech and the right to criticize the government, people began to demand to know what had happened to the disappeared and cried for justice; they wanted to punish the military criminals.

Chapter 2: *Nunca Más*: The Official Remembrance

Argentines eagerly consumed *Nunca Más*. The publication of the work in 1984 was the first in a series of similar reports that truth commissions established by the newly-elected democratic governments of South America in the 1980s and 1990s would write.⁷⁵ During this time, the military dictatorships of Latin America were collapsing and citizens desperately wanted to know what had happened to people whom the armed forces kidnapped. Although *Nunca Más* does not focus specifically on the children but on all of the military's victims, it was the first time a work confronted the memory of the disappeared children. The result of painstaking work by researchers and staff members of the Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared (CONADEP), the Argentine truth report was also the first post-dictatorship work that presented the horrors of the Dirty War.⁷⁶ In it, a government commission presented to the citizenry what happened to those the military victimized through kidnapping, torture, and execution as a way of ingraining into the minds of the readers the horrors of the time. In the "General Introduction" to the book it says:

The enormity of what took place in Argentina, involving the transgression of the most fundamental human rights, is sure, still, to produce that disbelief which some used at the time to defend themselves from pain and horror. In doing so, they also avoided the responsibility born of knowledge and awareness, because the question necessarily follows: how can we prevent it again? And the frightening realization that both the victims and their tormentors were our contemporaries, that the tragedy took place on our soil . . .⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Other South American truth reports include: Proyecto Nunca Más, Colombia, nunca más: crímenes de lesa humanidad (Colombia: Proyecto Nunca Más, 2000), Myriam Pinto, Nunca Más, Chile, 1973-1984 (Santiago de Chile: Terranova Editores, 1986), Servicio Paz y Justicia, Uruguay nunca más: informe sobre la violación a los derechos humanos (1972-1985) (Montevideo: Servicio Paz y Justicia, 1989), Paulo Evaristo Arns, Brasil, nunca más (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1985). This creation of truth commissions and reports was not only a Latin American phenomenon. For example, after the end of Apartheid in South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Committee was created by the Mandela government to investigate the use of torture and oppression by the Afrikaner government. An excellent work on this is Martin Meredith, Coming to Terms: South Africa's Search for Truth (New York: PublicAffairs, 1999).

⁷⁶ The official name of CONADEP in Spanish is: la Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas.

⁷⁷ CONADEP 9.

CONADEP hoped that *Nunca Más* would make it clear to Argentines that they must confront the tragedies and the events of the late 1970s and early 1980s so citizen would never let them happen again. The popularity of *Nunca Más* shows that Argentines were eager to learn about the disappeared from an official source and not from hearsay and gossip. Thus, through the truth report, Argentines confronted the terror created by the armed forces.

Nunca Más is a work that strives for national remembrance and reconciliation. The creation of truth commissions was a sign on the part of the civilian governments that the oppression committed by the military was inhuman and a full understanding of the atrocities was necessary. Truth reports emphasize “truth finding and truth selling” and have the goals of “repairing human dignity, healing individuals, and mending societies after the trauma of mass atrocity”⁷⁸ Thus, more than a body that has the purpose of prosecuting criminals and torturers, truth commissions have the mission of “mending” society and helping citizens come to terms with the disappearances and executions carried out by the authoritarian government. The commissions accomplished this through confronting the public with testimonials that describe what happened. Supported by national governments, truth commissions present to the populace an official story of the past regime’s repression. The focus is not on punishing the military criminals who broke into private homes at night and abducted husbands, fathers, children, and even entire families, but on facing this past and coming to terms with it so the nation can begin to overcome its grief.

Works such as *Nunca Más* center on the victims and not the victimizers so there is public acknowledgement of the oppressed.⁷⁹ In part, giving the disappeared and their family an official venue to discuss their pain allows victims to feel that their countrymen are concerned about what

⁷⁸ Martha Minow, “The Hope for Healing: What can Truth Commissions Do?,” *Truth v. Justice: The Morality of Truth Commissions*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg and Dennis Thompson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 236.

⁷⁹ Minow 238.

had happened; their stories do not fall on deaf ears.⁸⁰ A larger issue than individual healing is that of the entire society. As the governments of dozens of countries created truth commissions in the mid-1980s, the question arose as to what value these served. Was displaying the trauma of victims through works like *Nunca Más* helpful in collective healing? Those who served on truth commissions pointed to recent works in psychotherapy that said sharing the stories of violence is therapeutic for the victims and that hearing these narratives is beneficial for the society at large.⁸¹ In a way, truth reports are the catalyst for national reconciliation and a continuing conversation on the past. Some scholars such as Tina Rosenberg, who studies how Eastern Europeans psychologically dealt with their communist past, noted the similarities between how truth commissions and individuals, who had post-traumatic stress disorders, overcame their problems: through a wholesale confrontation with the painful events. In both cases, the sufferer tells her story to a person or group of persons who listen intently and “validate” them with a type of “official acknowledgement.”⁸² Both are forms of therapy, except one on an individual level and one on a group level. Rosenberg wrote, “If the whole nation is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, this process [a confrontation with the trauma] would be appropriate for the whole nation.”⁸³ This is what the Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared attempted to accomplish.

Individuals testifying before truth commissions free themselves from the shackles of past pain and indignity. Knowing the full extent of the brutality of the military regimes allows people to move toward the stage of healing, which cannot happen without full knowledge of what happened. Richard Mollica, a therapist who studies trauma among refugees who have fled

⁸⁰ Minow 239.

⁸¹ Minow 240-241.

⁸² Minow 241.

⁸³ Minow 241.

oppressive governments, argued that by describing the cruelty they endured, victims regain the dignity they lost at the hands of the torturers: society is once again treating them as human beings by listening to their pain.⁸⁴ Also, to progress with life and to stop dwelling on the pain, a person must first face it. Chilean therapists counseling victims of the Pinochet regime stated, “By confronting the past, traumatized individuals can learn to discriminate between past, present, and future.”⁸⁵ Hence, the oppressed can continue with their lives and have hope for a better future. In addition to this, by informing their fellow citizens about what the government did to them, victims gain a sense of purpose and feel they have finally defeated their tormentors.⁸⁶

On a national level, hearing stories of individual victims leads to collective healing. For example, the presence of an official record created by a commission composed of respected community leaders ends myths and unfounded information about the past.⁸⁷ Such a body debunks the excuses given by the former dictators for disappearances and exposes the untruthfulness of their propaganda. Also, by having commissions which focus on the stories of the victims and not vengeance on those who caused the terror, the chances of bloody uprisings against the military are reduced thus helping to maintain civil order.⁸⁸ On a national level the writers of truth reports have a series of goals. These include presenting the truth and erasing the lies of the past, utilizing national recognition of the victims’ pain to unify the country, and restoring the dignity of citizens who for years or even decades lived under brutal repression.⁸⁹ Thus, truth commissions expose a nation’s populace to what happened in an effort to begin a collective reconciliation with the past. *Nunca Más* was the first Latin American truth report to

⁸⁴ Minow 243.

⁸⁵ Minow 243-244.

⁸⁶ Minow 244.

⁸⁷ Minow 250.

⁸⁸ Minow 252-253.

⁸⁹ Minow 253.

be published and was done by the first truth commission, CONADEP. In an effort to collectively remember what happened as a way to moving toward a better future, the commission and its work were projects of historical memory as is clear through the history of the organization itself.

Nunca Más was the project of President Raúl Alfonsín and stemmed from his desire to lead a national healing of the wounds of the Dirty War. Alfonsín, the first democratically-elected president after the dictatorship, had inherited a government that had to confront a devastated economy and a population suffering psychologically from years of military rule and the recent defeat in the Falkland Islands campaign. In addition to this, questions concerning the future of soldiers and officers who had participated in the tragedy of the late 1970s and early 1980s still lingered. Alfonsín targeted the leaders of the three juntas that had ruled Argentina during the dictatorship as the central perpetrators of the crimes of the Dirty War but worked carefully not to alienate the military which was volatile and in a state of disarray. On 13 December 1983, Alfonsín created CONADEP and gave it the mission of investigating the cases of the desaparecidos through interviewing witnesses and victims, searching through government archives, and visiting the torture centers. The government could then use this information in prosecuting the military criminals.⁹⁰ The person Alfonsín put in charge of the organization, Ernesto Sabato, was one of Argentina's foremost authors of the twentieth century.⁹¹ Under his leadership, the journey into the fate of the disappeared had begun.

After its creation, CONADEP set out to make a record of the disappearances. On 6 March 1984, the Chamber of Deputies of the Argentine Congress delegated three of its members, Santiago Marcelino López, Hugo Diógenes Piucill, and Horacio Hugo Huarte, all of whom were members of the leftist Radical Party, to join the commission which was composed of both

⁹⁰ CONADEP 381.

⁹¹ CONADEP 382.

civilians such as Sábato and government officials. Next, five departments were formed to accomplish the different tasks of CONADEP: Depositions, Documentation and Data Processing, the Procedures Department, the Legal Affairs Department, and the Administrative Department. Also, various international organizations such as the United Nations and the Organization of American States assisted the commission in their early investigations by providing technical support and manpower.⁹² When operations were in full force there were 16 members of the commission proper, but CONADEP also employed approximately 120 people who worked seven days week for eight to ten hours per day.⁹³ In its early operations, though, the organization had only two offices with temporary government employees who had no experience in investigating atrocities.⁹⁴ Despite this, it was an organization that the nation eagerly watched.

One of the main tasks of CONADEP was to interview and depose witnesses and victims of atrocities committed during the Dirty War. The largest of the departments, Depositions, interviewed people at first from 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. Later, though, the department changed its operations and deposed people from Monday to Thursday so Friday could be left to process all the information gathered during the week. Every deposition had an assigned number that corresponded to a file that had all information on the particular disappearance including statements from witnesses and any data gained from the government archives.⁹⁵ Workers for the commission also traveled to fifteen of the twenty-three Argentine provinces where over 1,400 depositions were taken. In addition to this, CONADEP asked Argentine diplomatic representatives who were stationed abroad to take depositions from those

⁹² CONADEP 429.

⁹³ Matilde Herrera, "Como trabajo la CONADEP," El periodista de Buenos Aires (22 September, 1984): 8.

⁹⁴ CONADEP 430.

⁹⁵ CONADEP 431.

who fled the country during the dictatorship.⁹⁶ In general, CONADEP searched through the torture camps' registers, visited morgues, talked to people who knew the missing, questioned soldiers and Security Forces members, checked prison and police rosters, and researched what happened to the property of the disappeared.⁹⁷ Every department had its role in the operations of CONADEP and other government institutions were involved as well. For example, during its investigations, the commission issued 1,300 information requests to various ministries and departments, the largest number of them, 280, going to the Ministry of Defense.⁹⁸

CONADEP carried out interviews and investigations for nine months. By the end of its operations, the commission had recorded 8,960 names of desaparecidos which included 172 babies, 160 teenagers between the ages of 13 and 18, and 52 people between the ages of 55 and 77. In addition to working with files and documents, the commission also traveled to the actual torture sites.⁹⁹ On 9 March 1984, a team from CONADEP inspected the Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA), a military installation in Buenos Aires where the armed forces tortured many victims. Despite all of their great work, though, the commission failed to get statements from the torturers as these men refused to give depositions. As the commission was only an advisory body it did not have the power to force people to interview with them. So, although CONADEP requested interviews with 44 of the most well-known officers, none of these military personnel ever replied.¹⁰⁰

The end "product" of the commission's work was a 500-page report which the commission presented to President Alfonsín on 20 September 1984. In November of that year, the University of Buenos Aires Press (EUDEBA) published the report, entitled *Nunca Más: The*

⁹⁶ CONADEP 432.

⁹⁷ CONADEP 434.

⁹⁸ CONADEP 439.

⁹⁹ Guest 384.

¹⁰⁰ Guest 435.

Report of the Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared, for public consumption.¹⁰¹

Made in the last months of the commission's existence, *Nunca Más* barely scratched the surface of what happened during the Dirty War and is at times difficult to follow because of its haphazard organization. It has six sections, excluding the prologue and conclusions, which include: The Repression, The Victims, The Judiciary during the Repression, Creation and Organization of the National Commission, The Doctrine behind the Repression, and Recommendations. It is in the section dealing with victims that there are testimonials and summaries of interviews with victims, and relatives and witnesses to the atrocities. Some of these deal specifically with children and infants. Despite the fact that the book was quickly put together it became in instant success and after just a few weeks of being available to the public, over 200,000 copies had been sold in Argentina.¹⁰² The book encouraged Argentines to speak out against the former government and to have confidence that the Alfonsín government was committed to fighting the injustices of the past.

The section entitled "Victims" in *Nunca Más* is the central portion of the book. Here, there are stories of victimized children, families, disabled persons, ministers, prisoners, journalists, industrial and agricultural union members, and others who do not fit into a specific category. In this part of the work, CONADEP presented story after story of people whose homes were broken into, who disappeared during the night, and who gave birth in military installations. For CONADEP, the best way to make Argentines face the reality of the Dirty War was to, in a frank fashion, give examples of the atrocities that the military carried out. Here memory plays a crucial role as well as CONADEP did not want readers to forget about the disappeared after they finish the book. They will remember the stories about the screams from the prison cells or of the

¹⁰¹ Graziano 50. The title in Spanish is: *Nunca Más: informe de la Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas*.

¹⁰² Guest 386.

pain a mother described due to the loss of her child. Events that are the most traumatic are the most powerful in a person's mind and CONADEP presented a series of narratives that were truly horrific and unforgettable.

“Woe to those who abuse a child . . . Never, perhaps, has this maxim become such a horrific reality as in the cases related in this chapter,” the commission report explained in the section on children and pregnant women who disappeared.¹⁰³ Those who hurt the young are the worst type of criminals, in continued. chastising those who would “forcibly [remove a child] from its legitimate family to be put in another, according to some ideological precept of what’s ‘best for the child’s welfare,’ then this constitutes a perfidious usurpation of duty.”¹⁰⁴ The truth report related a horrific picture of what the military did to the children of so-called subversives and showed how even non-military doctors and nurses were involved in the physical repression of youths. There were a variety of “actions” taken by the armed forces against children.

One of the actions of the armed abductors was to leave them in the care of family members or neighbors. For example, on 4 February 1977, in the mid-morning, a group of men with weapons burst into the house of Adriana Calvo de Laborde, a physics professor. The soldiers promptly began to rummage through Laborde’s residence and then informed her that she had to go with them into custody. She had a son whom the armed forces simply left with neighbors.¹⁰⁵ In the city of Córdoba on 21 September 1976, at 4:00 a.m., David Coldman, his wife Eva, and his eighteen-year old daughter Marina woke up when men came into their home. The kidnappers left the eleven-year-old son of the Coldmans, Rubén, in the house.¹⁰⁶ In both of these cases, the military abducted the people whom it wanted and simply abandoned the children.

¹⁰³ Guest 286.

¹⁰⁴ Guest 286.

¹⁰⁵ CONADEP 290.

¹⁰⁶ CONADEP 327.

Often, children were just “onlookers” while the military dealt with the person they wanted. Lucio Ramón Pérez, a resident of Buenos Aires, told of the abduction of his brother on 9 November 1976, to the commission. The man was asleep with his family when around 2:00 in the morning a loud explosion occurred outside that woke everyone up. The man went to the front door and when he opened it he saw four men climbing over the fence that surrounded the house. Wearing civilian clothing and carrying rifles, they came into the apartment and told the wife and young son not to watch what was about to transpire.¹⁰⁷ In this instance, the government officers had absolutely no interest in anyone but Ramón Pérez and thus left his wife and son to their own devices while they brutally interrogated and later abducted him.

Similarly, Alicia B. Morales de Galamba and her children Paula, Natalia, and Mauricio, lived in Mendoza with a family friend named María Luisa Sánchez and her daughters Josefina and Soledad. On 12 June 1976, at eleven at night, men broke into the house and began to go through the family’s possessions. Galamba recalled, “The terror was palpable and we could not breathe. It was terror that grew alongside the shouts of the children, which became more and more frenzied. María Luisa and I took them in our arms in an attempt to calm them down.”¹⁰⁸ The intruders took the whole group into custody and transported them to the Mendoza Police Headquarters where officials took away Mauricio, aged two months, for many hours before returning him to his mother. At one point, Josefina and Paula could no longer stand being in the small room that the officers put them in and began banging on the door. In response to this, the guards took Josefina away for a brief time but eventually returned the girl to her mother.

¹⁰⁷ CONADEP 12.

¹⁰⁸ CONADEP 307.

Eventually, the government allowed all four children to leave the facility and gave them to their grandparents.¹⁰⁹

In addition to the possibility that the government would leave the children of their adult victims in the care of neighbors or others, there also was the chance that they would kidnap them along with the parents and put them up for adoption or give them to military families.¹¹⁰ This most often happened to women who gave birth when in custody, an event that allowed military officers to pick the child that they wanted. Sara Solarz de Osatinsky and Ana María Martí, who were in the Naval Mechanics' School, a military installation converted into a prison, during the dictatorship, remembered seeing pregnant women on the floor waiting to give birth.¹¹¹ Similarly, Drs. Jorge Magnacco, a gynecologist, and Martínez, a dermatologist, were two of the doctors who cared for these women in the School with the assistance of nurses and even prisoners.¹¹² One anonymous witness or group of witnesses heard during their own captivity in the School that "there was a list of married couples in the Navy who could not have children of their own, and who were prepared to adopt one of the children of people who had disappeared. The man who drew up the list was a gynecologist attached to the Navy Mechanics School."¹¹³ One group of victims remembered women named María del Carmen Moyano and Ana de Castro both of whom gave birth to their children in captivity at the naval facility in April of 1977.¹¹⁴ Carmen Moyano was in extreme pain during her labor and gave birth to a girl. Castro went through a similar ordeal and had a boy. A few days after the birth of these women's children, naval personnel took them away in one direction and their children in another. The ultimate fate of

¹⁰⁹ CONADEP 307-308.

¹¹⁰ CONADEP 14.

¹¹¹ CONADEP 288.

¹¹² The first name of Dr. Martínez is not given in Nunca Más.

¹¹³ CONADEP 289.

¹¹⁴ Abuelas de la Plaza. Niños desaparecidos, jóvenes localizados 110.

these women and their children still is not known, and whether or not the babies found their way into the arms of a military officer is also not known.¹¹⁵

Apart from abduction and abandonment, there was the possibility that the military would execute a kidnapped child with her parents. For example, Elsa Norma Manfil reported to the commission that on 26 October 1976, at 6:00 in the morning, military soldiers opened fire on the house of her brother, Carlos Laudelino Manfil after pounding on the front door with no response from the inhabitants. Neighbors who witnessed the events stated that the men then went inside the home, began shooting, and murdered Laudelino Manfil, his wife Angélica, and his eight-year old son. A daughter named Karina suffered non-mortal wounds; twin infants, Silvia Graciela and Ariel, both of whom were six months old, survived and went to live with another family member.¹¹⁶ Here, the government was not specifically rooting out a person with the intent of taking him or her away into the night but instead had the mission of just eradicating everyone in the house. In El Vesubio, a secret detention center run by the state, Jorge Antonio Capellano, his wife Irma Beatriz Márquez, and her son Pablito Márquez were prisoners and according to the memories of some other residents of the camp Antonio Capellano disappeared first when guards took him to a reformatory which left his wife and the young boy. Beatriz Márquez later received notification that the government was transferring her elsewhere and her son then went through a series of torture sessions.¹¹⁷

Not all pregnant women taken into government custody gave birth. Isabel Gamba de Negrotti, who was twenty-seven years old and a nursery school teacher, was pregnant in 1976. The military came and abducted her and took her to one of their complexes. She remembered:

¹¹⁵ CONADEP 289.

¹¹⁶ CONADEP 309.

¹¹⁷ CONADEP 309.

They took me to another room where they kicked me and punched me in the head. Then they undressed me and beat me on the legs, buttocks and shoulders with something made of rubber . . . They started to give me electric shocks on my breasts . . . They gave me electric shocks in the vagina . . . They kept throwing water over my body and applying electric shocks all over.¹¹⁸

After this torture, Negrotti had a miscarriage. A similar story comes from Ana María Careaga who was sixteen years old and two months pregnant when the government abducted her off of the streets of Buenos Aires. The officials did not initially notice that María Careaga was pregnant but once they did they tailored their regimen of pain to this. She recalled, “They used the electric prod for many hours. They inserted it and threw kerosene and gas in my vagina, in my eyes, in my ears.” The government later released this young woman and she escaped to Europe and was able to give birth to her child with no complications.¹¹⁹ Although this particular case did not involve the death of the fetus, it certainly could have and the military certainly did not have any qualms about damaging or killing babies in any stage of their development.

With its testimony, *Nunca Más* made a political statement about and passed moral judgment upon military abuse of children. Not only was the evidence of the truth commission meant to document the disappearances, but it also was to be used in the prosecution of the torturers by the Ministry of Justice. Thus, the stories in the work, in addition to committing them to the Argentine collective memory, are meant to show how evil the actions of the military were. For example, one paragraph says, “Deprived of their identity and taken away from their parents, the disappeared children constitute, and will continue to constitute, a deep blemish on our society.”¹²⁰ Here there are two issues that come forth: the idea of stolen identity and that of a scarred nation. For the most part, most Argentines did not know the disappeared children personally nor were children in the country affected by military abuse. Yet, there is some

¹¹⁸ Arditti 22.

¹¹⁹ Arditti 23.

¹²⁰ CONADEP 286.

connection, in this work at least, between what happened to a few hundred individuals and all the citizens of Argentina.

CONADEP argued that the children were not able to defend themselves. In *Nunca Más* the commission wrote, “In their case [that of the military], the blows were aimed at the defenceless [sic], the vulnerable, and a new type of torment was conceived.”¹²¹ Here, the book puts forth the idea that the military acted horrifically against a group who did not have the ability to strike back or fight for itself and such forceful words impress the idea that there is something that the readers need to remember and about which they need to be upset. Similarly, the report later states, “This most painful situation was rapidly challenged by the extraordinarily indefatigable and discreet work begun by the Grandmothers of the Plaza . . .”¹²²

The notion of lost identity is a central theme in the chapter that deals with disappeared children. The truth reports says, “Deprived of their identity and taken away from their parents, the disappeared children constitute, and will continue to constitute, a deep blemish on our society.”¹²³ The word “deprive” is powerful in the sense that it implies that the children’s identity, the very essence of who they are and how others perceive them, physically disappeared because of the actions of the military. One definition of identity is, “Identities [personal or collective] are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past.”¹²⁴ Here, identity is not something that is unique to a person or even a society but is instead the way both of these entities relate to the greater historical narrative of which they are a part. When the armed forces removed a child from his or her family and put him or her with another, this constituted this identity deprivation or theft.

¹²¹ CONADEP 286.

¹²² CONADEP 286.

¹²³ CONADEP 286.

¹²⁴ Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins. “Social Memory Studies: From ‘Collective Memory’ to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1988): 122.

Throughout the testimonies in *Nunca Más*, there is present the implication that Argentines should remember that it is unnatural for children to grow up without a sense of who they are. In the section on children and pregnant women who disappeared, there is an account about the Poblete family. The husband, José Liborio Poblete, a Chilean, met his future wife, Getrudis Marta Hlaczik, in a rehabilitation clinic in the Belgrano district of Buenos Aires. They married and had a daughter named Claudia Victoria who was the age of eight on 28 November 1978 when the armed forces seized José in the plaza. At almost the exact same moment, provincial police entered the family's home and kidnapped Gertrudis and her daughter and put them into a patrol car. The government allowed a telephone call between Gertrudis and her mother during which Marta Hlaczik asked her mother if Claudia Victoria was in her possession. The line soon went dead though and no formal record exists on the whereabouts of any of the three family members. In relation to this story, the commission stated, "The desperate, frantic search by grandparents of children who have disappeared sums up the pain and anxiety that is experienced when people are faced with the fact that somewhere, alongside unknown people, a child is growing up without any connection with his or her family, people, or in some extreme cases, country."¹²⁵ Here, CONADEP hinted that some missing children still may be alive. Yet, this is the only occasion where the commission does so.

Another example of lost identity in the stories comes in one of the testimonials of a medical doctor who worked in the obstetrics department of Iriarte Hospital in Quilmes. On the topic of one baby he delivered, the physician said, "I asked for the Births Register. It had the information on this particular case, but I noticed that the name of the mother had been crudely rubbed out. In its place had been written the initials N.N (identity unknown) . . ."¹²⁶ This case is

¹²⁵ CONADEP 287-288.

¹²⁶ CONADEP 293.

not as clear-cut as the previous ones because no one is directly stating that the fact that this child, who was obviously born to someone, had no recorded name or biographical information is inherently upsetting. Another doctor recalled inquiring about two children he saw in a military hospital because they were alone and crying for their mother. The response given by the other medical personnel gave him was that all of the records showing which children had been delivered to the facility at night and this was the only identification the children had.¹²⁷ The lack of a name, a place of origin, or anything else that would separate these particular children from others also is an example of lost identity; the children were no more than numbers as in a prison. Similarly, a midwife who worked in the Campo de Mayo Hospital and assisted in the birth of a baby to a blindfolded woman in the medical center's delivery room remembered some strange occurrences during the procedure. Military officers almost immediately took the baby after its birth and that was the last time anyone recalled seeing this young person. In addition to this, beyond the fact that the birth occurred, no one involved remembered even the sex of the baby.¹²⁸ A similar description comes from a grandmother who told the story of when her pregnant daughter was taken away by the government and, after they executed her, they even shot her stomach "to ensure that I [the grandmother] could never prove the birth of my grandson."¹²⁹ The grandmother noted that this made it impossible to ever know the sex of her unborn grandchild; it had no identity.

Other than lost identity, there are other questions in *Nunca Más* on the psychological impact on the missing children. For example, how would the children would be able to live with the memory of torture and oppression? In a subsection of the book entitled "The effects on children" the CONADEP wrote, "Many pregnant women were kidnapped, and in captivity they

¹²⁷ CONADEP 298.

¹²⁸ CONADEP 299.

¹²⁹ CONADEP 301.

endured all kinds of suffering. However, both the mothers and their children suffered the sequels of their descent into hell. These after-effects were difficult to overcome . . . and enormous efforts had to be made by the mother and child for them to adjust back to family life.”¹³⁰ Here, the commission asserted that there were psychological after-effects of all the tragedies of 1976 – 1983 and that these continue to affect the children even after the repression at the hands of the military ended. Following a brief introduction, there is a series of testimonies about mothers and children who underwent torture, and kidnapping

An example of a child who, according to *Nunca Más*, lived through the horrors of daily life after physical torment, was Marcelo Barbagallo. In April 1976 the state took him away from his parents after soldiers arrested his parents, his nineteen-year-old sister Elena Isabel, and his twenty-two-year old cousin Nora Chelpa in the family home. The abductors acted in a violent manner toward the young boy while they ransacked the house for approximately two hours, taking items such as radios, linens, televisions, and money. After they left, Marcelo went to live with his seventy-year-old grandmother and slept in the same room as her. The grandmother told the commission that her grandson would spend an immense amount of time looking out of the windows in search for his parents. They never came back, though, and one day in October 1982 the grandmother found Marcelo dead and the doctors who examined the boy claimed that he died of a heart attack, at the age of twelve.¹³¹

Yet another testimony about a child and her trauma is that of Mauricio, the son of Alicia B. Morales de Galamba. On 12 June 1976 Morales de Galamba and a friend, María Luisa Sánchez de Vargas were working in the kitchen when loud knocking commenced. Moments later, soldiers burst in and began to beat up the women and blindfolded them. All the commotion

¹³⁰ CONADEP 305.

¹³¹ CONADEP 307.

woke up the youngsters who began to sob loudly. The noise of the children was the back-drop to the rummaging and destruction that the soldiers caused throughout the house. They broke objects that got in their way, essentially anything of value in the house as they asked Morales de Galamba about the whereabouts of her husband.¹³² This testimonial, which Alicia Morales de Galamba gave to the commission, illustrates the type of violence that children viewed. These children did grow up with knowledge, however vague, of what they saw and, according to the commission, carried this with them for the rest of their lives.

The section on niños desaparecidos concludes with “final reflections” from the commission. It begins, “It is very difficult in the context of a struggle against subversion to find a valid reason for imprisoning and torturing people of the age we have referred to. The majority were taken as hostages.”¹³³ Did CONADEP search for reasons or did the commission in the publication of the book wish to leave readers with a sense that there might not be any answers? In this final section in the chapter on children and pregnant mothers of *Nunca Más*, the commission argues that there are no clear answers to how and why the military would treat the children in such a manner. Thus, they are playing on the idea of trauma as they assign the term to the situation of the children because what happened to them is not explainable.

Nunca Más is a work that was not only the first book that discussed the disappeared and how Argentina should remember this, but it also was a work of national healing and reconciliation. It is understandable that some people would ask why a nation that had experienced years of horrific repression and a regime that used torture and execution against dissenters would want to remember that past. The theory that those on the commission believed was that through confrontation with the trauma of the Dirty War, such as the disappearances of

¹³² CONADEP 307-308.

¹³³ CONADEP 332.

children and other victims and the theft of identity, the nation could begin to heal its wounds and move forward. Otherwise, Argentines would linger in the past and always wonder what happened to those the military kidnapped. The creation of CONADEP and *Nunca Más* shows that the Alfonsín government wanted to instigate this national healing and, at the same time, validate the victims and their families and help them recover from the trauma. The memory of the Dirty War had to be directly challenged so the pain could also be used to convince the population that it must never again allow a regime like the one of 1976-1983 to take power in their homeland. It is true that the creation of CONADEP was also a tactical move on the part of the Alfonsín government to appease voters demanding to know what had happened to the disappeared. Nevertheless, *Nunca Más* did initiate a national discussion, on the part of various groups at least, on the Dirty War and the victims of the armed forces. Yet, the commission's form of therapy and remembrance, confronting the stories of pain, would not be enough for some Argentines.

Chapter 3: Grandmothers of the Plaza: Remembrance Through Hope

The grandmothers have dedicated their lives to finding their grandchildren. The Grandmothers of the Plaza, who have been searching since 1977 for the missing children, deal with their trauma by believing that some of the niños are still alive. Unlike *Nunca Más*, which uses stories of the atrocities and those who suffered them to keep the memory of the Dirty War alive, these women instead act upon their memories of loss. But for these women there is something greater at stake. For them, “The disappeared children were deprived of their identity, of their religion, of the right to live with their family, in the end, of all of the recognized national and international rights.”¹³⁴ The right of a person to know her true identity and the chance that they can give it back to the disappeared children means that there still is hope in finding them. The women refuse to believe that their grandchildren are dead, thus they do not bury their memories of them and move on; they instead find solace in the belief that they can find their loved ones. Thus, the grandmothers do not publish books with testimonials about what happened to the children but instead their literature centers on restitution. The Grandmothers of the Plaza honor the memory of their grandchildren by not accepting that they are missing forever and confront their pain by not accepting it.

Why do the grandmothers search for the disappeared children? Beyond notions of biological attachment, the answer lies in the larger issue of how a group deals with the memory of the disappearances. During the dictatorship, the grandmothers openly demanded, from the military rulers, the return of the missing children. They continued fighting the regime until its demise yet they did not give up the battle once democracy returned to Argentina. They did, though, wait to see what CONADEP would discover through its research. When CONADEP and the University of Buenos Aires released results of the commission’s work through the

¹³⁴ Abuelas de la Plaza, Niños desaparecidos, jóvenes localizados 19.

publication of *Nunca Más* in 1984, the Mothers of the Plaza and the grandmothers were dumbfounded. They could not accept that the way to healing the wounds of the Dirty War was to read the stories of the disappearances, accept that those horrors should never be repeated, and move on with their lives. Memories of their grandchildren were not enough for the women; they wanted their loved ones back. To fully recover from the traumatic memories of the late 1970s and 1980s, the grandmothers they needed to know exactly what happened to the disappeared children and not just that the military had abducted them. Although the grandmothers themselves focus on the children and not their own psychological problems, they do not give up the search for the children because it is how they deal with their trauma. For these women, to give up on their grandchildren, to pronounce them dead, would be the worst path to take. For years, the grandmothers have dedicated their lives to finding the niños and to admit defeat would force them to have only sorrow left and no hope for reuniting with their grandchildren.

There are a multitude of media in which the grandmothers could express their opinions on the missing children, yet they primarily publish books. Pierre Nora wrote, “As memory’s ideal historical instruments, . . . [books] inscribe a neat border around a domain of memory.”¹³⁵ The publication of books allows the grandmothers to present a coherent message to readers: they want to find the missing children. The literature that the grandmothers have written and published are in no way memorials to the children as that would signify that all of the niños were dead. Nora wrote that “. . . there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills . . . that without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them [memories] away.”¹³⁶ The work of the grandmothers challenges this notion. Although they do have archives which contain the information they have collected,

¹³⁵ Nora 21.

¹³⁶ Nora 12.

they do not present eulogies or build monuments to the missing children. Unlike CONADEP which worked under the assumption that Argentines must confront the memories of the disappearances and then go on with their lives, the grandmothers could not continue living if they did not constantly recall the past by searching for the children. The history of the grandmothers illustrates how they have never blindly accepted what the military or the Alfonsín government told them. Thus, they have always countered the “official story.”

The Grandmothers of the Plaza (Abuelas de la Plaza) quickly became the most vocal opponent of the armed forces’ treatment of the children after its formation in 1977. Although the group did not have a single founder, María Isabel Chorobik de Mariani, also known as Chicha Mariani, was the first organizer of the grandmothers.¹³⁷ On 25 November 1976, the army attacked and destroyed the house of Chorobik de Mariani’s son. Her son survived yet his wife and three-month-old daughter were missing. Nine months later, she received an anonymous phone call that both her son and granddaughter were dead. Despite this, Chorobik began to search for her granddaughter and visited police stations, army barracks, and judicial centers. During her investigation, she found other women looking for missing grandchildren.¹³⁸ Most of these women were members of the Mothers of the Plaza, who marched in the Plaza de Mayo, demanding to find out what had happened to their missing children. It was during these marches that more and more grandmothers came together and began to think that they should form their own group which originally had twelve members.¹³⁹

The women continued to go to the Plaza de Mayo, and there even was some hostility on the part of two mothers who demanded that the grandmothers demonstrate in another plaza, such

¹³⁷ Arditti 51. It should be noted that Rita Arditti is the primary scholar who researches the grandmothers specifically and her work: Searching for Life: The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Disappeared Children of Argentina is the only work that focuses solely on the grandmothers.

¹³⁸ Arditti 52.

¹³⁹ Arditti 53.

as the Plaza del Congreso. This died down though and the grandmothers began to hold meetings in the cities of La Plata and Buenos Aires for the purpose of cataloging the names of missing children and collecting photographs and other information about them. Originally, there were 12 members and they met in public places such as bus stops, eateries, and cafes while, at the same time, trying to conduct their business discreetly. When they spoke on the telephone, they used code words in case the military was tapping the lines.¹⁴⁰ As the group began to grow, members decided to name it: the Argentine Grandmothers of Disappeared Small Grandchildren; it would not be until 1980 that the name was changed to the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo. They met every week at the Plaza de Mayo, although they did not march like the Mothers of the Plaza, and focused their attention on the juvenile courts as they felt this is the body through which kidnapped children were being adopted by military families. They gathered evidence that many missing children were alive and sometimes even received information from anonymous telephone informants about specific youths.¹⁴¹ While they were searching for their grandchildren, the grandmothers also suffered from threats from military authorities and the police. In 1977, when a policeman asked a woman if she was a member of the grandmothers, she replied, "Yes, I am part of the Grandmothers' organization. And so? I have every right to do whatever I choose with my life. I do not disturb or harass anyone, I am simply looking for my son. Do you understand what it means to look for a son?"¹⁴² The grandmothers knew that what they were doing, openly criticizing the government and demanding to know the whereabouts of the children, was putting them in danger. Yet, they defiantly continued their work.

How did the grandmothers search for the disappeared? During the dictatorship, they would receive information from telephone calls or people who handed them slips of paper when

¹⁴⁰ Arditti 55.

¹⁴¹ Arditti 57.

¹⁴² Arditti 60.

they were in the Plaza de Mayo every Thursday. Also, there was an answering machine set-up so people could leave messages with information about children who may have been abducted and were living at such and such address with a family. When they thought they had a lead, the grandmothers would investigate the area where a missing child was supposedly living. One grandmother, Emma Baamonde, said. "We worked like ants, we worked like spies. Nobody trained us. We learned everything by ourselves."¹⁴³ Information that the grandmothers received on the whereabouts of their loved ones often was vague and sketchy at best. Estela B. de Carlotto, onetime vice-president of the Grandmothers de la Plaza, once got an anonymous message from a person who claimed that she had been in a cell with her daughter Laura Estela. Later, Carlotto learned from a freed prisoner that her daughter was expecting a baby to be born in June 1978 and that officials would have it put in an orphanage. Carlotto prepared for the birth of the child and when the due date arrived, she looked frantically in all of the orphanages and other places she could think of where the child might be; with no luck. Then, on 25 August 1978, she received a notice from the district police stating that she and her husband needed to go to the Isidro Casanova Police Station. There, an officer told Carlotto that her daughter was dead as of that morning and that no family members could see the body of the deceased. Carlotto recalled, "When I asked about the child, the officer told me that he knew nothing whatsoever about the existence of a child. According to released prisoners, we know it was a son, who was born on 26 June 1978."¹⁴⁴

For these grandmothers who spoke out against the state both in the public squares and in the court room, fear and terror were a part of daily life. These women did not know if they would live to see the next day and if the military would one day decide to rid themselves of this

¹⁴³ Arditti 67.

¹⁴⁴ CONADEP 301-302.

particular torment. Antonia Acuña de Segarra, one of the grandmothers from Mar del Plata remembered, “We received many threats over the phone . . . On another occasion, they threatened several grandmothers . . . and I received a letter saying that I too would disappear at any moment. But after what had happened to us, after they took away the best that we had, our children, I had to disregard those threats.”¹⁴⁵ So, one of the characteristics of life for those searching for missing family members, in this case children, was that anything could happen at any moment. A government that had no fear of reprisal would not second-guess itself in dealing with some “old women.” Yet, as the Abuelas de la Plaza became a large and powerful organization, the military decided not to violently silence them as this could cause international outrage. So, they had to rely on late night threats and sporadic acts of aggression against this group which continues its search for the missing children today.

The Grandmothers of the Plaza is an organization whose members, collectively, use their memory of their missing grandchildren as a catalyst for an international search for the children. Their work though often is heart-wrenching. In 1984, after the dictatorship had collapsed, a judge, Dr. Delia Pons, defended a policeman who was the recipient of a child from so-called subversives. To the grandmothers the judge said, “I am convinced that your children were terrorists, and ‘terrorist’ is synonymous with ‘murderer.’ I do not intend to return children to murderers because it would not be fair . . . It does not make sense to disturb those children that are in the hands of decent families that will be able to educate them right . . .”¹⁴⁶ Examples such as this show that there are constant obstacles that the grandmothers must overcome to find the missing children. Yet, these women are vigilant in their work and never will give up. Their history and determination in the face of heckling from the military and governmental workers

¹⁴⁵ CONADEP 61.

¹⁴⁶ Arditti 57.

who do not care about the children are testimony that the fight to recover the children will not end.

The literature of the grandmothers illustrates that their memory of the children is a living one; the children are still out there. The works include books that provide biographies of the missing children, to those that describe the process of locating the disappeared and returning them to their biological families.¹⁴⁷ The vast majority of the books and pamphlets created or sponsored by the grandmothers are collections of information on the missing children and the ways in which the Madres have gone about searching for them. In contrast to *Nunca Más*, the official Argentine work on the victims of the military coup, the Grandmothers of the Plaza wrote their passion into their commentaries. Unlike the members of CONADEP, the grandmothers do not present themselves as representatives of the official record. Instead, they just want to find their loved ones.

An example of a book that draws upon all of the records, photographs, testimonials, and interviews from the period of the Dirty War is *Niños desaparecidos, jóvenes localizados en la Argentina desde 1976 a 1999 (Disappeared Children, Located Youths in Argentina from 1976 to 1999)*. This volume catalogs information on each of the missing children, dead or alive. The monograph's opening sections present the central beliefs of the grandmothers. For example, the opening lines of the book are, "The problem of the **disappeared children** for political reasons is of such gravity that it affects the universal conscience and it must be solved totally, and in such a

¹⁴⁷ These works include: Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, *Restitución de niños* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba S.E.M, 1997), Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, *Niños desaparecidos en la Argentina desde 1976* (Buenos Aires: Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo, 1987), Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, *Niños desaparecidos, jóvenes localizados* (Argentina: Temas Grupo Editorial, 1999), Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, *Missing Children Who Disappeared in Argentina between 1976 and 1983* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, *Niños desaparecidos y niños desaparecidos nacidos en cautiverio* (Capital Federal, República Argentina: Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo, 1990), Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, *Los niños desaparecidos y la justicia* (Buenos Aires: Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, 1988), and Jorge Luis Berra, *Banco nacional de datos genéticos: la identificación de los niños desaparecidos en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo, 1988).

way, that **never again** will it be repeated in our country nor in the world.”¹⁴⁸ Here, the grandmothers stress that the children’s plight affected all Argentines and that the search for the disappeared must continue. The introduction to the work gives a definition of a disappeared child along with information on the steps that the grandmothers have taken to search for them along with laws that the government has passed in recent years. When looking at the laws that the Grandmothers of la Plaza decided to reproduce in the manuscript, Article 8 of the Convention on the Rights of Children: National Law 23,849 stands out among the rest. Section one of this regulation declares that “the states [the political divisions of Argentina] are committed to respect the *Right of the Child* to preserve his or her *Identity*, including *nationality, name, and familial relations* . . .”¹⁴⁹ Once again, as in *Nunca Más*, the ideas of identity and nationality appear.

The organization of *Niños desaparecidos, jóvenes localizados* shows that the work covers all the disappeared children. The book’s chapters are: (1) Children Who Disappeared with their Parents, (2) Children Born During the Captivity of their Grandmothers in Clandestine Centers of Detention, (3) Located Children and Pairs Who Were Assassinated, and (4) Located Children and Youths Who Were Restituted. These chapters correlate almost exactly to the categories that the National Commission on the Disappeared created to describe the types of action taken against the youth by the government during military rule. Taking each section separately, what is striking is that each begins with a photograph relating to the movement of the grandmothers of the Plaza. The first chapter has an image of the Abuelas marching through the Plaza de Mayo carrying a banner that with the words “NIÑOS DESAPARECIDOS” and, underneath this, photographs of various missing children. Chapter two has a similar picture but the banner asks the question, “Where are the hundreds of babies born in Captivity?” Along the same lines, the

¹⁴⁸ Abuelas de la Plaza. *Niños desaparecidos, jóvenes localizados* 9. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁴⁹ Abuelas de la Plaza. *Niños desaparecidos, jóvenes localizados* 23.

third chapter, which deals with youths whom the grandmothers or governmental officials have discovered to be dead, has yet another image of the Abuelas marching but here many of the participants are clearly screaming, reflecting the pain of discovering that those they loved are dead. The final chapter, which deals with children who were still alive and able to find their real families, has an image of the grandmothers holding a banner with the words, “Restitution of the Disappeared Children to their Legitimate Families.” The inclusion of these images makes each section not merely a collection of mini-biographies but instead visually illustrates the emotion and pain of family members who went through the records, endless hours spent in the dark waiting rooms in the office of bureaucratic functionaries, and marched through the central plaza of Buenos Aires demanding to know what had happened to their children and grandchildren.

What kind of information do the grandmothers include in each biographical section on the children and what is sometimes missing? Take for example one of the first entries which is on a girl named María Mercedes Barrera. First, there is a large photograph of the child with a small note underneath explaining that she was born on 29 March, 1970, and that she disappeared on June 27, 1979. To the left of her photograph are two small grey boxes where, if the grandmothers had them, pictures of the parents, María Cristina Albornoz and Jorge D. Barrera, would appear. Below the images is a short description of what the authorities and the Abuelas de la Plaza do know about the young girl. It says, “The girl was kidnapped the 27th of June in 1979 in Concepción (Province of Tucumán) together with her mother, María Christina ALBORNOZ, and her cousin, Christian Danial BARRERA PEREA. All of them continue to be disappeared.”¹⁵⁰ Throughout the book, the accounts of each of the niños are similar, except that there is sometimes more information on some people and less on others and, in addition to this,

¹⁵⁰ Abuelas de la Plaza, Niños desaparecidos, jóvenes localizados 35.

there often are no pictures of either the child or the parents; the grey boxes where the images should remain.

When looking at the arrangement of the short paragraphs and images of the youths, the theme of identity comes forth once again. What is the first piece of information that the book gives about the child: his real name. Second, there are the photographs in which the one of the youth is the more emphasized of any of the others. Sometimes, as mentioned above, there just are no images to show nor can any future ones appear because the child is either still missing or dead. So, just a grey box is there, sitting blankly on the page almost saying, there should be something here but there is not. This ties into the idea of stolen identity and of the military being the entity that denied these young people the right to have a face to go with their names. Like the person himself or herself, though, the image will never again be there and the chances of one appearing in the future are extremely unlikely. Similarly, the textual account of what happened to the child impresses upon the reader the significance of identity. When linked together, name, physical appearance, and biographical information are three of the cornerstones of personhood according to the Abuelas de la Plaza in this work.

The vast majority of the books that the grandmothers produced are similar to *Niños desaparecidos, jóvenes localizados* and provide information on the search for missing children. For example, in *Los niños desaparecidos y la justicia (The Disappeared Children and Justice)*, published in 1988, the grandmothers explain the legal proceedings behind recovering missing children. Take the example of Paula Eva Logares Grinspon who was born on 10 June 1976 and kidnapped by the military on 18 May 1978. In 1983, the grandmother of Logares Grinspon, Elsa Beatriz Pavón de Aguilar, filed a suit against the family who illegally adopted her: Raquel Teresa

Leiro and Rubén Lavallén who was a member of the Buenos Aires Provincial Police.¹⁵¹ The section gives information on how the legal proceedings progressed and the defense's arguments against the prosecution. It then gives the decision of the court, which in this case was to return Logares Grinspon to her biological family.¹⁵² The book has a total of five such accounts and each gives detailed information on the abducted child, the arguments made in the courtroom to gain her return to her real family, and the ultimate decision of the particular court. This type of work serves the purpose of not only showing what the grandmothers have done in order to reunite with their missing loved ones, but also the book illustrates that the grandmothers are out finding their grandchildren even several years after the dictatorship fell.

Another book of the grandmothers was *Niños desaparecidos y niños desaparecidos nacidos en cautiverio* (*Disappeared Children and Disappeared Children Born in Captivity*) which was published in 1990. This work is similar to *Niños desaparecidos, jóvenes localizados* and lists all the known missing children, has their photographs, and gives a short biography of them including the names of their parents, the location from which the military kidnapped them, and any other pertinent data. Basically, the book has eight sections, the first three give background information on the Grandmothers of the Plaza and the disappeared children. After that, there are chapters on: Children who are missing, children born in captivity, located children, and children who the grandmothers located but are dead.¹⁵³ Perhaps the title page of the book best explains its purpose. Underneath the main heading it says, "The problem of the disappeared children for political reasons is one of such gravity that it affects the universal conscience and it must be solved in its totality and in such a manner that it can never be repeated in our country, or

¹⁵¹ Abuelas de la Plaza, [Los niños desaparecidos y la justicia](#) 43-45.

¹⁵² Abuelas de la Plaza, [Los niños desaparecidos y la justicia](#) 65-70.

¹⁵³ Abuelas de la Plaza, [Niños desaparecidos y niños desaparecidos nacidos en cautiverio](#) 2-4.

in the world.”¹⁵⁴ In a sense, it is much like *Nunca Más* in that it begins with the declaration of “never again.”

Restitución de niños (Restitution of Children), unlike other works of the grandmothers does not list missing children but instead explores the suffering of the children and the process of finding and returning them to their biological families. In this work, the grandmothers discuss why, in their collective opinion, the military targeted boys, girls, and infants are discussed. The grandmothers argued that the system of repression was highly structured as was the systematic oppression of children. The abduction of youths was part of the armed forces' attempt to strengthen national security and these young people were, in the eyes of the generals, just as dangerous to the state as their “subversive” parents because they too could one day follow in the footsteps of their grandmothers and fathers and oppose the government. In addition to this, the book contains a discussion on the effects of the oppression on parents, families, and the children themselves. Also, for Argentine society and the families of disappeared persons, the consequences of the military's actions were irrevocable according to this work; the loss of so many youths caused a rift in society that affected three or four generations. The effects were the most devastating for the children themselves as many grew up never knowing who their real parents were or what happened to their biological families.¹⁵⁵ This is perhaps one of the greatest questions lingering in the aftermath of the Dirty War: what happened to everyone the military abducted and tortured? Did the jailers kill them and throw them into a pit after the interrogations were over, or did they simply vanish into thin air?

Restitución de niños the grandmothers' search for the missing youths. In the Prologue to the work, Estela Barnes de Carlotto, an Abuela de la Plaza, wrote, “And thus, with much love,

¹⁵⁴ Abuelas de la Plaza. Niños desaparecidos y niños desaparecidos nacidos en cautiverio 1.

¹⁵⁵ Abuelas de la Plaza. Resititución de niños 27.

with a squeezed heart, with irreducible conviction, today 20 years later [after the organization began in 1977], we can claim without a doubt that nobody more than they, our grandchildren, has the right to recover their *Identity*, to stop being enslaved, to recognize their history, to be themselves.”¹⁵⁶ For example, in chapter 10 of *Restitutución de niños*, there is a discussion by Laura Conte, a grandmother, on what she termed, “El derecho a la identidad” (“The Right to Identity”). In this section of the work, Conte argues that the disappeared children deserve to know who they are. Conte wrote, “The identity of a child is shaped before birth. It is based on the desire of the parents about the child who, together with the . . . familiar and cultural context forms the original matrix.”¹⁵⁷ Here, the themes of needing to produce such a book, as grandmothers, come forth as does the need to recover the identity of the children who have lost it. Essentially, *Restitutución de niños* is a book that explains how the Abuelas have gone about locating and restituting children to their rightful parents or, in many cases where the parents are missing as well, to grandparents and other family members. Yet, the work also argues that the youths who the military kidnapped and gave to other families, such as those of military officers, lost something crucial: a sense of who they truly are. The grandmothers constantly assert, in each of their books, that there is a need to tell these niños who they really are as this is their right.

Perhaps one of the more surprising projects of the Grandmothers of the Plaza was the creation of a genetic database. In 1980, Chicha Mariani began to ask scientists if it was possible to use blood testing to show that a young boy or girl was the grandchild of a particular woman. In 1982, some grandmothers visited Dr. Victor B. Penchaszadeh, an Argentine and professor of pediatrics at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York City. He gave them the name

¹⁵⁶ Abuelas de la Plaza, *Resitutución de niños* 13.

¹⁵⁷ Abuelas de la Plaza, *Resitutución de niños* 230.

of a geneticist named Dr. Fred Allen who worked at the New York Blood Center.¹⁵⁸ These initial inquiries led to the creation of the National Genetic Data Bank in May 1987 by an act of the Argentine Congress. Essentially, grandmothers put samples of their blood in the database and by 1996, 2,100 people had “deposited” their blood in the bank.¹⁵⁹ It was in 1987 that data bank was used for the first time to return a child born in captivity to her family. The government determined that the bank should stay open until 2050 based on the average life expectancy in Argentina and the use of the facility is free for relatives of the disappeared and children who are unsure if they were disappeared or not.¹⁶⁰

In 1988, the grandmothers produced a short book on the genetic bank entitled, *Banco nacional de datos genéticos: la identificación de los niños desaparecidos en la Argentina* (*The National Genetic Database: the Identification of the Disappeared Children en Argentina*). The book begins with an introduction about the Dirty War and the plight of the disappeared children. Then, it explains the science behind the blood testing and how grandmothers and those suspected of being abducted children or children born in captivity can utilize the service. After this, there are detailed charts and diagrams about the different blood groups and a further explanation of how the process works. Here, as in the previously mentioned books, the grandmothers are searching for the missing children. In the case of the Genetic Data Bank, they are utilizing science to solve mysteries that basic research into birth records or other documents cannot. This work makes a larger point about the grandmothers and how they act on their memories of the children. DNA is a form of biological memory that “remembers” enormous amounts of information that has accrued over thousands of years of human evolution. Unlike human memory, though, DNA never “forgets” its identity or “what” it is. The creation of a genetic

¹⁵⁸ Arditti 70.

¹⁵⁹ Arditti 72.

¹⁶⁰ Arditti 72-73.

database signals that the grandmothers see this new science as a way to almost definitively prove that a person is or is not a disappeared child. Also, a database does not die as the grandmothers knew they would and with them, first-hand memories of their missing grandchildren. Thus, the creation of a Genetic Data Bank, something that will always be able to “recognize” the children was one of the grandmothers’ central projects in the mid-1980s and with its existence, their fight to find the children can continue beyond their own lives.

The Grandmothers of the Plaza did not accept CONADEP’s official work of national healing. The grandmothers did not feel that merely knowing how the military kidnapped the children and acknowledging that these actions were something that the nation must remember. These women have created their own therapeutic approach to the horrors of having their grandchildren kidnapped, never giving up hope that they are still alive and retrievable. By focusing their energy into the goal of restoring the disappeared children’s identity, hence repairing their currently false memory of the past, the women were helping themselves cope with the traumatic memories of the Dirty War. Their publications were vehicles for them to transmit this message to the Argentine public as well as they, like CONADEP, were appealing to popular support for their form of remembrance. The types of works that the grandmothers produced illustrates that they were not merely creating “monuments” to the memory of the children. No where are there stories that describe the children’s plight, all of their books focus on the future and finding the disappeared children. The grandmothers must keep searching, otherwise the military will have won and the pain would be overwhelming.

Conclusion

Talking and writing about memories of traumatic events is therapeutic. The ability to confront the horrors of the Dirty War allowed some Argentines to begin the process of healing. Both *Nunca Más* and the works of the Grandmothers of the Plaza show how two organizations faced horrible memories of torture, disappearances, abduction, and execution and then moved forward with their lives. Despite this similarity, CONADEP's theory of how to remember and that of the grandmothers are quite different. Like the authors of most truth reports, the commission hoped *Nunca Más* would start the process of national reconciliation with the past and allow people to accept what had happened. In contrast, the grandmothers did not view this approach as one that could relieve the traumatic memories that haunted them. These two attempts to reconcile memories of pain occurred as Argentines endeavored to understand what the military had done during 1976-1983. Although neither the works of CONADEP nor the Grandmothers of the Plaza represent how all Argentines worked through their memories and trauma, these two organizations appealed to a larger audience than themselves and thus were affecting the national memory of the Dirty War.

The memory of traumatic events causes groups to band together to confront them. The brutality and oppressiveness of the Argentine authoritarian government was not atypical for Latin America. During the 1960s, the armed forces of numerous countries such as Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, Bolivia, Colombia, Guatemala, and El Salvador overthrew civilian governments. Although the level of severity varied throughout the region, state-sponsored terror was also normal for this period. Each of these states came into existence in reaction to the conservative military's fear of leftism and communism and a belief that they were the only ones who could "save" their nation. When these dictatorial governments began to fall beginning in the 1980s,

Latin Americans were left with the memories of pain and suffering. They had lingering questions in their minds such as, what had happened to everyone who the military had abducted? Just as in Argentina, country after country created truth commissions in order to give the victims a forum to speak and to begin the process of national healing. Confronting the sheer horror of the events was the first step for these nations to come to terms with the years and in some cases decades of random torture and executions by the armed forces. In fact, the creation of truth commissions is not only limited to Latin America as the Mandela government in South Africa created the Truth and Reconciliation Committee after the end of apartheid. The name of the committee shows what the two main missions of a truth commission is: to discover the truth and to help both individual victims and that nation begin to reconcile with the past.

The Grandmothers of the Plaza rejected the “official” version of how an Argentine should remember the victims as they could not easily accept that their grandchildren were dead. They decided that they had to find the missing children and that for them, the hope that their granddaughter or grandson may still be alive was how they dealt with trauma. Although they never directly said it themselves, the grandmothers searched for their loved ones for very personal reasons in addition to restoring identity. They were not only grandmothers but mothers as well, and their children had also been kidnapped. Early on in the Mothers of the Plaza movement, the women who would form the grandmothers’ organization decided that their children were probably dead; there was no hope in finding them. But there was the possibility that they could be reunited with their grandchildren as they knew many of them had been given to military or pro-military families. Focusing on this possibility, the grandmothers banded together in order to collectively search for the missing children. It is true that when fighting to find the children, the grandmothers stressed that the military had stolen identities and these

identities needed to be returned to the children. But any reader of their works will also see that the search for the missing children is highly personal for the grandmothers; they miss their grandchildren.

In the aftermath of state-sponsored terror, there are varying ways in which people cope with the pain. In Latin America, it was typical for the newly-elected democratic government to create a truth commission. Yet, not everyone agreed with the form of remembrance that this body offered. At least in the case of the Grandmothers of the Plaza, and the Mothers of the Plaza as well, searching for missing family members is therapeutic. More work needs to be done on how a nation responds to the release of a truth report and if it creates a truly open conversation on former repression. Also, what are the responses of the victims themselves and their family members? In Argentina, neither the grandmothers nor the mothers could accept CONADEP's model of accepting what happened and then moving on with life. They said no and went about remembering the children in their own way. Although this thesis has focused on how two different Argentine organizations have presented a way to remember and deal with trauma, the phenomenon exists beyond Argentina's borders.

Nunca Más and the literature of the grandmothers show the result of National Security Doctrine in Argentina: a traumatized country searching for answers. Scholars have focused on the politics of the period, but have not studied the psychological effects of the oppression on Argentines. At the end of the Dirty War, Argentines had to grapple with the loss of loved ones at the hands of people who believed they were the saviors of the nation and drew "strength" from a doctrine of state security. CONADEP was composed of both government officials and well-known civilians who wanted to find out what the military government had done to its victims. They also wanted Argentines never to forget the brutality of the period so it could never happen

again. Similarly, the grandmothers were women whose children and grandchildren had been disappeared by the armed forces. They felt that their adult-aged children were dead, but that their grandchildren could still be saved. Ultimately, the work of both CONADEP and the grandmothers signaled the end of National Security Doctrine. The violent and inhuman treatment of the populace at the hands of soldiers during 1976-1983 ended the illusion that a military regime was better than a democratically-elected government. In more recent times, after the collapse of the Argentine economy in 2002, international observers waited to see what the military would do. Traditionally, the armed forces would view the crisis as their cue to dissolve the government and “repair” the situation. Yet, this time the military did not do anything. By the early 21st century, Argentines no longer would tolerate soldiers taking over their state. Thanks to the actions of a brave handful of citizens who took the first steps, CONADEP and the grandmothers, the Argentine nation said, *nunca más*.

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