Constructing Victimhood and the Historical Memory of Violence in Colombia's Open-Ended Civil War, 1958 – Present

by

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List of Acronyms

AUC *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* / United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia

CCJ *Comisión Colombiana de Juristas* / Colombian Commission of Jurists

CIMHM *Centro de Investigación de Memoria Histórica Militar* /
Center for Research on Military Historical Memory

CINEP *Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular* /
Center for Research and Popular Education

CNMH *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica* / National Center for Historical Memory

CNRR *Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación* / National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation

DAS *Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad* / Administrative Department of Security

ELN *Ejército Nacional de Liberación* / National Liberation Army

ESDEG *Escuela Superior de Guerra* / College of War

FARC *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* / Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia

GMH *Grupo Memoria Histórica* / Historical Memory Group

JEP *Jurisdicción Especial de la Paz* / Special Jurisdiction for Peace

M-19 *Movimiento 19 de Abril* / April 19th Movement

MOVICE *Movimiento de Víctimas de Crímenes de Estado* / Movement of Victims of State Crimes

RUV *Registro Único de Víctimas /* Singular Registry of Victims

UNIPEP *Unidad Policial para la Edificación de la Paz* / Police Unit for Peacebuilding

UPV *Unidad para las Víctimas* / Victim's Unit

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Abstract

How does the state make sense of a "difficult past" in the midst of ongoing crisis and violence? In the case of war-torn Colombia, how do particular branches of the state (Congress, bureaucracy, and the military) play a role in constructing "historical memory" of the country's civil conflict—and identify groups of victims and perpetrators—prior to the conflict's natural conclusion? And how does the state interact with outside experts in this process? This dissertation argues that actors within Colombia's Congress, bureaucracy, and military engage with expertise about the civil conflict in three primary ways: collaboration, cooptation, and rejection. In the case of the making of the 2011 Victims' Law and defining the contours of a legal victim identity, members of Congress rejected aspects of human rights expertise in favor of what I call "elite historical narratives" about the facts of the civil conflict. From a bureaucratic standpoint, the Colombian state collaborated more directly and openly with academic experts in the creation of a permanent Center for Historical Memory housed in the agency for social policy. And finally, the military has worked to co-opt (yet also collaborate with) this same academic expertise about "historical memory" of the conflict to amplify narratives in favor of the state's innocence and portray soldiers not as perpetrators but as victims.

Each of these strategies yield unique outcomes of commencing official meaning-making processes prior to the natural resolution of a national crisis. For evidence, this dissertation engages with a combination of archival (text and visual), ethnographic, and interview data—including the analysis of legal and congressional documents and interviews with Colombian

academics and government officials. Theoretically, this dissertation bridges memory studies with scholarship on the symbolic state to improve upon traditional understandings of state meaning-making in the aftermath of violence—uncovering, specifically, these processes in the midst of *unresolved* violence.

Chapter 1 Introduction: Violence and Memory in Colombia

> "In Colombia, where the 'past never passes' because the war doesn't end, the cult of memory is much more ambiguous than in those histories that have already been consummated..."
>
> Dr. Gonzalo Sánchez Gómez, National Center for Historical Memory

In the aftermath of civil conflict, knowledge about the contours of violence becomes a priority of the state for myriad reasons: for informing policies that facilitate political transition; for locating victims whose final resting place may still be unknown; or for bringing perpetrators to justice in the elaboration of testimonies in a courtroom. Each of these tasks requires some ontological consensus—an existing collection of facts of who, what, where, when, and why—regarding the foundational reality of the mass violence that has occurred in the scope of the conflict. In the case of Colombia's decades-long civil war, these knowledge-making questions have abounded *in the midst* of unresolved conflict. State-sponsored processes of official historical narration and the socio-legal construction of victim and perpetrator identities have been pursued in tandem with ongoing government operations to eradicate the "enemy," establish ceasefires, and build a rudimentary peace in accordance with international norms of human rights and transitional justice. This dissertation asks most fundamentally about the nature of this narrative work—constructed and amplified by distinct arms of the state including Congress, bureaucracy, and the military—when it occurs *prior* to the cessation of violence. How are we to understand the strategies and implications of this kind of official knowledge production that runs

in tandem with ongoing combat and struggle? How does the state work to discursively manufacture the closure of crisis?

The Colombian state has relied on various forms of expertise in these endeavors. Rather than conceptualizing the state as a whole to assess an imagined, unitary project of meaning-making, this dissertation focuses on how three branches—Congress, the bureaucracy, and the military—engage with internal and external experts to communicate a sometimes diverging vision of Colombia's recent past and present in various platforms since the 1950s. I argue that this engagement with experts takes the shape of three strategies: cooptation, collaboration, or rejection. The state relies on academic and other civil society experts, including victims of the conflict themselves, to produce diverse knowledge products that range from strategic policy aims—as in the case of defining a victim identity for the 2011 Victims' Law—to highly symbolic measures intended to shape public imagination, as in the case of the founding of the National Center for Historical Memory in the same year 2011. This dissertation analyzes key projects of meaning making in the Colombian state—including the construction of an academic field of conflict memory since the 1950s, the legislative production of an official "victim" category in 2011, and the discursive mobilization within the military to produce a *counter*-"victim" category.

This dissertation is split into three sub-cases which each encapsulate a different arena for meaning making. In the case of the 2011 Victims' Law and its process of defining the contours of a legal victim identity, members of Congress *rejected* aspects of human rights expertise in favor of what I call "elite historical narratives" about the facts of the civil conflict. From a bureaucratic standpoint, the Colombian state *collaborated* more directly and openly with academic experts in the creation of a Center for Historical Memory embedded organizationally within the federal

agency for social policy, *Prosperidad Social* (“Social Prosperity”). And finally, the military has worked to *co-opt* (yet also collaborate with) this same academic expertise about the "historical memory" of the conflict to amplify narratives in favor of the state's innocence and portray soldiers not as perpetrators but as victims. Each of these strategies demonstrate different implications of commencing official meaning-making processes prior to the natural resolution of a national crisis. For evidence, this dissertation engages with a combination of archival (text and visual), ethnographic, and interview data—including the analysis of legal and congressional documents and interviews with Colombian academics and government officials. Theoretically, this dissertation bridges scholarship within memory studies and the symbolic state to innovate upon traditional understandings of state meaning-making in the aftermath of violence—revealing strategies and consequences in the midst of unresolved violence. In the following section, I turn toward a broad historical narration of Colombia’s civil war and current political landscape.

The Evolution of Colombia’s Open-Ended Conflict

The task of synthesizing the events of over 70 years of civil conflict in Colombia—for the purpose of laying a historical groundwork for this dissertation—is not an easy one. In addition to the complexity introduced by the sheer number of years and actors that must be accounted for in any linear narrative of a conflict of this duration, the ambiguity surrounding the beginning and end of this particular conflict makes it exceptionally difficult to narrate. This is not my own observation—the newly released report of Colombia’s Truth Commission in 2022 resists a simple recounting of the conflict’s history by featuring, alongside a whole tool-kit of pedagogical resources, an unconventional timeline figure. In this official timeline (Figure 1), dates unfold from the center—an unknown origin—and the spiral is left open with an unclear

conclusion. The conflict is presented as circling around itself, not necessarily leading to any determined future but merely repeating the same movements across time as the spiral accumulates new rings.

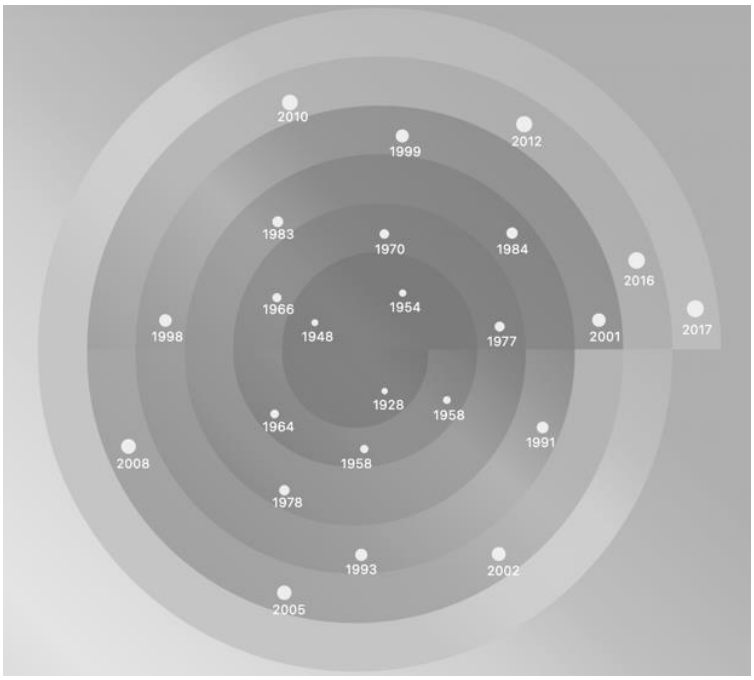


Figure 1 An interactive spiral timeline depicting the key events in Colombia's armed conflict, published by the Truth Commission in 2022. Source: https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/no-mataras-1 (retrieved on October 3, 2023).

Colombian anthropologist and recent truth commissioner Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar has spoken of blurred temporalities in determining when violence in Colombia decisively became a civil conflict—conventional scholarship suggests 1946, as will be discussed below—and opens up the question of broader patterns of foundational violence, like colonialism, that has wounded the country for much longer than the acute crisis of civil war in the 20th and 21st centuries (Castillejo-Cuéllar 2014). Provocatively, Castillejo-Cuéllar asks:

> "Is it possible to speak of harm as an accumulative phenomenon—even over centuries; a kind of existential palimpsest in which layers of collective suffering intertwine?" (2014:49)

Holding this reflection in tension with the task of narrating concrete events within the scope of what is known as Colombia's civil conflict, I proceed in this section with an abbreviated timeline (outlined in Figure 2) that will serve as guiding context for the following chapters of the dissertation. The summary begins with the period of partisan conflict known as "The Violence" (*La Violencia*) from 1946-1958 then follows with the creation of the well-known leftist insurgent groups—notably the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN)—and the opposing paramilitary forces that deepened the conflict with and alongside narcotrafficking in the 1980s and 1990s. The timeline concludes with a look at the more recent government interventions in taming but also ideologically *framing* the violence of the past several decades. As will be discussed in the core chapters of the dissertation, the key actors and events of the Colombian civil conflict are actively constructed and deconstructed in various knowledge projects engaged in by the government, the military, and civil society.

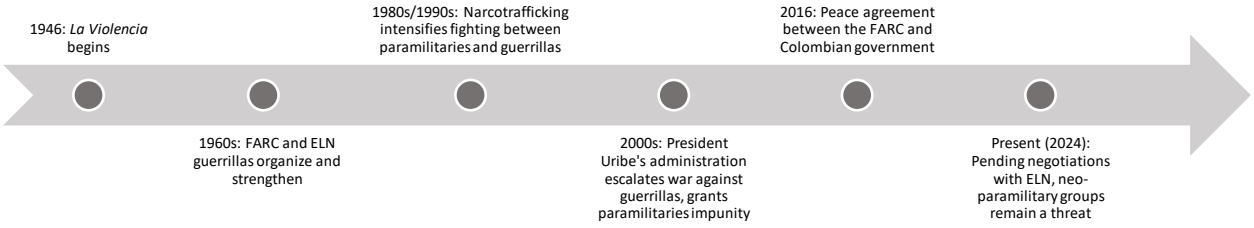


Figure 2 Timeline of key events or periods within the Colombian armed conflict from 1946 to present. Source: Kristin Foringer.

Partisan Terror and the Period of La Violencia *(1946 – 1958)*

The origins of the contemporary armed conflict in Colombia lie most proximately in a brutal period of country-wide violence known literally as *La Violencia* or "The Violence," spanning 1946-1958.[1] Colloquially viewed as fratricidal in nature, involving "hereditary hatreds among families, clans, and parties that had originated in the 19th century,"[2] the seeds of this conflict were more rationally rooted in a lopsided modernization throughout the country. At the onset of this period, Colombia had been suffering from stark rates of economic inequality and growing unrest from its largely rural population towards the traditional Liberal and Conservative parties, which were ruled by the landowning class since the 19th century. Heightened regionalism also set the stage for conflict, as the fragmented geography of Colombia—divided most centrally by the Andes mountain range and framed by the diverse climates of the coasts (Atlantic and Pacific) and the "eastern plains"—had alienated the majority of the country's population from its political capital in Bogotá (see Figure 3 for a map). In terms of infrastructure, Colombia did not even have a direct rail connecting the center of the country (Bogotá) to the Atlantic coast until the late 1950s (Abel and Palacios 1991). These factors yielded distinct regional economies centered around Bogotá, Medellín (to the northwest), Cali (on the Pacific coast), and Cartagena (on the Atlantic coast).

[1] For more context on the causes and consequences of *La Violencia* and broader social dynamics in Colombia during this time, see Zamosc 1986, Abel and Palacios 1991, Bergquist et al 1992, Sánchez and Meertens 2001, LeGrand 2003, Karl 2017, and the authoritative reports ¡*Basta Ya*! (GMH 2013) and *Hay Futuro si Hay Verdad* (Comisión de la Verdad 2022).

[2] Abel and Palacios 1991:616

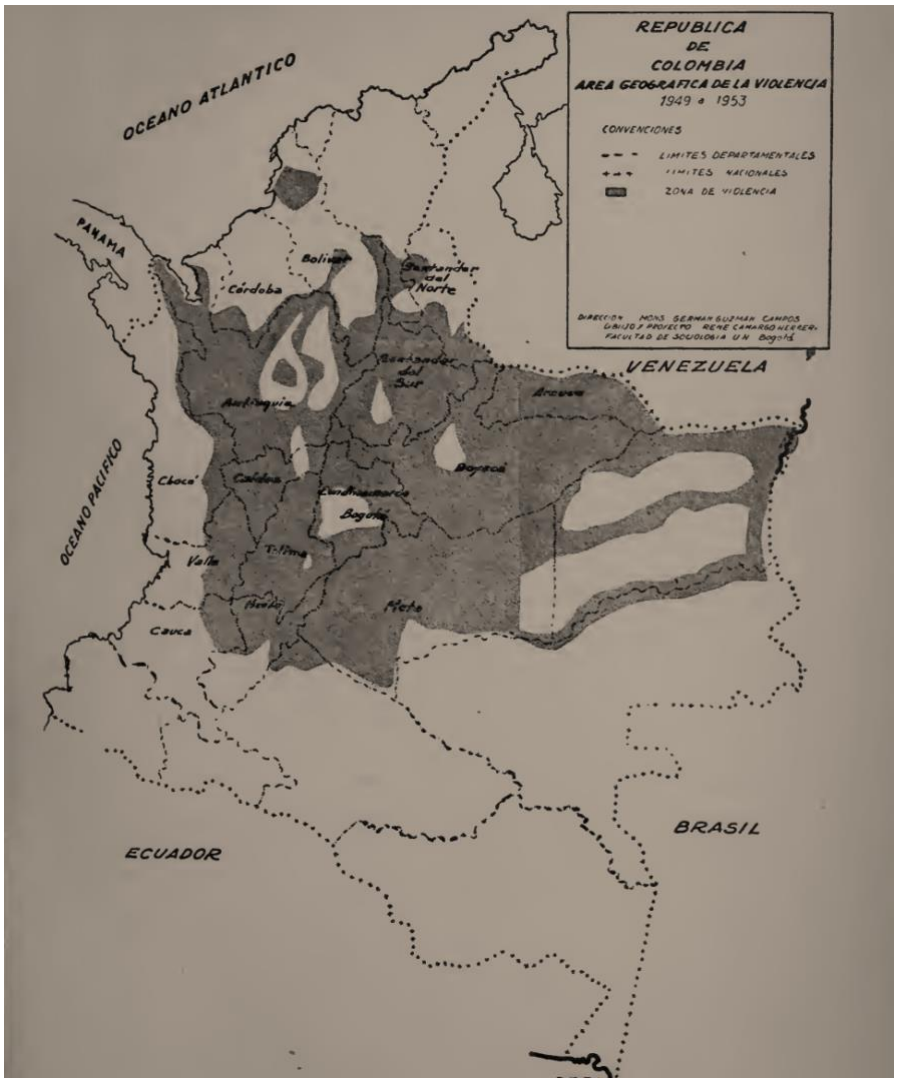


Figure 3 Map depicting the "areas of violence" (1949-1953) in Colombia (corresponding to the shaded area). The country's capital of Bogotá is located in the center-west of the country, with conflict extending outwards in all directions. Source: Guzmán et al 1962

As such, one historian who studies 19th century map-making in Colombia has described the country's nation-building program as a process of building *regions*, following the well-known colloquial saying that "Colombia is a country of regions" (Appelbaum 2016).[3] Ethnically, Colombia was overwhelmingly mestizo (heritage from both European and indigenous ancestry),

[3] This is a common understanding and phrase that I was initially introduced to by political scientist Eduardo Pastrana at the Pontifical Javerian University in Bogotá (Interview, Nov 17, 2021).

with Afro-Colombians concentrated along both coasts and indigenous groups spread throughout remote areas and constituting less than 2% of the country's population in the early 1940s (Abel and Palacios 1991). As compared to other civil conflicts globally, however, it is important to note that Colombia's was and is not an "ethnic conflict."

Leading up to *La Violencia* in 1946, tensions in the agrarian landscape between landowners and peasants had grown and added fuel to partisan political agendas heading into the 1946 presidential election, which yielded the administration of Conservative Mariano Ospina Pérez. Conservatives began replacing Liberals among many local and regional levels, and violent clashes began along party lines. A charismatic populist leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán—who had run during the prior presidential election—secured wide support among the working class who was fatigued by the "establishment" Liberal and Conservative parties who were perceived as largely deaf and antagonistic to their plight. These traditional political parties had long been ruled by the landowning class On April 9, 1948 Gaitán was assassinated in Bogotá during a speech, and the chaos that ensued would come to be viewed as the eventful initiation of *La Violencia* at full force. Immediately following Gaitán's assassination, riots broke out within Bogotá which came to be known as the *Bogotazo* and included a march to the presidential palace dragging the corpse of the assassin. University students at the National University of Colombia seized the radio waves to communicate the events to the countryside, urging peasants to "organize" and warning—perhaps prematurely—of imminent "revolution." (Bergquist et al 1992:82)

La Violencia following the *Bogotazo* of 1948 was unabashedly macabre and blurred the lines between official and unofficial violence in the Liberal and Conservative regions of the country. On the Conservative side, special armed forces arose as dirty complements to state

military and police: the "*chulavitas*" as a paramilitary force and the "*pájaros*," which were hired gangs of assassins. One victim recounted these alliances by the following: "the police and army would come by day and the *pájaros* by night."[4] The state sponsorship of these forces would become a theme in the later decades of civil conflict that also featured significant paramilitary involvement and impunity. On the Liberal side, combatants consisted of peasant self-defense forces and guerrillas—with varying levels of organization and overlap between the two. The combat between Conservatives and Liberals included multiple levels of actors and could be described as "neighbor against neighbor, district against district." (Sanchez 1992: 89). The terror between individuals and groups left behind horrific scenes of desecrated corpses, slaughtered livestock and entire communities burnt to the ground. The main pattern of violence involved a community-wide massacre or ambush followed by retaliation in the form of razing homes and stealing cattle. In a landmark report published by the National University in 1962 year, Guzman et al found that between 1948 and 1958, the number of conflict-related deaths among civilians and combatants reached 134,820 with thousands more displaced and injured. This number has since been updated to an estimate of over 250,000 deaths (Farnsworth-Alvear et al 2017).

The remedy for *La Violencia* that was prescribed through a political pact between the Conservative and Liberal parties in 1958 was a power-sharing agreement called the National Front, which would extend until 1974. In addition to its structural flaws in the centering of yet again the same two political parties that had yielded *La Violencia* (and banning the consideration of insurgent candidates like Gaitán had represented in 1946), the National Front was also highly repressive in practice. They maintained military offensives against communist communities, backed by U.S. support. This functioned to further activate and organize the peasant self-defense

[4] Comisión de la Verdad, "El legado sangriento de Los Pájaros en Antioquia." Retrieved April 21, 2024 (https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/el-legado-sangriento-de-los-pajaros-en-antioquia).

forces and guerrillas from the times of *La Violencia* and only hastened the initiation of what would be considered the contemporary civil conflict.

Although the overarching narratives produced about *La Violencia* define it by its overtly partisan nature—a war between Conservative and Liberal neighbors and intervening armed forces—it is also important to highlight the dimensions of class struggle and land disputes that fueled its intensity. Although Communists and radical Liberals sought to convert *La Violencia* into class confrontation and mobilize the peasantry across traditional party lines, the conditions for this kind of revolutionary struggle would not be consolidated until the 1960 (Zamosc 1986).

Emergence of Revolutionary Armed Groups in the 1960s[5]

Building upon—but also, scholars agree, *distinct* from—*La Violencia*, armed guerrilla groups with revolutionary aspirations began to emerge in the early and mid 1960s. As American sociologist Maurice Zeitlin remarked (rather cynically) about this transition in a 1972 essay,

> "Some of the older bandit groups (from *La Violencia*) even declared themselves 'revolutionaries' and may indeed have been genuinely politicized…" (Zeitlin 1927:43)

The truth is much more complex than attributing continuity from the "banditry" of *La Violencia* into the formation of guerrilla groups in the 1960s. Rather the onset of peasant mobilization and harsh suppression by the new National Front government converged with international communist ideologies to foment the creation of new groups like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). The FARC was most proximately influenced by a radicalized and newly organized peasantry post-*Violencia*, while the

[5] For more scholarship on the emergence of guerrilla groups including the FARC, ELN, and M-19, see Pizarro 1986, Bergquist et al 1992, LeGrand 2003, Arjona 2016, and Steele 2017.

ELN grew from the ideological currents of the Cuban revolution and Latin American liberation theology. A government investigative commission would later summarize things this way: "You cannot speak in Colombia of a singular guerrilla, rather of plural guerrillas," given the extreme diversity of ideological bases, social makeup, and armed strategies of each group.[6] The guerrilla movement(s) are plural also in their varied lifespans across the duration of the conflict, with the FARC only recently having signed a far-reaching peace agreement in 2016 and the ELN still actively in talks with the current President Petro's administration at the time of writing this chapter. This section briefly outlines the roots and initial trajectory of three major guerrilla groups: the FARC, ELN, and M-19.

By the early 1960s, the geographic fragmentation and violent social repression reinforced by *La Violencia*'s legacy—and the subsequent power-sharing solution embodied in the National Front—prompted the formal organization of the FARC. Although initially formed as the militant branch of the Colombian Communist Party, the FARC would later evolve as organizationally distinct and very local in character. Many early FARC leaders were residual from peasant self-defense battles fought in the countryside during the 40s and 50s. As one of the founding commanders of the FARC—Jaime Guaraca—described the origins of the group, "…there was no political instruction, much less a program to be carried out…it was a group formed fundamentally in self-defense" (Matta 1999:47). Pizarro has described the FARC's early activities as "a structure of regional social warfare, of individual and collective survival."

Conversely, the ELN has roots in university campuses and formed as a new group post-*Violencia*. It emerged in the early 1960s as the result of university students' pilgrimage to Castro's Cuba to receive military training, along with the support of figures like the Catholic

[6] Comisión de Estudios sobre la Violencia. "Colombia: Violencia y Democracia" Informe presentado al Ministerio de Gobierno. Universidad Nacional de Colombia and Colciencias: Bogotá, D.C.

Father Camilo Torres who was heavily influenced by liberation theology (Zeitlin 1972). The ELN developed primarily in the Santander department and in areas with historical oil exploitation and land disputes (LeGrand 2003). The ELN would never reach the scale of the FARC, but it is currently the only active guerrilla group remaining in Colombia (as of 2023) from this original cohort of organizations.

By the 1980s the FARC, in a movement toward peace and greater political legitimacy, eventually entered formal politics under the peace talks sponsored by President Belisario Betancur's Conservative administration, forming the Patriotic Union (UP) party officially in 1985. The FARC's entrance into the political arena was met with widespread violence from paramilitary and military actors, who assassinated or forcibly disappeared an estimated 4,153 UP candidates on local and national levels. This significantly weakened the political party and led to the quick renewal by 1987 of militant strategy among FARC members outside of the boundaries of UP's political participation.[7] The UP ultimately vanished from political life in 2002 when the National Electoral Council revoked its status.

Roughly concurrent with the formation of the Patriotic Union, the "19th of April Movement" (referred to as M-19) enjoyed increasing visibility and legitimacy in the political center of Bogotá. Officially formed in 1972, the M-19 was an urban guerrilla movement with a more developed and centralized political agenda than the FARC. As prolific Colombianist historian Daniel Pecaut (1992: 229) cautions, the M-19 represented a shift in the insurgent ecology that didn't merely signal "the prolongation of the preceding phase" of guerrilla warfare inaugurated by actors like the FARC and ELN in the 1960s. The M-19's distinctive political agenda (born in the nation's capital and not the countryside) meant that "war was placed

[7] Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica. 2018. *Todo pasó frente a nuestros ojos: El genocidio de la Unión Patriótica 1984-2002.* CNMH: Bogotá, D.C.

officially at the service of politics." Unfortunately, the relative institutional legitimacy that the M-19 initially enjoyed suffered a fatal blow in the deadly siege of the Palace of Justice (Colombia's supreme court) in 1985, in which M-19 sought to hold a trial for President Betancur about violating his 1984 ceasefire agreement. The Colombian military responded with a full-scale assault, and the whole event left nearly 100 magistrates, civilians, military, and guerrillas dead.

Paramilitary Consolidation and Narcotrafficking

As the guerrillas sought to strengthen their position both militarily and politically in the 1980s, private self-defense forces proliferated to protect the interests of landowners and powerful narcotraffickers against the encroachment of the guerrillas.[8] These so-called self-defense groups, now recognized as paramilitary forces, had significant intersection with business and government elites, including the Colombian armed forces. On the surface, these groups showed resonance with earlier prototypes of Conservative security forces like the *chulavitas* of *La Violencia*, but thanks to integration within the illicit drug economy, the paramilitaries of the 1980s enjoyed a previously unheard of scope and strength. Paramilitary forces began targeting individuals to assassinate—including candidates within the newly formed Patriotic Union party—and committed large-scale massacres and displacements throughout the countryside to secure territory for large estates of cattle ranches, owned by narcotraffickers and other economic elites (LeGrand 2003).

[8] For more information on the origins and dynamics of paramilitary groups in Colombia, see Cubides 1999, López and Sevillano 2008, and *¡Basta Ya!* (GMH 2013).

Unlike the FARC's strict organizational model, akin to a "mass army"—with more rigid discipline and deeper bureaucratization—the paramilitary forces that confronted them were more porous to external and political factors and found deep integration within Colombian politics and narco-society (Gutiérrez Sanin 2008). Going beyond their supposed aim of "self-defense," the paramilitaries were industrious in the drug trade due to their proximity to elites in the global market and "multilayered networks for trafficking and laundering money," in addition to securing police protection for these activities (Farnsworth et al 2017:369).

Simultaneously in the 1980s, the guerrillas expanded their activities into the drug trade to fund their continued military operations. Their involvement in the drug trade was initially closer to the peasant producers rather than the elite distribution networks. The basic contours of this looked like extracting payments from coca growers and those involved in manufacturing the "base paste" of cocaine, in exchange for protection from the guerrillas. The profits generated from working actual trade routes, as well, contributed to the guerrillas' success in the drug trade. However, the FARC and the ELN also continued to reap profits by other tactics like large-scale kidnapping schemes to "harvest" elites and politicians for hefty bail payouts. This tactic, known as "*pesca milagrosa*" or "miraculous fishing," was common throughout the 1990s.[9]

Due in part to the drug trade and new sources of income, paramilitaries and guerrillas both intensified their violent confrontation in 1990s. The government eventually granted legal status to the paramilitaries under Decree 356 of 1994, titled the "Cooperatives of Surveillance and Private Security" or "CONVIVIR" (which ironically translates to "coexist"), seeing their utility as a partner to the state's counterinsurgency strategy. In technical terms, the CONVIVIR

[9] Known as "*pesca milagrosa*" or "miraculous fishing,"—taken from the name of a popular Colombian children's game—this modality of kidnapping involved setting up checkpoints on the highway and "catching" as many victims as possible to determine their "value," then holding them for ransom (El Tiempo 1998, Rohter 1999).

cooperatives were legitimized as distinct from criminal paramilitary groups, yet human rights organizations like Amnesty International warned from the start that this legislation merely legalized the paramilitaries.[10] Three years after this decree, there were officially 414 CONVIVIR cooperatives functioning in Colombia, as well as a new independently-formed alliance called the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (the Spanish acronym AUC). The AUC had formed as a unifying network for paramilitary groups under the leadership of Carlos Castaños, a drug trafficker whose father was kidnapped and killed by the FARC (LeGrand 2003). The decade between 1995 and 2005 would be the most violent of the entire armed conflict; 70% of the war's victims were produced during this period—subjected to violence from both the insurgent and counter-insurgent forces.[11]

By 2003, with the initiative of right-wing President Alvaro Uribe, the 37 groups making up the AUC officially—on paper—began laying down their weapons through a demobilization process that provided them ample impunity despite perpetrating horrific violence.[12] Over 30,000 combatants went through demobilization ceremonies, and the government proudly asserted that they ceased to exist.[13] But these evolved into what is now known as neo-paramilitary groups, including the Aguilas Negras, that continue to inflict violence in the country's poorest regions. The entanglement of the paramilitaries with politics at multiple levels is part of what has

[10] *El Tiempo*. 1997. "Así nacieron las CONVIVIR." 14 July. Retrieved Feb. 22, 2024 (https://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-605402).

[11] Comisión de la Verdad. 2022. "Hay futuro si hay verdad: Informe Final de la Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición." Retrieved Sept. 15, 2023 (https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/hay-futuro-si-hay-verdad).

[12] ¡ Grupo Memoria Histórica (GMH). 2013. *¡Basta Ya! Colombia: Memorias de Guerra y Dignidad*. GMH: Bogotá, D.C.

[13] Human Rights Watch. 2010. "Paramilitaries' Heirs: The New Face of Violence in Colombia." Retrieved Apr 16, 2024 (https://www.hrw.org/reports/colombia0210_insert_low_0.pdf).

guaranteed their survival through several decades; this collusion of paramilitary groups and the Colombian government has come to be known as "para-politics." According to the Truth Commission's statistics in 2022, there had been a total of 88 prosecutions of high-level politicians with ties to the AUC paramilitaries: 72 of these were congressmen and 16 were governors across a wide range of departments (states) in Colombia (Restrepo 2022). The shadow of para-politics still lingers large today among conservative political actors in the country and threatens a peaceful transition to a more complete democracy.

Turning the Tide Toward Peace

After Uribe's impunity-granting Law of "Justice and Peace" in 2005, there was momentum among civil society and some key government actors to reshape the contours of what a comprehensive and lasting demobilization should look like across all actors involved. While violence certainly continued into the late 2000s and 2010s, this era also saw the introduction of key transitional justice initiatives aimed at establishing peace and recovering the social fabric of the country. In 2011, Congress passed widespread reparations legislation for victims of the conflict and by 2016, the government signed a peace agreement with the FARC.

The Victims' Law of 2011 was a landmark accomplishment in providing symbolic and legal recognition to millions of victims of conflict violence—those who have suffered, primarily, forced displacement from their homes as armed groups overtook and occupied their land, or the family members of those killed in massacres when these displacements took place. The law instituted a National Registry of Victims and allocated funds for monetary reparations for victims, along with ensuring symbolic reparations in the form of "historical memory"

construction and other cultural initiatives.[14] The passage of this law served as a public reckoning of the human cost of decades of war and garnered international attention from human rights actors like the United Nations, despite certain flaws in the scope of the law which will be discussed more in following chapters.[15]

Later within President Santos' administration, a formal peace agreement was established in 2016 between the FARC and the Colombian government following long and intensive negotiations based in Havana, Cuba. This agreement included not only a ceasefire and the comprehensive demobilization of guerrilla combatants, but also a detailed plan for actively promoting peace and justice across many sectors of society including judicial (in the form of the Special Jurisdiction for Peace- JEP) and historical mechanisms (the Truth Commission). The peace agreement initially struggled in popular opinion and narrowly lost formal approval through a plebiscite process—relying on executive privileges to sign it into being.[16] This difficulty in persuading the public toward peace was largely the fruit of Uribe's former administration(s) in ramping up hostile rhetoric toward the guerrillas. In the years since 2016, the peace agreement has fared precariously, as some FARC members have failed to demobilize and state has failed to sufficiently protect those who have demobilized and are reintegrating into society.[17]

[14] The distribution of monetary reparations has been detrimentally slow and was the cause of a recent 10-year extension of the program in 2020 (El Tiempo 2020b).

[15] See Foringer 2022 (and a version of this article in Chapter 3 of this dissertation) for more on the context of the Victims' Law.

[16] The plebiscite called upon 34 million voters in Colombia to approve or reject the peace agreement. It was disapproved by a slim margin, but 63% of voters didn't cast a ballot. (Farnsworth-Alvear et al 2017).

[17] International Crisis Group. 2021. "A Fight by Other Means: Keeping the Peace with Colombia's FARC." Latin America Report No. 92. Nov. 30. Retrieved April 16, 2024 (https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/092-a-fight-by-other-means%20%282%29.pdf).

Other complications that have arisen since 2016 include ongoing violence from both traditional and "non"-traditional armed groups. The ELN remains active along the northeastern border with Venezuela, despite ongoing negotiations at the initiative of President Gustavo Petro—himself a former M-19 guerrilla.[18] The most significant lag in a comprehensive "peace" throughout the country remains the strengthening of neo-paramilitary and narcotrafficking groups like the Gulf Clan, that continue to exert control over large territories and impose tactics like "armed strikes" that force trapped citizens to remain indoors for long periods of time.[19] Additionally, the country faces unimaginable rates of social activists (*líderes sociales*) being assassinated by armed groups, who enact a "deliberate strategy" to destroy indigenous and Afro leadership and weaken the social fabric (*tejido social*) of the country. In the year 2023 alone, the UN acknowledged 105 of such killings.[20] With this violence continuing to proliferate, Colombia is far from entering a definitively "post-conflict" era.

With the rapid evolution of motivations and action attributed to all armed actors involved throughout the course of the Colombian civil war—the guerrillas, the paramilitaries, and the armed forces—the era of peacebuilding that commenced in the 2010s has faced complex obstacles. Echoing the question of "genuine politicization" that sociologist Maurice Zeitlin (1972) raised regarding the earlier transition of armed actors between *La Violencia* of the 1940s/50s and the emergence of the guerrillas, the same question would later become even more

[18] Reuters. 2024. Peace talks with Colombia government in crisis, ELN rebels say. Feb. 21. Retrieved March 3, 2024 (https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/peace-talks-with-colombia-government-crisis-eln-rebels-say-2024-02-21/).

[19] Schmidt, Samantha and Diana Durán. 2022. Cartel shuts down much of Colombia over leader's extradition to U.S. *Washington Post*, May 9. Retrieved March 3, 2024 (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/09/colombia-clan-golfo-armed-strike-otoniel/).

[20] La Silla Vacía. 2024. ONU registra 105 líderes sociales asesinados en 2023. Feb. 28. Retrieved March 3, 2024 (https://www.lasillavacia.com/en-vivo/onu-registra-105-lideres-sociales-asesinados-en-2023/).

complicated with the entrance of "dirty" interests from the drug trade and consolidation of paramilitary groups protecting the most powerful. In the simplest sense, peacemaking actors have had to, and must continue to, grapple with what this conflict was even *about*, and if there is enough ideological coherence—or "genuine politicization"—to generate societal consensus about the past, present, and future of this violence and any hopes for peace. The reality is that the Colombian "conflict" (1946 to present) is a multiplicity of conflicts hinging on old partisan biases, new revolutionary ideals, and the multi-faceted incentives of the drug trade. This has led to the stubborn reproduction of conflict across all these decades, and points to the difficulty in assigning meaning through peacebuilding and its associated tasks of official historical narration and the conceptualization of victims and perpetrators.

History, Memory, and the Symbolic State

A priority of the contemporary peacebuilding momentum within the Colombian state is the construction of "historical memory" of the conflict. Processes of historical memory construction were explicitly sponsored and mandated in both the Victims' Law of 2011 and the 2016 Peace Agreement with the FARC. On its face, historical memory is a synthesis of the concepts of history and memory, which theorists have long sought to distinguish and define. Building on earlier insights from scholars like Maurice Halbwachs (1925; 1950), sociologist Jeffrey Olick (2016: 36) has observed that *history* most often carries connotations of "truth and accuracy," while *memory* is tangled up with "usefulness and authenticity." Beyond the theoretical associations of the phrase, "historical memory" has been adapted in the Colombian context primarily to describe efforts by the state and civil society to both understand and commemorate incidents within the scope of the civil war. As historian and founder of

Colombia's state-run Center for Historical Memory, Gonzalo Sánchez Gómez, declares, "historical memory…is not an object of work in itself, but appears in an ancillary way, immersed…in the mobilization in defense of human rights," (Sánchez 2018:97). As such, there are normative frames built into this particular project of knowledge production. Within historical memory initiatives, victim voices—or "subaltern memories"—are said to be elevated above hegemonic discourse and are legitimated with the "rigor of social science" for a range of audiences and often with the explicit purpose of facilitating transitional justice (Wills 2022). As such, projects of historical memory and the associated tasks of identifying and platforming victims, provide an occasion to understand the collaborative dynamics of state knowledge construction in the aftermath—and presence—of violence.

As highlighted earlier, this dissertation investigates the strategies deployed by various state actors to produce historical narratives—or the historical memory—of a conflict that has reached no natural closure. This also implies the conceptualization of "true" victims, who can claim authentic authorship of these narratives. I situate this analysis broadly within the existing scholarship on memory politics, contentious commemoration, and the symbolic state. In the following sections, I first discuss the politics of memory and the key contribution of this dissertation to the study of state commemoration of "difficult pasts" prior to the closure of crisis. I then highlight the disaggregated nature of historical memory production, bringing in multiple actors to the process rather than a singular or unitary author. Turning to the literature on symbolic state power, I connect the study of historical memory—and the conceptualization of victims—to current understandings of the *symbolic* power of the state and emphasize how this, too, benefits from a disaggregated analysis of the "many hands of the state" involved in exercising this symbolic power.

Memory Politics and the Study of "Difficult Pasts"

Within the sociological study of collective memory, there is a particular emphasis on "politics of memory," which Zubrzycki and Wozny (2020:176) summarize broadly as "the shaping of collective memory by political actors and institutions." This subset of focus builds on the very origins of memory studies that formally began with Hawlbachs' (1925; 1992) development of the term "collective memory" and its subsequent usages that capture the various political interventions in public imaginations of the past (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991, Olick and Levy 1997, Zolberg 1998, Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002, Schwartz and Shuman 2005, Saito 2006, Jansen 2007, Simko 2012). Scholars of collective memory and the state have shifted in the past decades from interrogating the foundational myths and heroic origin stories of nations to studying memory and historical policy in particular relation to national conflict and "difficult pasts." Zubrzycki and Wozny (2020:179) explain the importance of historical narratives during times of "political rupture," just as much as during the "creation and maintenance" of regimes. The construction and/or revision of national historical narratives during political ruptures (especially when the object of the narrative is a trauma or conflict) often plays out within venues of commemoration, crystallized either as memorials or sites of memory or as drawn out processes of assigning meaning to past conflict. Within the literature on memory of difficult pasts, scholars have debated various theoretical models to explain the differing outcomes of commemoration expected in the aftermath of conflict (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991; Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002; Saito 2006; Teeger and Vinitzky-Seroussi 2007; Conway 2009; Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger 2010).

Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz's 1991 article on the Vietnam War memorial became a benchmark for scholarly discussion about commemorative outcomes of difficult pasts, as they complicated the traditional Durkheimian assumption that memorialization symbolizes solidarity. Their novel argument instead is that commemorative processes make visible the conflicting views among multiple constituents of a national trauma. Vinitzky-Seroussi (2002) later fleshed out conditions for which we would expect this kind of multivocal commemoration versus the alternative of "fragmented" commemoration, which encompasses a wider historical range within which varying discourses about the past are aimed at different audiences. Vinitzky-Seroussi's model evolved in the subsequent decade and a strand of scholars joined the conversation, evaluating new conditions for and types of national commemoration of difficult pasts, including "reiterated commemoration," (Saito 2006), controlled or consensual commemoration, (Teeger and Vinitzky-Seroussi 2007), mixed commemoration (fragmented and consensual) (Conway 2009), and "cacophonous commemoration" (Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger 2010).

Out of each of these studies, an important axis of analysis is the *time* elapsed between the historical moment of conflict and the subsequent iterations of commemoration. For example, Saito's (2006) study on the collective memory of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima emphasizes elapsed time as a transformational space in which "reiterated commemoration" changes the shape of the trauma narrative based on current political goals. In Vinitzky-Seroussi's (2002) consideration of time, she argues that a smaller margin between the moment of a national trauma and the particular commemorative activity in question means a higher possibility for fragmented discourse about the event. Interestingly, she considers her case on the commemoration of assassinated Israeli political figure Yitzhak Rabin to qualify as a quick turnaround between the moment of tragedy and the start of its commemoration, since this happened within one week. In

all of the existing cases in this literature, the fundamental presumption is that commemoration occurs *after* the passage of trauma or conflict, and that the distance between the difficult past and its commemoration in the present shapes what outcomes we can expect.

The literature has yet to deal extensively, or at all, with a "difficult past" that extends empirically into the present yet is met with commemorative efforts by a state who is trying to manufacture its own closure. In other words, how can we make sense of commemorative initiatives when there is *negative* elapsed time since the moment of conflict? Wagner-Pacifici (2017:5) has warned of the myopia of memory scholars who "analytically cauterize" events in the process of distinguishing the past from the present. In an applied sense, Amy Sodaro, in her book *Exhibiting Atrocity* (2018), asserts that commemoration in the form of a museum, for example, "is a luxury available to those nations and communities that are no longer in conflict and have the political, social, and economic means to put the past behind them." Colombia's conflict knowledge ecosystem provides an opportunity to develop new theories of contentious commemoration that account for commemorative processes that coincide with—rather than follow—national crises.

Disaggregating the Construction of State History

Scholars have theorized various actors involved in the production and maintenance of collective memory in distinct contexts: "agents of memory" (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002), "commemorative agents" (Schwartz and Shuman 2005), "reputational entrepreneurs" (Fine 2001), "moral entrepreneurs" (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991), and "carrier groups" (Simko 2012, drawing on Weber). Focusing specifically on those agents on the *production* side of collective memory projects—like those involved in the construction of national historical

narratives—is helpful in parsing out the myriad participants in collective memory overall. Schwartz and Shuman (2005) criticized the broad dismissal in the collective memory literature of those individuals involved in producing cultural symbols—the "text writers" and "symbol makers"—as definitively *individuals,* and the scholarly tendency to instead conceive of them as faceless participants in a hegemonic "cultural memory" project. Although their critique goes beyond this distinction to encourage sociologists to focus on relational collective memory overall, I take as a starting point this disaggregation among memory producers to interrogate specifically those actors embedded in cultural institutions of the state and the ways their interactions lead to specific outcomes in historical projects.

Recent sociological scholarship on the state coincides with this mandate to disaggregate actors rather than assume state (cultural) power operates as a unitary top-down project (Morgan and Orloff 2017). This is an important framework for understanding commemorative projects of the state and the ways that a singular ideological gaze doesn't determine the final outcomes of these. In her work on the congressional usage of Martin Luther King Jr.'s memory, Francesca Polletta (2003) underscores the wide range of political and personal interests represented by a state body (U.S. Congress) that is largely perceived of as unitary. She argues that simply reducing commemorative activities to those from elite versus popular spheres "doesn't do justice to the multiple, competitive, and changing relationships among elites inside and outside the government, and within subordinated groups," (Polletta 2003:220). This perspective extends even more to commemorative negotiations in post-conflict contexts, where multiple political interests at the top (not just multiple actors throughout civil society) compete for narrative control of a joint history.

This dissertation shows that the various proximity of memory experts to state arenas and the various responses of the state to either reject, coopt, or collaborate with this expertise determines the "winning" representations of violent conflict and victimhood projected into the public sphere. Beyond attributing the process of historical memory construction to a subset of actors who either win or lose in their attempts to control narrative, I argue that *relational* configurations are key and that these may follow a predictable pattern based on the corresponding arena of the state in which engagement with external expertise plays out. For example, the templates of interaction embedded within Congress versus bureaucracy versus the military can determine the shape within which memory negotiations take place.

Symbolic Power and the State

Much scholarship on civil wars draws on classical understandings of state power—focused on coercive ability over territory. Yet civil war creates the conditions for new forms of symbolic power to emerge in various ways. This is precisely because there is contestation over the state's "monopoly on violence" whenever insurgent and counterinsurgent actors are prevalent. Scholars have recently begun understanding state power as increasingly *symbolic* rather than material, departing from a classical Weberian definition of the state which focuses on territory and physical coercion (Weber 1922; Scott 1998; Loveman 2005). Philip Gorski (2003:165-166) describes the key symbolic dimensions of state power as "pedagogical, corrective, and ideological," which contrasts yet complements its classically-recognized "administrative, policing, and military" dimensions.

Recent empirical scholarship on the symbolic state has tended to focus on the invisible and everyday nature of these pedagogical and ideological projects, focusing on such specific

activities as census taking and racial categorization, which seek to impose official imaginations about the make-up of a state's population (Scott 1998; Kertzer and Arel 2002; Loveman 2009, 2014; Emigh et al 2016). Looking at the mundane aspects of the symbolic state makes sense in light of Mara Loveman's (2005:1655) definition of symbolic power as "the ability to make appear natural, inevitable, and thus apolitical that which is the product of historical struggle." With the case of a victim category in Colombia, scholars have expounded on the various subjectivities that "victimhood" produces in relation to the state, including the victim as an organized political actor (Rettberg 2015), as a voter (Acosta 2021), and as an economic actor (Vallejo Pedraza 2019). Mariana Delgado Barón (2015) underscores that it is an act of state power that leverages legal categories like "victim" in the 2011 Victims' Law to produce and reproduce useful subjectivities.

Existing work that emphasizes the political conflicts in post-conflict victim- naming succeeds in outlining the symbolic and material *stakes* of the category construction but pays relatively less attention to *how*, processually, the particular theaters of this decision-making—judicial, legislative, or bureaucratic—interact with this politicization to facilitate or constrain certain outcomes. Luke Moffett (2016) points out the differences in partisan priorities of victim classification when it occurs on a national stage versus the international one, as national governments opt toward superimposing levels of blame and innocence onto a victim category according to political status. For example, states may distinguish categories of "victim" from "victim-perpetrators," such as insurgents injured in combat with state forces, whereas the international arena of human rights and humanitarian law may acknowledge only one broader category of victim. This difference in categorization across national and international levels exemplifies the way that the stakes of the victim definition change across different arenas of

decision-making. Erica Bouris' analysis of "complex political victims" considers what she calls the "ideal victim," an identity that state parties in power can leverage to assess the "righteousness" of each of the conflict groups (2007: 32). McEvoy and McConnachie broadly acknowledge that "victims are (to varying degrees) instrumentalized in the pursuit of larger political and social goals," and that we can see this varies according to the institutional level where victim identification occurs (2012:528).

Rather than viewing the politicization of victim categories as something that is only strategically coordinated by actors making deliberate decisions, this dissertation acknowledges the contingent and at times ideologically incoherent ways in which particular arenas of decision-making facilitate various outcomes. As Stanley Cohen (2001:12) points out, misrepresentations and even the denial of violence by the state are not always the result of a "planned campaign," but can emerge from the gradual, collective mismanagement or omission of knowledge about such violence. This collaborative management (or mismanagement) of knowledge is the focus of my dissertation across the three sub-cases or branches of the state involved in historical narration of the conflict and the practice of victim-perpetrator identification. Attending to the relationship among actors vying for their preferred categories and narration of past violence *within* specific institutional settings illuminates how each state arena—in this case, Congress, bureaucracy, and the military—can set the terms for an eclectic or even contradictory narrative to emerge. The following chapters of this dissertation will argue that these processes in Colombia followed general patterns of engagement whereby the state either rejected, coopted, or collaborated with experts when it came to decision making about representations of violence.

Methodology

This dissertation uses elements of comparative-historical and broadly qualitative methods to answer its central questions about the role of the state in knowledge production about violence. Sources of data include ethnographic notes and photos, memoirs, reports, newspaper articles, internal administrative memos, policy memos, and expert interviews. This project intentionally engages a diverse range of visual and textual materials, some of which could be considered "archival" in the sense that they exist in a unified collection—like the over 3,000 pages of congressional debates that form the basis of analysis in Chapter 3 on the Victims' Law of 2011. The majority of my visual and text data, however, are rooted in online databases, ethnographic observation, and information shared with or sent to me by interview informants or on-site staff while conducting institutional ethnographic observation. I compiled these sources along with transcripts of my interviews into a database and analyzed them using the qualitative coding software ATLAS.ti. Using "focused" coding, rather than inductive open coding, I analyzed this data with an eye for what Stefan Timmermans and Iddo Tavory (2022) would consider "promising themes" that were informed by my understanding of existing literature on memory, violence, and the state. In this way, my epistemological approach is aligned with what Tavory and Timmermans (2014) describe as "abductive"— the informed cultivation of "surprise" that allows data to speak on its own terms yet works within frames of interest for a specific community of scholarship.

Because this project engages the sociology of knowledge, some of my data serve as both primary *and* secondary sources: for example, a 1986 government report about conflict violence informs both my empirical backdrop of violence and also serves as evidence in a description about the knowledge construction process in Chapter 2. In general, I take these instances of

historical investigation as objectively true while also investigating their social construction and biases. This is because of the proximity of these reports and materials to Colombian historians and social scientists, which would constitute an accepted part of any bibliography under "usual" circumstances. In other words, I've tried to balance what could otherwise slip into a more radical constructivist perspective that nothing can be taken at face value. This kind of suspicion would undermine a postcolonial engagement with Colombian scholarship in the U.S. context by interpreting all historical narration of the conflict as merely the sum of its biases, without room for "objective" fact. This is a tension that I navigated while writing this dissertation and that I have only partially resolved through triangulating multiple sources and using my best judgement—informed by nearly six years of personal engagement in this project and direct interaction with key conflict scholars in Colombia—to determine which sources are reliable from a historiographical standpoint. This, at times, will include sources that have become politicized by various constituencies since their publication—including the recent Truth Commission report published in 2022.[21] Where relevant to my own argument, I highlight the political and social biases that go into producing such scholarship while emphasizing, especially, the legitimacy of academic research that has dedicated itself to the work of peace.

In my interview strategy, I engaged with informants less as a generalizable pool of a subset of social actors, and more as expert informants on the institutions and processes in which they participate. I recruited the majority of my over 40 informants based on their employment at specific organizations and after constructing a database of reports produced by key scholarly institutions—primarily the National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH) and the Center for Research on Historical Military Memory (CIMHM)—identifying the researchers acknowledged

[21] See Chapter 5 for more discussion on the immediate aftermath of the Truth Commission's work.

as authors and/or contributors to the reports. I also conducted site interviews with docents, librarians, and other staff at various public offices and exhibits. As a whole, my interview informants include social scientists, historians, docents, librarians, military officials, attorneys, bureaucrats, and journalists. I also triangulate the historical data stemming from my interviews with texts like newspaper articles, secondary histories, and memoirs.

From an epistemological standpoint, I sought to open the scope of scholarship I engage with beyond American-based historiography and sociological literature about Colombia to prioritize work produced by Colombian and other Latin American scholars who have written on these themes for decades prior. Particularly because this dissertation analyzes knowledge production, I take special care to emphasize key academic voices from Colombia not only as objects of study in this case but also interlocutors with which I hope to sustain a conversation. In concrete terms, this looks like quoting from scholarly interview informants as well as their published works to frame the historical and theoretical context of this study in addition to my findings. Or asking informants in the course of our interviews whether they see themselves as *participants* in state projects of historical memory or as expert informants *about* these projects—or both. This allows me to better contextualize the scholarly voices that make up the bulk of my data, especially in Chapter 2. Additionally, several interview informants requested continued conversations and to see the results of this study—indicating a more collaborative context for this research.

My intention for this dissertation was also to strike a balance between producing historical explanations for my selected case while also generating useful theory for further sociological research—something that single historical case studies are equipped to do, despite objections from some disciplines. As Dietrich Rueschemeyer delicately argues in his 2003 essay, "Can One or a Few Cases Yield Theoretical Gains?", the fruit of focusing sociological analysis on a single

historical case is the ability to dialogue with and revise the existing theoretical framework that the researcher engages with. In other words, it is too dismissive to take a "pure" historical approach and consider all causal explanation to be self-contained within the case, *and* it is not sufficient to ignore "small-n" studies from a positivist standpoint for their lack of generalizability. By carefully considering and situating my study of the Colombian state within a sociological framework of existing expectations, the resulting analysis can "talk back" to the guiding theories and inform future research in other national contexts.

Also related to the historical nature of this project, it is important to note that I engage with a "living history," in the sense that the scope of events included in this dissertation extended with each day that I was writing. Since I started data collection in 2018, the Colombian social and political landscape has experienced drastic shifts including the transition between a "denialist," right-wing presidential administration that undermined peace initiatives and the rise of Colombia's first Leftist president who ran on a campaign of "total peace." Throughout this period, the discursive environment around the civil conflict and victims has intensified or shifted in various ways, and I sought to capture this in my analysis across each chapter.

Finally, a discussion about the timeline of data collection must also highlight the global disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which halted all "business as usual" from March 2020 onward. The nature of social and global engagement changed dramatically, and this necessarily sparked questions of methodological shifts in the social science community. Sociologists began seriously considering *virtual* spaces as ethnographically plausible, and interviews pivoted from being "in-person" to being conducted over platforms like Zoom. I had planned for a year of fieldwork living in Bogotá, Colombia between 2020 and 2021, yet I adapted this plan to remain positioned in the U.S. (with the exception of smaller trips to Bogotá,

Medellín, and Cartagena—roughly three months in total) while conducting interviews online and attending livestreamed events relevant to the institutions in my case. In many cases, I believe the structure of Zoom interviews increased my access to some elite informants who were willing to share an hour of their time virtually in lieu of inviting a stranger into their office or a nearby café. Yet it should be noted that this pivot to online interviews was only viable for the scope of my project focused on professional actors who each had a computer and reliable Internet access; this would not be the case for other populations across Colombia and partly explains the absence of some public voices in my research including those of conflict victims and ground-level social activists who are also engaged in knowledge construction processes around the conflict.

Roadmap to the Dissertation

The following chapters are divided into three sub-cases, as discussed above. In Chapter 2, I take a broad historical view of the environment of knowledge construction surrounding conflict violence since the 1950s, with various state-funded commissions and initiatives. This activity eventually yielded a sub-field of "violent-ologists" by the 1980s, which then precipitated the permanent bureaucratic nature of the National Center for Historical Memory established in 2011. I argue that this instance of bureaucratization enabled a collaborative pattern of engagement for the state to involve subject-matter experts in the production of historical narratives of the conflict. In Chapter 3, I narrow the focus onto the particular expertise involved in constructing a legal victim category through congressional and civil society deliberation leading up to the Victims' Law of 2011 and the "elite historical narratives" that were the most influential in producing boundaries around the legislated vision of victimhood. Within the context of Congress, the state's engagement with expertise was primarily one of rejection, which was

partially determined by the format of congressional debate which siloed expert engagement. In Chapter 4, I continue the discussion on victim identity and historical memory by analyzing the adoption of these questions into a distinctive military context, especially after the 2016 Peace Agreement with the FARC, where the Public Forces have sought to construe its members as victims and thus authentic co-authors of historical memory in the country. It is through the military that we see the state most clearly attempting to coopt the work of civilian expertise when it comes to projecting a narrative of victimhood. The Conclusion (Chapter 5) offers a reflection on the current status of memory politics in the country along with key theoretical takeaways from the dissertation.

Chapter 2 The Rise of Violent-ology: How Colombian Institutions Evolved to Construct the Historical Memory of Civil War, 1958 – Present

State initiatives related to collective memory and truth are often seen as temporary fixtures or building blocks within broader transitional justice programs—prescribed as a remedy for societies pivoting from periods of disorder and violence toward a new era of democracy. The world has seen widely broadcast truth commissions like South Africa's (1995-2002), for example, as judicial aims to collect victim testimonies and seek justice in specially-created tribunals.[22] Organizationally, these are fleeting structures. Truth commissions—and their assemblages of experts, victims, perpetrators, and legal actors—are designed by nature to be transitional, buffering between eras of violence and peace. But what does an institutionalized pursuit of truth look like in places with ongoing conflict like Colombia, where civil war has remained intractable since the 1940s? Anthropologist Jefferson Jaramillo Marín observes that between 1950 and 2012, the Colombian state convened 12 investigative commissions into the country's civil war, which makes the country an "unprecedented case" globally (2014:27). There have been peaks and valleys in the shape of violence throughout the past several decades of Colombia's conflict, which have each sparked some form of institutional response by the state to recover facts and testimonies and to propose policy interventions for moving forward.

In this chapter, I argue that state-funded academic investigations into the causes and consequences of Colombia's ongoing civil war became increasingly institutionalized over the

[22] For more discussion on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), see Chapter 4 in Priscilla Hayner 2010.

course of 50 years in a way that reflects changing beliefs about the entrenched social dimensions of violence in the country. Whereas the first research commission—*La Investigadora* of 1958—was ordered in response to an acute and widespread outbreak of partisan violence in the countryside of Colombia, a later investigation in 1987 known as the Commission of Experts started to issue more generalized claims about social ills in the country as violence sprawled into urban settings and across wider sets of actors during this decade. Coinciding with this Commission was the emergence of a new field of scholars designated the "violent-ologists," which effectively initiated a pivot in Colombian strategy for conflict research—away from sporadic investigations ordered by individual presidential administrations and toward a sustained focus, culminating in the permanent government agency the National Center of Historical Memory (CNMH) by 2011. This chapter argues that this pivot in institutional design for projects of historical conflict investigation—from commission to permanent governmental agency—maps onto the shifting understandings of the nature of the violence occurring in the country and perhaps a slow acknowledgement that the roots of the conflict are tangled inextricably within many social layers and dynamics in the country—too diffuse to warrant a time-bound remedy of historical investigation and testimony collection.

I argue that the recent bureaucratization of conflict research—now designated "historical memory" work—has three specific consequences, among others: (1) the diffusion of conflict knowledge across broader organizational contexts, (2) a combined vulnerability and resilience to political influence in knowledge production, and (3) impacts on organizational aspects of the Colombian academy as a whole.[23] Within a broader conversation of the state's engagement with expertise, I show that this decision to locate the ongoing construction of historical memory

[23] The data in this chapter stems from primary archival documents (primarily in the first half) and ethnographic observation and expert interviews (primarily in the second half).

within a bureaucratic framework demonstrates a collaborative posture and the desire to co-create narratives with experts who may fall beyond the traditional organizational grasp of the state. Rather than following a conventional model of truth commission in which investigators are appointed through highly-centralized means, the National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH) in Colombia facilitates diverse contracts with academics across a variety of public and private universities, along with other experts in the form of activists and artists. The findings in this chapter reveal that the interactions in this bureaucratic context yield a particularly prolific and diverse set of historical memory "products" as compared to other arenas of the state where collaboration with experts is more constrained.

The Challenge of Truth in Chronic Crisis[24]

There is much existing research about post-conflict settings and the various institutional avenues for the construction and maintenance of truth in them (e.g. truth commissions).[25] Much less research has focused on what these institutional avenues look like in the midst of ongoing conflict. In her investigation of historical memory in twentieth century Spain, Josefina Cuesta (2008:127) argues that a sociological perspective doesn't construe "truth" as emerging from a "secret relationship between a witness and their memory" but from the *spaces* that receive, judge, and amplify these conveyed truths. Similarly, in his analysis of epistemic power in knowledge production about the Armenian Genocide, Joachim Savelsberg (2021) argues that the dissemination of knowledge about violence doesn't happen in a vacuum, but in institutions with

[24] I allude to the notion of "chronic crisis" here as based on Henrik Vigh's 2008 article about the notion of "crisis as context" in places of prolonged conflict and vulnerability. This contrasts with the typical understanding of crisis as acute and temporary.

[25] See Chapter Three of this dissertation along with Chapman and Ball 2001, Grandin and Klubock 2007, Emilio Crenzel 2012 and Hayner 2010.

their own institutional logics. As such, much existing research focuses on the organizational features of the judiciary as a primary platform for these truth processes (Skaar 2011; González Ocantos et al 2019). Special tribunals are often created apart from regular judicial procedures to expediently deliver judgments on crimes committed in the context of large-scale conflict.

Infusing a more comprehensive approach, truth commissions have been diagnosed as a remedy for post-conflict states dealing with competing narratives about the past. They've also been flagged as hopeful conduits for reconciliation and symbolic reparations for victims. South Africa's is perhaps the most famous, and within the Latin American region Guatemala, El Salvador, and the commissions of the Southern Cone are notable (Hayner 2010). Yet even in cases where truth commissions have been studied amply from an organizational perspective, less research has been done on contexts like Colombia that have embarked on permanent truth initiatives that are integrated into the bureaucratic ecosystem of a national government. Chapman and Ball (2001:5) discuss the institutional limitations that they see as "intrinsic" to truth commissions as a model for transitional justice: "limited resources, dependence on cooperation from officials who served the previous regime, missing data, and political environments that limit their mandate and options." The authors also warn about a temporal dimension to the limitations of a truth commission, citing the fragility of individual memories of victims over time and the likelihood of memories to change. Thinking about temporality more generally, the assumption from existing scholarship is that truth commissions happen *after* a conflict has ended, and that the duration of a commission has more to do with the time necessary to collect existing data and testimonies, rather than setting itself up with capabilities to monitor and interpret real-time violence.

In the Colombian case, investigative truth commissions have emerged in parallel with the violence they seek to capture and analyze. This chapter proceeds by tracing the Colombian state's attempts to champion and promote official knowledge production about the conflict in the midst of ongoing violence since *La Violencia* in the 1950s. I argue that the recent creation of a permanent, federal agency for conflict research in 2011—the National Center for Historical Memory—inaugurated a more protracted approach to knowledge production that reflects a consensus about the entrenched nature of violence in the country. By the end of the chapter, I outline some key consequences of this bureaucratization of historical memory based on expert interviews and archival data.

"*La Investigadora*" Commission (1958)

The seeds of the contemporary field of historical memory in Colombia are evident in the first national inquiry into the origins and impact of *La Violencia* in 1958, officially titled the "National Research Commission on the Causes and Current Situations of Violence in the National Territory." Known simply as *La Investigadora*, short for "the research commission," this commission tasked seven men—politicians, military generals, and Catholic priests—with traveling throughout the countryside for a total of eight months. Their goal was to compile evidence including interviews and local archives detailing the causes and impacts of partisan violence in known conflict territories since roughly 1930. *La Investigadora* was officially mandated by governmental decree at the start of the National Front, a political powersharing arrangement between Liberal and Conservative elites that would last until 1974. As detailed in the prologue of the commission's final report, their self-professed purpose was to "visit affected

zones, discern the problems and needs of the peoples, and inform the government so that they can establish new and more rational official actions" (Guzmán et al 1962:15).[26]

This hearkening to "rational" political action is intertwined with the overtly scientific approach that *La Investigadora* assumed, which can be traced to its embeddedness in the birth of Latin America's first sociology department at the National University of Colombia in 1959. As part of its founding work, the Department of Sociology was specifically tasked with producing *La Investigadora'*s final report—*Violence in Colombia: Study of a Social Process*—using the empirical evidence collected by the group (see Figure 4). In the prologue of this two-volume monograph, sociologist Orlando Fals Borda situates the text within the mission of the new Sociology Department—"to serve the country and to create science" (Guzmán et al 1962:12). He further sings the praise of this disciplinary focus, calling sociology the "new frontier of science" and declaring that its "promotion should satisfy the most demanding of scientists and critics and help to solve many of society's problems, both big and small" (Guzmán et al 1962:12). It should also be noted that structurally, the Sociology Department got its start as an extension of the Department of Economic Sciences before winning its final formal designation as a distinct department at the National University on May 5, 1961 (Silva Colmaneres 1961).

[26] The citation here, Guzmán et al 1962, will be used frequently throughout this section and refers to the primary text of *La Investigadora*'s final report *Violence in Colombia*.

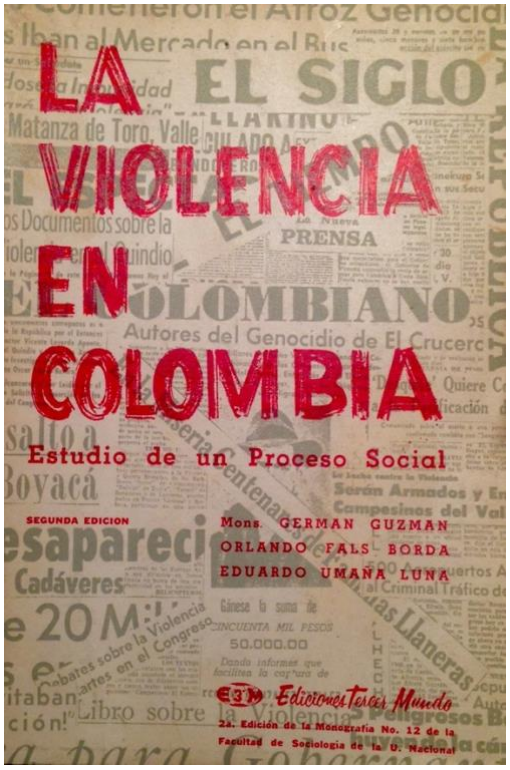


Figure 4 Cover of the 1962 edition of the Ediciones Tercer Mundo publication of *La Violencia en Colombia* report, meant for public dissemination. Source: http://germanguzman.univalle.edu.co/home/cronologia (retrieved on March 29, 2023).

La Investigadora's final report *Violence in Colombia* was meant to occupy a specific genre of public social science, distinct from less "rational" commentaries on the state of Colombia's ongoing violence. This is echoed in the introduction by Third World Editions, the first publisher of the monograph for a public audience, that declares the report's "rigorous perspective" on the country's conflict to be distinct from the abundance of existing accounts in poetry, novels, stories, and essays.[27] The report instead offers a so-called objective perspective that allows "an examination free from (biased) considerations" (Guzmán et al 1962:9). In line with this celebrated rigor, co-author Orlando Fals Borda ends the report's prologue with an

[27] Third World Editions was itself founded on the mission of "disseminating Latin American thought within the social sciences." Although it had public appeal during its 40 year tenure as a publishing company, most readers were a "restricted public" spanning mainly intellectuals and researchers (El Tiempo, 2001).

enumerated outline of the eight sociological methods used in their analysis and in *La Investigadora*'s overall data collection. These include "direct observation via car, horse, and foot" of conflict zones, guided interviews with various individuals including guerrilla and military leaders, clergymen, and exiles, archival research including court and governmental records, visual documentation and map-making, and statistical analysis (Guzmán et al 1962:17).

The pages of *Violence in Colombia* (1962, across Volumes I and II) are organized partly in accordance with a historical arc—e.g. the first few chapters discuss the various waves of *La Violencia* and its antecedents, including the assassination of populist leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán—yet largely according to analytical headings, suggestive of a more social scientific approach. These include chapters like: "Tactics and Norms of the Armed Groups," "Biographical Sketches of Guerilla Leaders," and "Mortality Statistics." In many of the chapters, testimonies from interviews conducted by the commissioners are interwoven with government reports, newspaper articles, and hand-drawn maps to produce a collage of evidence embedded in interpretive text. The chapter dedicated exclusively to "mortality statistics" contains more tables than text, as it lays out an entire appendix of dates and locations of specific violent actions between 1958 and 1963.

An additional method included in the report that Fals Borda described merely as "personal experience" was ascribed to the contributions of Fr. Germán Guzmán Campos, the first author of the report who had several years of experience working in conflict areas prior to being designated as a commissioner with *La Investigadora*. Although Fr. Guzmán would eventually earn a doctorate degree in the social sciences two decades later, his primary identity as a participant in *La Investigadora* and its analysis in *Violence in Colombia* was as a Catholic

priest.[28] Glossy black-and-white images included in the centerfold of the report's 1962 edition feature Fr. Guzmán standing alongside armed guerrilla members wearing a black cassock and smiling warmly for the camera (see Figure 5). His contributions to the report weave together both empirical findings from his tour through the countryside—including excerpts of dialogue with community members and maps indicating locations of fighting and displacement—along with moral appeals for peace. According to Fr. Guzmán, as summarized by Fals Borda, "we are all capable, by commission or omission, of the violent acts that have occurred" (Guzmán et al 1962). This particular language echoes the Christian concept of sin, the "commission or omission" of actions that constitute evil, which in this case refers to the carnage of partisan violence. The unique intertwining of scientific and moral appeals, fostered by the collaboration between a priest and a sociology department, constitute what Fals Borda describes as "a valuable experience in co-authorship that I would dare to call unusual in this country" (Guzmán 1962:17).

[28] Universidad del Valle. "Germán Guzmán Campos: Biografía." Archivo Virtual Germán Guzmán Campos. Retrieved on March 28, 2023 (https://germanguzman.univalle.edu.co/home/biografiagcc).

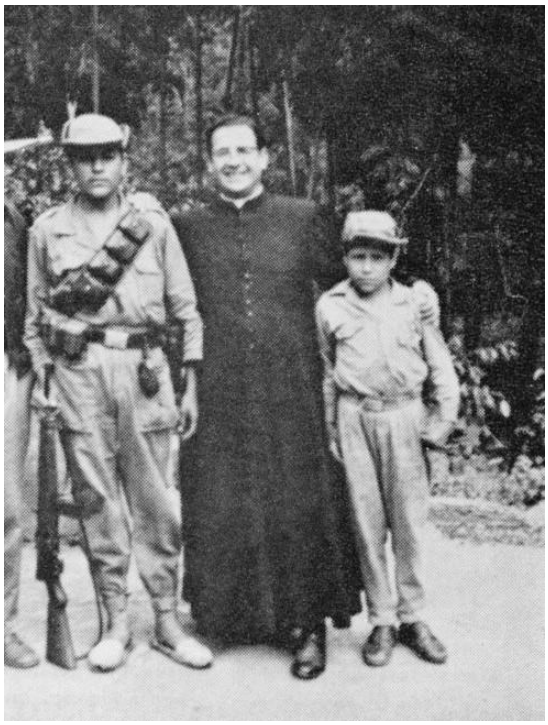


Figure 5 Fr. Germán Guzmán Campos alongside child guerrilla soldiers as part of his travels with the 1958 Commission. Source: http://germanguzman.univalle.edu.co/home/cronologia (retrieved on March 28, 2023).

The separate scientific and moral claims presented in *Violence in Colombia* find harmony in the overarching appeal to a "civilized" discourse that Fals Borda calls for in the early pages of the report. This invocation of the "civilized" versus barbaric—manifest in the text's persuading its national readers to behave as "men and not beasts"—sheds light on what the authors perceive the function of their scientific and religious framework to be throughout the report. They situate the publication of *Violence in Colombia* as a triumph considering all that the commissioners had to overcome in the countryside with the immense "ignorance" that "clouded the whole environment and made the researcher's analytical task more difficult" (1962:14). Alongside these pointed critiques of their countrymen, the authors actually situate their work as a reconciliatory intervention into the "ignorance" and barbaric actions of partisan combatants—not just a passive documentation of the violence from the outside. In the midst of their data

collection, *La Investigadora* actively facilitated 52 peace agreements among local factions (Guzmán et al 1962). Fr. Guzmán narrates the commissioners' attempts to pacify the peasants (*campesinos*) they encountered, establishing an "environment of serenity and trust" in which the "intimate outpouring of feelings" could be channeled into dialogue and ultimately ceasefire agreements (1962:111). The report also quotes from a contemporaneous newspaper article in the national *El Tiempo* headquartered in Bogotá, titled "Making Contact with the Peasants":

> "It's the first time, said the peasants, that they came to ask us about what happened…to talk with us about peace without putting a bullet in us afterwards."

The dual role of *La Investigadora* commissioners as both peacemakers and researchers led to a fluid and evolving public imagination of the commission. On one hand, most national press attention at the time focused on the commission's image of peacemaking. Contemporary Colombian sociologist Jefferson Jaramillo Marín (2014:50) describes its media reputation sharply as a peacemaking mission led by "educated gentlemen" that would overcome "the barbarity of the peasant masses" and bring "national salvation." On the ground, the reception of these "educated gentlemen" in guerrilla-controlled, rural villages was conditioned by the unique combination of clergymen and social scientists in the group. In contemporary sociologist Jefferson Jaramillo Marín's view, the prominence of Fr. Guzmán Campos in the wandering caravan meant that the official interviews conducted by the commission had a confession-like quality to them:

> "The commissioners succeeded in camouflaging the collection of testimonies with the clothing of confession, or of spiritual counseling." (2014:59)

Yet in the final destination of these testimonies—in the meticulously-presented data of *Violence in Colombia* after the commission was complete—the academic face of the

commissioners emerged. The hybrid identity of peacemaker and researcher could later be considered part of a "therapeutic-academic business," which Jaramillo Marín (2014) believes was established as a precedent with the 1958 *Investigadora*. The double-edged sword of peace and research, along with the mixed rhetoric of social science and morality intertwined in the final report, is formative within the longer arc of historical memory projects in Colombian history.

Critiques of La Investigadora

Despite the commission's steps to synthesize both peacemaking and research, contemporary reflections on the work of the 1958 *La Investigadora* and its report credit it with setting an elitist precedent for future initiatives of conflict research. In his 2017 book *Forgotten Peace*, historian Robert Karl highlights the distinction between "violence-as-practice" and "violence-as-idea" that was generated by the work of *La Investigadora*. He explains:

> "For urban Colombians, violence seemed primarily a problem of knowledge: before they could hope to eradicate violence as a widespread practice in public life, they first had to comprehend its origins and scope." (Karl 2017:9)

In other words, there was a disconnection between the embodied crisis of violence in the countryside and the notion of "violence-as-idea" that Colombians in the capital city of Bogotá grappled with through research and writing. Karl situates the 1958 commissioners as part of a broader landscape of politically-connected intelligentsia—or "*país letrado,*" literally "the literate nation"—that were engaged in various projects investigating the country's ongoing conflict. This included Gonzalo Canal Ramírez, a Bogotá-based writer and lawyer with close ties to the military, who published so-called "macabre statistics" detailing the estimates of nearly 200,000 Colombian lives lost to partisan violence since the late 1940s (Karl 2017). Similar to members of

La Investigadora, Canal Ramírez had initially been asked by the military junta in May 1958 to collect interviews in the countryside with the purpose of informing public policy and potential economic intervention as a solution to the conflict. This pipeline between collecting data and informing policy never materialized in Canal Ramírez's case, so he took his interview materials and testimonies and instead produced a film, "This Was My Village," that reached nearly half a million in theaters (Karl 2017).[29] This unintended consequence of what was initially a policy-oriented pursuit—the funneling of state-sponsored empirical research into cultural and artistic projects—would later prove part of a pattern with similar conflict research in later decades in Colombia.

In a 2005 essay by sociologist Orlando Fals Borda, an original author of the 1962 *Violence in Colombia* report, he laments the narrow trajectory of his past research and similar initiatives like the 1987 Commission of Experts, which was based yet again in the National University in Bogotá:

> "The fact is that there has been much theory and very little effective action regarding the violence and its impact." (2005:12)

Fals Borda goes on to critique the science-obsessed influence of early conflict research in the country that insisted on creating "paradigms" out of their theses about Colombian violence, pretending as if the violence was a "natural" or universal phenomenon rather than a local one. He instead argues that researchers should (and should have) focused on those "discernible patterns…that have defined our specific reality: the reality of the tropics and its peoples, cultures, and resources that have gained their own signification since the beginning of time." (2005: 13).

[29] This film was recently showcased by the Foundation of Colombian Film Patrimony on October 20, 2021. To see commentary from this event and images from the original film, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6WlWhRO8bvc (last accessed April 25, 2024).

These sentiments mark a departure from his statements four decades earlier in the original prologue of *Violence in Colombia*, which sought to align the authors' work with a more universal mission of legitimizing the newly-minted sociology department at the National University. In that prologue, he emphasizes their goal as engaging with "the wise teachings of the great masters" of sociology—most of which are anchored *outside* of Latin America—as well as aspiring to "methodically catalogue local social facts without losing sight of the universal dimension of science" (Guzmán et al 1962:11). Fals Borda's evolving perspectives on the appropriate academic foundations for conflict research reveal the extent to which *La Investigadora* remains a touchstone for scholarly discourse. The methodological tension he underscores between adopting a universal/scientific approach and a cultural/local approach in producing knowledge about the Colombian conflict is a relatively technical debate and not one of primary concern to the Colombian public or other audiences outside of academia.

Commissioner and main author of *Violence in Colombia,* Fr. Germán Guzmán Campos, commented on contemporary critiques about the reputation and legacy of the book in a 1984 address at the First International Symposium about Violence in Colombia, held in Bogotá. Diverging from Fals Borda's later critique about the book's scientific tone, Guzmán acknowledged that critics blamed him and his co-authors for assuming too *descriptive* of a tone. He also quoted directly from a critique that accused the book of speaking of violence in the "past tense," with this anonymous critic saying:

> "The book by Guzmán, Umaña Luna and Fals Borda reassures the executioners; it speaks of violence in the past, violence is already a fact of history, of yesterday. it speaks of what happened but which, thank god, is now over." (Guzmán 1984:20).

In the afterlife of the commission's work and book, the Colombian conflict would continue on for decades to come. Government administrations came and went, yet insurgent groups

proliferated along with new market incentives as narcotrafficking entered the scene by the 1980s. These new wave(s) of violence would become the topic of later investigative commissions mandated by the government, including one in 1987 called the Commission of Experts.

The Commission of Experts (1987)

Whereas *La Violencia* was met with a singular research commission in 1958, the ongoing violence(s) of sprawling guerrilla, military, and paramilitary groups extending into the 1980s (and beyond) raised the issue of channeling more sustained scholarly attention toward the conflict. By 1987, Colombia had seen the intensification of insurgent activity by key groups like the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) along with the consolidation of conservative paramilitary groups and the advent of sophisticated narcotrafficking networks.[30] The fighting was no longer relegated to the countryside as it was during *La Violencia* and instead had expanded into urban areas with the growth of kidnapping schemes, political assassinations, bombings, and other violent acts.[31] Under President Virgilio Barco in 1987, a "commission of experts" was formed to evaluate the contemporary status of the civil war—and more broadly, the problem of new forms of violence spilling into urban areas—in Colombia and, importantly, to prescribe policy recommendations to accompany their observations.

Financed by the Ministry of Science (then named Colciencias) a team of ten men—including two anthropologists, six sociologists, a university dean, and a retired military general— met "weekly or sometimes biweekly in Bogotá" for a series of months, collaboratively

[30] See Chapter One of this dissertation for more context as well as Pizarro 1986, Bergquist et al 1992, LeGrand 2003, Arjona 2016, Steele 2017, Cubides 1999, and López and Sevillano 2008.
[31] Ibid.

drafting what would come to be their final report: *Colombia: Violence and Democracy* (see Figure 6). As opposed to the 1958 commissioners, this group of experts did not conduct extensive fieldwork to collect data but rather drew primarily from newspaper sources and government statistics. In the prologue of the final report, the chair commissioner Gonzalo Sánchez Gómez (a historian-sociologist who will prove to be a central figure in the emerging field of "violent-ology" in Colombia) immediately situates the group within the lineage of the 1958 Commission. He recalls *La Investigadora* by name yet insists that the present commission's scope is more "modest" in the sense that they are focused only on research and not on the interventional practices and peacebuilding initiatives of the earlier commissioners. However, despite not actively meddling in the "territories" as peacebuilders, these new commissioners of 1987 would establish the framework of future peace negotiations by providing crucial categorizations of what kinds of violence and its perpetrators are politically relevant—either to prompt negotiations or relegate them as common crimes and criminals outside the scope of "official" violence (Rojas Cabal 2023).

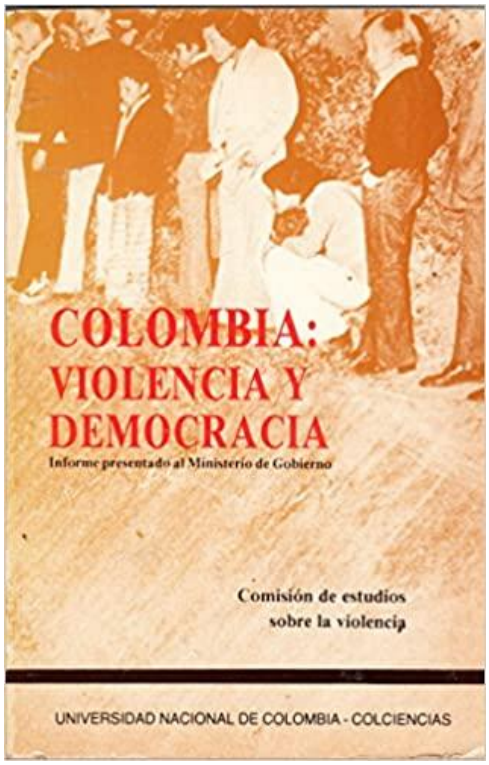


Figure 6 Cover of the report titled *Colombia: Violencia y Democracia* written by the Commission of Experts (also referred to as the Commission of Studies about Violence) and published by Colciencias and the National University of Colombia in 1988. Source: University of Michigan library.

The unique problem that the 1987 commissioners had to confront was the multiplicity of forms of violence then plaguing the country. On this theme Sánchez later recalls:

> "Until that moment, the idea of violence was identified with the traditional vision of some grand political violence or of guerrilla confrontation. But the fundamental contribution of (our) book was…putting on the table, putting in evidence, something that had become a fact: the *multiplicity* of violences." (Sánchez quoted in Galindo and Valencia 1999:196)

More specifically, the experts had to distinguish "continuities" from "radical discontinuities" in the patterns of *La Violencia* of the 1940s and 1950s and the contemporary violence of the 1980s. As astute social scientists, the group focused on building a typology of violences. In the first part of their report, they list out ten types of violence, among which are labels like "violence of the

State against social movements" and "violence of organized crime against politicians and journalists." Their goal in this section wasn't necessarily to discuss modalities of violent acts but to specify unique configurations of perpetrators and victims like "the State" and "journalists," respectively.

While the report points to a broadening or generalizing of violence in the country—beyond solely the "political dimension" that had dominated the narrative until then—it does so in the context of a specific geographic claim that emphasizes urban violence over rural violence. In the opening paragraphs of the first part of the report, the authors write:

> "Much more than the violence of the countryside, the violences that are killing us most (today) are those on the street." (1988:18).

Several decades later, anthropologist and Colombian congressman Jorge Andrés Cancimance, comments that this narrative shift was a "turning point for the Colombian academy," who until then had not ventured far into explaining violence that was not archetypically "partisan" or political (Cancimance 2012). With a more critical lens, peace activist and president of the Colombia's Institute of Studies for Development and Peace (INDEPAZ), Camilo Gonzalez Posso, suggests that the commisioners' legacy diverted attention away from comprehensive analysis of violence by focusing primarily on "street crime" (CMPR 2014).

The 1987 commission ushered in the birth of a new breed of public intellectual: the "*violentólogo*" (violentologist). Sociologist Fernando Cubides (1987) has defined this professional term as having emerged in journalism but being well-received (at the time) by the academics to which it applied, along with the general public engaged in the violentologists' works. Cubides (1987:94) further claims that the violentologist exists within a "moral community which is different in part from that which ordinarily binds scholars of the same

subject." In other words, violentologists were not merely members of an academic niche, but were drawn into a public-facing arena with moral stakes. In the scope of Gonzalo Sánchez' own biography, his identity as a founding violentologist was relatively accidental. He explains in an interview that he specifically left for Europe after the 1987 Commission's report was finished as a way to distance himself from the conversation and to seek new academic opportunities in other subfields (Galindo and Valencia 1999). But as violence in his home country continued into the 1990s with the proliferation of narcotrafficking and paramilitary groups, Sánchez was called upon as an expert to address this problem in various talks in Europe and eventually back in Colombia by invitation. This led to him writing another book on the Colombian conflict shortly after in the 1990s (Galindo and Valencia 1999). Another commissioner, sociologist Eduardo Pizarro Leongómez, would go on to write seven academic articles in 1988 alone focused on violence, peace, and the military. Many others in the commission would remain prominent voices as violentologists in the decades that followed.

Notable social theorist Daniel Pécaut questioned the scientific "universalizing" approach of some violentologists in a 1993 talk in Cali in conjunction with the Universidad del Valle's Department of Social Sciences.[32] Pécaut put at the forefront a question of whether the naturalized multiplicity of violences taxonomized by contemporary violentologists and the 1987 commissioners was a suitable explanation for Colombia's strife. In this talk, he also underscored a central paradox in the 1987 report as naming the social and political factors contributing to a general culture of violence in the country, while also undermining the connectedness of events like urban homicides to actual political and social fights like the violence of the 1950s. He

[32] Pécaut, Daniel. 1993. "¿Es posible aún una interpretación global de los fenómenos recientes de la violencia en Colombia?" Talk delivered in the auditorium of the Bank of the Republic in Cali, Colombia on October 13. Retrieved April 23, 2024 (https://bibliotecadigital.univalle.edu.co/server/api/core/bitstreams/3200ceff-b255-415a-8b97-70f9a6d5fbf2/content).

concludes that the 1987 violentologists fit within a broader pattern of Colombian researchers who "dare to suggest universal interpretations" of "violent phenomena" (Pécaut 1993:3).

The criticism that this particular group of violentologists in 1987 was too bold in making universal claims perhaps maps on to a sociological logic that had already—implicitly or explicitly—left its mark from the early work of *La Investigadora* in 1958. The social sciences, would continue to dominate the genre of "historical memory" commissioned by the state well into the 1990s through the 2010s. The rest of this chapter will trace the way that academics have shaped and been shaped by the increasing institutionalization of memory work in Colombia. Whereas the 1958 and 1987 commissions represent a form of sporadic investigation with fixed terms of research, limited timelines, and singular publications, the country began forming more longstanding solutions to the need for analyzing ongoing violence(s) in the midst of a conflict that has not ceased.

Institutionalizing the Field of Historical Memory

If the 1987 Commissioners were correct in their assessment that violence was entrenched in multiple facets of Colombian society—and that this warranted sustained scholarly attention—then the persistence of these wounds would demand a growing supply of academics and institutions by the early 2000s. The endurance of the conflict through multiple waves and multiple actors into the 21st century indeed meant that the work of cataloguing, analyzing, synthesizing, and disseminating information about Colombia's violence was becoming a regular type of academic labor. This genre of applied investigative scholarship would come to find an institutional home in a permanently-existing state entity by 2011—the National Center of Historical Memory (CNMH), which will be discussed in great detail below. This Center is part

of a broader ecosystem that emerged most robustly in the early 2000s as a *field of historical memory,* composed of organizational structures from civil society, the state, and academia. The road from the conflict-oriented investigative efforts of 20th century Colombia to the historical memory production of the 21st century is not a straight line, rather it was facilitated through the converging efforts of human rights organizations and other civil society actors that introduced new authoritative voices—particularly those of the *victims* of violence—into scholarly publications.

In contrast to the top-down origins of the two previously discussed commissions from 1958 and 1987—stemming from the priorities of presidential administrations (despite grafting in various actors from civil society)—the field of "historical memory" was initially called for from a grassroots base (Wills 2022) . The integration of the more formal academic efforts of the violentologists into the field of work that could be called "historical memory" starts with the story of a rising human rights consciousness and mobilization on the broader South American continent in the 1970s. In Chile, as a response to state violence under Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship, families of the thousands of tortured and "disappeared" victims (*desaparecidos*) turned toward civil society organizations like the Catholic Church's Vicariate of Solidarity to assist in documenting violations, preserving their testimonies, and providing legal, psychological, and material support (Bickford 1999). Over time, NGOs like Chile's Vicariate of Solidarity grew to possess immense archives of photographs, death certificates, testimonies, and other "traces" of Pinochet's victims that could serve as the basis for a collective picture of Pinochet's violence. These raw materials from intake files that had been deployed in strategic legal pursuits were also woven together into various publication formats for broader public awareness. The Vicariate succeeded in publishing 300 editions of a periodical called *Solidaridad*

(see Figure 7) that interspersed Biblical and pastoral meditations with in-depth reporting on ongoing violence and published lists of victim names.[33]

Inspired by these efforts in Chile and similar mobilization in Argentina by the well-known activist group Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo[34], Colombian organizations began organizing around similar strategies despite the complexity of the country's multi-actor civil war (in which the state only accounted for *some* but not all of the violence). In 1987, the Jesuit-founded Center for Research and Popular Education (CINEP) in Bogotá established a "Program for Peace" which maintained a database of human rights violations that was also published in the periodical *Justicia y Paz* (Justice and Peace), which is reminiscent of Chile's *Solidaridad* periodical. The pages of *Justicia y Paz* were filled with lists describing names, places, dates, and details of human rights violations throughout Colombia and was specifically published by the Inter-ecclesial Commission of Justice and Peace (see Figure 8).[35] It's important to note that in this work—similar to the Vicariate's in Chile—the organization serves on the receiving end of information and data about victims of violence rather than primarily seeking out "empirical data" for knowledge projects, as in the case of *La Investigadora* and the 1987 Commission in Colombia. Through its permanent institutional stature, CINEP became a trusted depository over time where victims' families could turn to for assistance and recognition—seeking out the organization rather than passively being approached as part of a data collection process.[36]

[33] Biblioteca Nacional de Chile, "La Vicaría de la Solidaridad (1973-1992)." Retrieved Dec. 28, 2023 (https://www.memoriachilena.gob.cl/602/w3-article-3547.html#presentacion).

[34] The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo formally organized in April 1977 to collectively denounce the disappearances of their children—gathering publicly in the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires. (Memoria Abierta. Retrieved April 25, 2024 at https://memoriaabierta.org.ar/wp/memorias-de-la-memoria-madres-de-plaza-de-mayo/).

[35] This observation is based on my archival analysis of *Justicia y Paz*. Retrieved Nov 27, 2018 (https://www.nocheyniebla.org/?page_id=171).

[36] Interview, June 27, 2018.



111. García Vega Alfredo Gabriel
112. Gedda Ortiz Maximo
113. González Inostroza Hernán Galo
114. González Inostroza María Elena
115. González De Asis Guillermo
116. González Espinoza Ignacio
117. González Fernández Héctor Gerardo
118. González González Luis Enrique
119. González Núñez Claudio
120. González Osorio Carlos Manuel
121. González Pérez Rodolfo Valentín
122. Grez Aburto Jorge Arturo
123. Guajardo Zamorano Luis Julio
124. Guendelman Winniack Luis
125. Guerrero Gutiérrez Carlos Eduardo
126. Gutiérrez Ayala Daniel Antonio
127. Gutiérrez Avila Artemio Segundo
128. Gutiérrez Martínez María Isabel
129. Gutiérrez Rivas Luis Sergio
130. Gutiérrez Seguel Sergio
131. Heredia Vásquez Miguel Andrés
132. Herrera Cotré Jorge
133. Hernández Flores Carlos Segundo
134. Hernández Flores Nelson
135. Hernández Flores Oscar Humberto
136. Hernández Orrego José Daniel
137. Herrera Villegas José Manuel
138. Huiquinir Benavides Joel
139. Ibarra Toledo Juan Ernesto
140. Ibarra Córdova Fabián
141. Jara Castro José Segundo
142. Jiménez Cortés Luis Carlos
143. Jimeno Grendi Claudio
144. Jorquera Encina Mauricio Edmundo
145. Joui Petersen María Isabel
146. Labrador Urrutia Ramón Isidro
147. Labrín Sazo María Cecilia
148. Lagos Cid Luis Humberto
149. Lagos Hidalgo Sergio
150. Lagos Marín Sergio Humberto
151. Lagos Marín Ogan Esteban
152. Lagos Nilson Glora Ester
153. Lagos Salinas Ricardo
154. Lara Petrovich Eduardo Enrique
155. Laurie Luengo Aroldo Vivian
156. Lazo Maldonado Luis Rodolfo
157. Lazo Maldonado Samuel del Tránsito
204. Muñoz Peñaloza Ramiro Antonio
205. Muñoz Peñaloza Silvestre René
206. Muñoz Rodríguez Luis Gregorio
207. Mura Morales Juan Miguel
208. Negrete Peña César Antonio
209. Neira Muñoz Marta
210. Núñez Espinoza Ramón Osvaldo
211. Ojeda Jara Jorge
212. Olea Alegría Víctor
213. Olivares Mori Fernando de la Cruz
214. Olivares Grainborge Jorge
215. Olivares Pérez Mario Samuel
216. Olmos Guzmán Gary Nelson
217. Orellana Meza José
218. Ortiz Moraga Jorge
219. Ortiz Orellana Ramón Remigio
220. Ortiz Valladares Francisco Hernán
221. Oyarzo Torres Bautista Segundo
222. Oyarzún Soto Flavio Arquímides
223. Palominos Benítez Vicente
224. Palominos Rojas Luis Jaime
225. Parada González Alejandro Arturo
226. Peña Marreros Michelle
227. Peña Fuenzalida Juan Francisco
228. Peña Solari Mario Fernando
229. Peña Solari Nilda Patricia
230. Pereira Salsberg Andrés
231. Perelman Ide Juan Carlos
232. Pérez Godoy Pedro
233. Pérez Hermosilla José Leonardo
234. Pérez Molina Sergio
235. Pérez Vargas Carlos Fraty
236. Pinto Caroca Héctor
237. Pinto Caroca Pedro
238. Pizarro Menicoml Isidro
239. Poblete Córdova Pedro Enrique
240. Ponce Vicencio Exequiel
241. Quinteros Miranda Abelardo de Jesús
242. Quiñones Lenbach Marcos Esteban
243. Radelgan Plaza Anselmo
244. Ramírez Gallegos María Julieta
245. Ramírez Nogales José Manuel
246. Retamales Briceño Asrael Leonardo
247. Reyes González Agustín Eduardo
248. Reyes Navarrete Sergio Alfonso
249. Reyes Piña Daniel Abraham
250. Riffo Ramos Sergio Alejandro
297. Tello Garrido Teobaldo Antonio
298. Terán de la Jara Carlos
299. Toro Garland Gonzalo Marcial
300. Toro Romero Enrique
301. Tormen Mendez Sergio Daniel
302. Torres Aravena Ruperto
303. Trejo Saavedra Luis Hernán
304. Urbina Chamorro Gilberto Patricio
305. Uribe Tamblay Bárbara
306. Ugas Morales Rodrigo Eduardo
307. Valenzuela Alvarez Basilio
308. Valenzuela Figueroa Luis Armando
309. Valenzuela Leiva Luis
310. Valladares Caroca Oscar Enrique
311. Vallejos Villagrán Alvaro Modesto
312. Valle Pérez José Miguel
313. Van Jurick Altamirano Edwin Fco.
314. Van Schowen Vasey Bautista
315. Vargas Barrientos Pedro León
316. Vasquez Sáenz Jaime Enrique
317. Vega Ramírez Luis Eduardo
318. Venegas Lazzaro Claudio
319. Vera Almarza Ida
320. Vera Figueroa Sergio Emilio
321. Vergara Doxrud Héctor Patricio
322. Vergara González Luis Armando
323. Vergara Inostroza Pedro José
324. Vicencio González Héctor Orlando
325. Vidal Molina José Alfredo
326. Vilches Figueroa Abel Alfredo
327. Villalobos Díaz Manuel Jesús
328. Villar Quijón Elías
329. Villagra Astudillo José Caupolicán
330. Villarroel Ganga Víctor Manuel
331. Weibel Navarrete Ricardo Manuel
332. Wiff Sepúlveda Modesta Carolina
333. Yáñez Jiménez Horacio Jesús
334. Zelaya Suazo Carlos
335. Ziede Gómez Eduardo Humberto
336. Zúñiga Tapia Héctor Cayetano
337. Zúñiga Zúñiga Eduardo Fernando

PERSONAS QUE HAN DESAPARECIDO DURANTE LOS SEIS PRIMEROS MESES DE 1976 Y CUYO PARADERO ACTUAL SE DESCONOCE.

Figure 7 A list from Chile's *Solidaridad* magazine (No. 4, October 19, 1976) of "people who have disappeared...and whose whereabouts are unknown" in the country. Source: https://www.memoriachilena.gob.cl/602/w3-article-3547.html#documentos (retrieved Dec. 13, 2023).

E. DESAPARECIDOS

Día	*Sitio*	*Nombre*	*Datos*
6	El Castillo (Meta)	Libardo Hernández Baudilio Alba 4 N.N.	6 campesinos secuestrados por un grupo armado. La versión oficial atribuye la autoría a las FARC.
8	San José de Ocune (Vichada)	José A. Ricardo	Militante de la U.P. detenido por el Ejército en zona rural. Luego negaron tenerlo en su poder.
9	Puerto Gaitán (Meta)	Jairo Humberto Rey Hernando Méndez V.	Tesorero y personero del municipio (el primero Liberal, el segundo de la U.P.), desaparecidos por desconocidos que los obligaron a abordar un vehículo en el sitio El Tomate.
10	Morroa (Sucre)	Gustavo Enrique Guzmán Luis Ortega Guzmán Neiro Muñoz Pineda Miguel Ignacio Muñoz	Desaparecidos cuando se dirigían a Barranquilla en búsqueda de empleo.
10	La Macarena (Meta)	Ezequiel Asaisa	Concejal de la U.P. secuestrado por desconocidos.
10	Neiva (Huila)	Juan de la Cruz Moreno	Profesor del INEM y de la Universidad Surcolombiana, desaparecido.
13	Ituango (Ant.)	Schalabach Hollmann	Militante de la U.P. secuestrado por desconocidos que incendiaron la sede del movimiento.
16	Bogotá, D. E.	Fernando Erazo Murcia Bertha Lucía Martínez de Erazo Benjamín Muñoz	Militantes del M-19 detenidos por agentes de seguridad en la carrera 19 con calle 39. Un documento entregado a la Procuraduría transcribe comunicaciones captadas y grabadas por radioaficionados que permiten deducir que los detenidos fueron investigados por el DAS y luego entregados a la XIII Brigada del Ejército. Las mis-

Figure 8 A list from *Justicia y Paz* magazine (Vol. 1, No. 2, 1988) of disappeared people in Colombia. Similar to Chile's *Solidaridad*, this is an early publication within the "historical memory" field, focused on the documentation and publication of human rights abuses. Source: CINEP (retrieved Nov 21, 2018).

While the initial collection of victim information in Colombia in the 1980s and 1990s was aimed at the concrete goal to provide material aid and legal justice, this slowly precipitated a

portfolio of knowledge—"subaltern experience"—in the form of collected photographs, intake forms from family members, newspaper clippings, death certificates, and more that could be elaborated into multipurpose memory projects.[37] In other words, what would eventually become public memory projects were first private investigations as families searched for loved ones. Archivist and educator César Osorio Sánchez considers this process—from private suffering to public knowledge—to be foundational to the construction of historical memory more globally. He explains:

> "Suffering is the driving force to leave a "trace." And this trace has a very practical purpose: to find the missing person, to record what happens to the prisoners, how they are torturing him... This then becomes known at an international level, so that reports (of violence) can be made." (Interview, August 13, 2021)

As such, the "traces" of violence are first the product of an intimate suffering and then elevated into a public sphere with its own institutionality and goals of knowledge production. Civil society organizations like CINEP (now proudly orienting its mission statement around the "safekeeping of 'historical memory'"[38]) served as early brokers of this information, passing from private to public. Eventually, historical narratives in the form of official government reports would cluster around these smaller testimonies thanks to the involvement of empathetic violent-ologists and the intellectual resources of academia.

As such, contemporary projects known as "historical memory" aren't merely a rebranding of the forms of violent-ological research already conducted in 1958 and 1987,

[37] Both Milton (2018) and Wills (2022) refer to the adjective of "subaltern" to describe forms of memory that originate "from below" and are rooted in experiences of suffering.

[38] CINEP. "Derechos Humanos y Violencia Política." Retrieved April 25, 2024 (https://cinep.org.co/derechos-humanos-y-violencia-politica/).

although they are certainly within the trajectory. Although still embedded in centralized institutions in Colombia, historical memory work importantly invites another round of actors into the mix in the form of victims and their advocates. María Wills (2022:41) says that historical memory as a genre represents a "crossroads" between personal memory, collective memory, and the discipline of history. It maintains a an emphasis on the "voice of victims" and the reconstructive priorities of impacted community leaders while integrating the methodological strategies and investigatory capacity of violent-ologists and academia. In creating this synthesis, it leverages an important source of legitimacy—the victim of violence, who takes precedent as the supreme authoritative voice in eras of transitional justice (Rudling 2019). This compounds upon the earlier government commissions that drew their legitimacy from preaching a scientific objectivity combined at times with moral supremacy (Sánchez 2018).

Growing in recognition from private to governmental spheres (and increasingly attractive to the government for its new brand of legitimacy rooted in victims' participation), historical memory became institutionalized as a field of expertise and research beginning in the early 2000s. The following sections will trace the emergence of key initiatives—the National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation, the Historical Memory Group, and the National Center for Historical Memory—and the specific circumstances and consequences of their increasingly permanent stature in state government.

Historical Memory Work: From "Commission" to "Group" to "Center"[39]

[39] For more details on the historical evolution of the entities named in this section, please see Jaramillo Marín 2014, Sánchez 2019, and Wills 2022.

What came to be known as "historical memory" of the civil conflict emerged not so much as a knowledge project to diagnose the collective malady of a nation nor to prescribe policy recommendations for presidential administrations. As explained above, it was initially a grassroots project that later joined forces with the academic labors of empathetic violentologists who would garner sustained institutional support through a series of legislative efforts and executive decrees. Historical memory work thus elevated and legitimized the residual facts or knowledge "debris" from practical investigative projects—the collected photographs, newspaper clippings, death certificates, and victim testimonies. As time went on, historical memory was viewed less as the mere interpretive narrative arising from critical investigatory processes and more as a public good that could be packaged by the state and re-represented to victims themselves as a right that they deserved—the "right to truth," as outlined by the United Nations and reinforced by national legislation in Colombia.

Historical memory research—as a state priority—was institutionalized in Colombia through two key legislative moments in the 2000s and 2010s. The first occurred with the Law of Justice and Peace of 2005, followed by the Law of Victims of 2011. The following sections will outline these particular historical openings in the arc of institutionalizing memory work within the Colombian government in the past two decades. Specifically, it traces the evolution of this kind of work from a traditional "Commission" format to a more permanent working "Group" of violentologists, to finally a protected "Center" of historical memory embedded in the bureaucratic state. I will then discuss some implications of this increased institutionalization of memory work, drawing on expert interviews, ethnographic data, and primary documents.

Table 1 List of key historical memory institutions in Colombia, sponsored by the national government.

Institution	Timeline	Activities
National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation (CNRR)	2005 - 2011	Designed to satisfy conflict victims' "right to truth" following mass testimonies from ex-combatants in the new tribunal established in 2005
Historical Memory Group (GMH)	2007-2011	Sub-commission of the CNRR that extended beyond initial tenure. Constructed archives and historical reports following the work of the CNRR
National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH)	2011- present	Collaborative and in-house research reports, commemorative events, documentaries, and exhibits

The National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation (CNRR) (2005-2011)

Mandated as part of the 2005 Law of Justice and Peace, the National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation (CNRR) evolved as a research-driven accompaniment to the primary initiative of the Law[40], which was a judicial program to provide benefits for select combatants exiting the conflict (known as "demobilizing") who volunteered to give testimony in court. Initially separate from the CNRR, the 2005 law also mandated a "duty of memory," in the form of safeguarding archives of historical memory that emerged from the court hearings—which they conceptualized as "knowledge about the history of causes and consequences of the actions of illegal armed groups."[41]

Despite allusions to justice and peace in its name, the 2005 law (and its related research commission) was born in a political climate hostile to human rights actors and discourse.

[40] Ley 975 de 2005 (Art. 50).

[41] Ley 975 de 2005 (Art. 56).

President Álvaro Uribe's administration functionally designed the Law of Justice and Peace as a judicial mechanism to grant mass impunity to those demobilizing perpetrators who opted to share their testimony.[42] Since the start of his first presidential term in 2002, President Uribe had spent his administration undermining victims and developing a vision of the state as the only legitimate actors engaged in an unfair fight against left-wing terrorists—rendering drastic state security interventions and fostering an environment in which impunity for right-wing paramilitary combatants made rhetorical sense (Semana 2005; El Espectador 2011; Castillejo-Cuéllar 2014; Álcala and Uribe 2016). This vision downplayed the role of perpetrators closest to state interests and paved the way for Law 975 of 2005—the "Law of Justice and Peace"—to establish a judicial venue for hearing voluntary testimonies from former paramilitary combatants in the process of demobilizing.[43]

Early critics of the law from civil society—including local and international human rights groups—argued that consequences were too ambiguous for these perpetrators, and the Constitutional Court eventually intervened to promote more accountability regarding jail sentencing (Uprimny 2014). Civil society groups were also skeptical about the limited role that victims would have in the formal processes like the Commission established by this law, despite its text paying lip service to "the rights of victims to truth, justice, and reparation."[44] In particular, the narrow investigatory capacity embedded in its judicial approach was a concern because it centered the perspectives of perpetrators regarding violence they committed or witnessed, rather than on victims' narratives or more comprehensive historical analysis (Evans

[42] Amnesty International. 2005. "President Uribe must not ratify impunity law." July 13. Retrieved March 27, 2024 (https://www.amnesty.org/ar/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/amr230212005en.pdf).

[43] Ley 975 de 2005.

[44] Ibid.

2012; Wills 2022). Due to this limited scope, violentologist Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar would later criticize the law as promoting a:

> "revisionist interpretation of history where…structural interpretations of the origins of the armed conflict disappeared" (Castillejo-Cuéllar 2014:51)

and relegating the understanding of the conflict as a simple "apriori" fact upon which elements of specific crimes emerged (Castillejo-Cuéllar 2012). In other words, the judicial emphasis of this Law could only ensure a partial "truth" since it did not also support comprehensive, academic investigative processes.

Similarly, the Colombian Commission of Jurists (CCJ), a non-profit human rights organization, criticized the law for "shifting the main focus of investigation away from the facts and toward the individual in question (the perpetrator)" (CCJ 2007:18). Thanks to the advocacy of the CCJ and other victim rights organizations, the Constitutional Court of Colombia stepped in to make substantial amendments to the law, demanding an enhanced responsibility for investigation into "the systematic practices and criminal strategies that facilitated paramilitary violence (as a whole) throughout the country" (CCJ 2007:25). Thanks to this court intervention, the National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation (CNRR) provided for in the law would be granted unfettered access to a wider range of information from public authorities about paramilitary violence.[45] From this point onward, the CNRR made great strides in the academic construction of what would later christened as legitimate "historical memory."

[45] Constitutional Court of Colombia. "Sentencia C-370 de 2006."

The Historical Memory Group (GMH) (2007-2011)

A team of researchers was soon organized to fulfill the academic aims of the CNRR, which would be distinct from the labor of the main commissioners. They shuffled through various titles internally, first labeling themselves an "area" for historical memory then finally the "Historical Memory Group" (Wills 2022). The Historical Memory Group (GMH) was composed of 21 members (see Figure 9), each chosen according to three criteria: academic trajectory, orientation toward community-based research, and their track record of activism (Jaramillo Marín 2014). These ultimately comprised anthropologists, attorneys, sociologists, historians and journalists. Historian and sociologist Gonzalo Sánchez Gómez was named as the director after he answered the public call for this role and was chosen explicitly due to his participation in the 1987 Commission of Experts. The GMH took as their general goal the research of a more comprehensive narrative of the civil conflict—against which individual testimonies from perpetrators speaking in the courts would gain focus and context. Their most specific mandate was to produce a "public report about the reasons for the emergence and evolution of illegal armed groups" (Wills 2022:107).



Figure 9 Members of the Historical Memory Group (GMH), with Gonzalo Sánchez Gómez centered in the back row with a scarf. Source: Jaramillo Marín 2014:192, originally from the National Center for Historical Memory.

The GMH researched a series of "emblematic cases" like the Trujillo Massacre—a reign of violence spanning 1988-1994 in which members of the Armed Forces allied with narcotraffickers to kill, torture, and forcibly disappear at least 342 victims (Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2008). Producing more than 16 lengthy volumes compiled from ethnographic, historical, and statistical data, the GMH elevated distinct events like massacres at Trujillo, El Salado, and Bahía Portete into objects of historical knowledge that could capture and sustain national attention. In a 2008 column in El Espectador newspaper titled "Why remember the Trujillo massacre?", human rights scholar Rodrigo Uprimny made the case that GMH's work was important in bridging the connection between uniquely horrific episodes like Trujillo and the ways in which patterns from these events emerge to describe the conflict's impacts on a broader

scale.[46] The magnum opus of the GMH's efforts was finally published in 2012 as a general report called *¡Basta Ya!* (*Enough is enough!*) which fulfilled the mandate given to them by the CNRR.[47]

Through their work, the GMH conveyed a breadth of "local or community experiences and memories," resulting in an institutionalized, national platform for victims' memories. (Sánchez 2018:107). Yet Director Sánchez was intentional to balance the "subjective demands" of victims in their fight for recognition with the "objective demands" of historical narrative (Jaramillo Marín 2014:193). He made it clear that their intention with the GMH's final report was to intertwine victim testimonies with academic methodologies. In this balance, it was also important for the GMH to demonstrate legitimacy and autonomy from its political origins. Especially given critique from civil society about the GMH's overarching Commission (discussed above) as late as 2007—when the GMH was just getting off the ground as a sub-commission—the group sought to underline their autonomy across three levels: intellectual, methodological, and operational (Wills 2022). This is reinforced in the language of a 2007 document by the CNRR that guarantees autonomy toward both the "process" and the "product" of the GMH's final report.[48]

From another perspective, however, sociologist Fernando Cubides declared that through the GMH, "the researcher has become a bureaucrat," (Cubides 2014:14). This kind of language echoes what one scholar referred to the violent-ologists of the 1987 Commission as—the

[46] Uprimny Yepes, Rodrigo. 2008. "Por qué recordar la masacre de Trujillo?" El Espectador, Sep 15. Retrieved March 16, 2023 (https://www.elespectador.com/opinion/columnistas/rodrigo-uprimny/para-que-recordar-la-masacre-de-trujillo-column-38402/).

[47] Notably, it wasn't published during the GMH's official tenure but only later once the National Center for Historical Memory was established as part of a separate legislative process (discussed in the following section).

[48] CNRR. Acta nro. 025 del 27 noviembre de 2007. Cited in Wills 2022:110.

"bureaucratized intellectual." (Villaveces 1998:95). This conceptualization and critique of the Memory Group as converting researchers into bureaucrats comes into greater relevance in the next section when we turn to focusing on the Memory Group's organizational successor, the National Center for Historical Memory.

The National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH) (2011-Present)

With the passage of the 2011 Victims' Law, the GMH transformed into the National Center of Historical Memory (CNMH), which would serve as its more permanent counterpart with a specific charge to "preserve historical memory" through academic and museological approaches that would also serve as a form of symbolic reparations for victims. According to Article 146 of the Victims' Law, the CNMH would function as a "public establishment of the national order, attached to the Administrative Department of the Presidency of the Republic, with legal status and administrative and financial autonomy and based in Bogotá." The CNMH would soon be assigned as a sub-agency of the Department of Social Prosperity—which managed the country's poverty and (new) victim assistance programs.[49] This location within Colombia's bureaucratic ecosystem ascribes a new character to the investigative work that had just a few years before been nestled within temporary judicial structure (through the Law of Justice and Peace and its CNRR commission). The new Center's permanent position within the Department of Social Prosperity also marks the first time that historical memory work would be institutionalized with such an open-ended tenure in mind—there was to be no definitive end date

[49] CNMH. "Decreto 4158 de 2011."

for the Center's work. Because of its permanent stature, the CNMH's funding is guaranteed as a fixed part of the General Budget of the Nation.[50]



Figure 10 Institutional logo for the CNMH. Source: National Center for Historical Memory

Functionally, the CNMH produces in-house historical investigations and community engagement initiatives, allocates funding for academic and artistic collaborations related to conflict memory and history, and considers all of their work to broadly fall under the umbrella of "symbolic reparations." The conceptualization of historical memory as a public good in the form of symbolic reparations—that is, non-monetary benefits guaranteeing victims' their right to truth and the preservation of historical memory—helps to make sense of the Center's organizational home within the same agency that provides more tangible victims' assistance and relief (Social Prosperity).[51] In the introduction to a 2018 CNMH historical report detailing the systematic political violence against Patriotic Union party members from 1984-2002, the authors explain their mission like this:

[50] CNMH. "Decreto 4803 de 2011."

[51] For more information about the legal concept of symbolic reparations and its application in Colombia, see my 2021 reflection in *Conflict(ed) Blog*, "The Prospect of Symbolic Reparations." Accessed March 28, 2024 (https://www.pwsc.us/conflicted-the-pwsc-official-blog/blog/the-prospect-of-symbolic-reparations).

> "It is…a dual opportunity, *first, to dignify the memory of the victims*, and second, to offer a comprehensive view of the set of events that marked a milestone in the history of political violence in Colombia.." (2018:15, emphasis added).

This understanding of the function of historical memory construction as a means to *dignify* and offer symbolic reparation to victims of the conflict is a natural extension of the work of the Historical Memory Group, initiated by the National Commission of Reparation and Reconciliation (CNRR). Indeed many members of the GMH continued their involvement through the CNMH, including Director Gonzalo Sánchez Gómez who became the first director of the CNMH. Formal reports from the GMH, including their landmark *¡Basta Ya!* report were published simultaneously as the work of the GMH *and* the CNMH in subsequent printings and press. In essence, the CNMH can be seen as the permanent counterpart to the GMH, which was only given a fixed date of operation from 2005 through 2011. It took the authority of a new legal document—the Victims' Law of 2011—to extend and protect this labor of historical memory from the old framework of the GMH to a new permanent, bureaucratic entity. This is significant because it classifies historical memory as important state business that is not tethered to temporary transitional justice initiatives.

A feature of this new structural permanence in the field of historical memory is the pace and quantity of reports emerging from the CNMH. As of the end of 2023, the Center had amassed over 200 reports, most of which are the length of an academic book.[52] Topics range from the histories of particular massacres to the testimonies of special groups of victims like specific indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. The ongoing research priorities of the CNMH are established through both personal and organizational dimensions. For example, the

[52] The entire library of CNMH reports is available for free download in the "*Libros*" section of their website, organized by year of publication. See https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/libros/ (last accessed April 25, 2024).

director is granted autonomy to invite specific subject experts into executive planning meetings and contract them for specific projects. Yet according to the guidelines of the CNMH, there is a system of oversight whereby the Committee on Research and Editorial Procedures must present makes recommendations to the Board of Directors about the specific research agenda and publishing agenda of the CNMH. The Board of Directors then ultimately determines the priorities of the agenda.[53]

CNMH publications are regulated by the same national policies that govern academic and scientific publishing, including those issued by the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Science (formerly Colciencias- the same entity which also oversaw the publication of the 1987 Commission of Experts).[54] In practice, the majority of CNMH publications involve research teams of social scientists, sometimes partnered with specific NGOs that both fund and contribute to the research in various ways. While the initiation of specific projects and reports used to be more internal to the founding GMH and CNMH members and director Gonzalo Sánchez—drawing from their existing networks in victim communities and with victim orgs—in recent years the CNMH has sought to expand access to collaborations through, for example, an open grant contest in conjunction with the Ministry of Science where collaborated with the Ministry of Science in offering a grant contest for academics around the country to propose unique research projects related to the historical memory of the conflict. This open contest will be discussed in more detail in a following section.

[53] This part of the process was established by an internal document (Resolution 120 of 2020) by Darío Acevedo that granted more authority to the Board of Directors.

[54] See the public document "Política Editorial para el Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica" (2021) for further guidelines that govern the publication process at the CNMH.

The remaining empirical sections of this chapter will outline some key implications of the bureaucratization of historical memory in Colombia since 2011. These include (1) the diffusion and public life of the resources produced by the CNMH, (2) the dual vulnerability and resilience of the political nature of the CNMH, and (3) the capacity of the CNMH to shape the Colombian academy as a whole in durable ways. As a whole, I argue that these impacts would not take shape in the same way through a short-term truth commission or research initiative that wasn't embedded in the bureaucratic ecosystem to the same extent.

Some Implications of the Institutionalization of Memory Work

Public Life of the CNMH's Work

The prolific research that the CNMH has been able to publish over time is largely considered academic in its appearance and function. This has led some to criticize the limitations of the work as elitist and siloed within the world of experts. One Colombian anthropologist, Juan Pablo, claims that the concept of historical memory has been "academized" through what he sees as the over-production of books and reports from the CNMH.

> "The (CNMH) rearticulated victims' discourse through a translation into academic languages for experts…they 'academized' the concept (of historical memory) and converted it into books and reports that nobody—that very few people, only academics and professionals—would read."[55]

This concern about the intellectual-ization of historical memory through the CNMH was shared by Camila Osorio, a journalist assigned to cover the Memory Group's work in its early days, who claims the volume of work from the CNMH was difficult to keep up with from the public's

[55] Interview, June 30, 2021

perspective. She saw her own task as a sort of broker, to translate the results of large reports like "The Massacre of El Salado," a 334 page document released in 2009, into smaller pieces of reporting that the public could consume.

> "I remember thinking, 'This is just so dense. Who is going to read this?' It's like, yes (the reports) are public and free on the website, but. (…) It was just a bunch of us nerds that were interested in reading the books, (…) like I would go buy coffee in the morning and ask the woman serving if she read about what the massacre that happened in Bahía Portete, and she would say, 'No, I don't have time to think about it.'" (Interview, August 18, 2021)

However, there is evidence that the CNMH's impact reaches beyond bookish spaces. In speaking with attorney Jesús Sanabria, he revealed that in his former role as an officer at the National Victim's Agency (UPV), he would draw upon background resources on specific massacres or displacement events that were produced by the CNMH. In the process of reviewing applications for the National Registry of Victims at the UPV, Sanabria explained that evaluators had only a brief amount of time to determine if an individual's testimony was "true" enough to grant them admission into the Registry. This Registry is then used as the primary authority in proclaiming someone's "eligibility" as a victim of the conflict and a recipient of promised reparations from the national government.[56] Among other resources, evaluators like Sanabria turned to the CNMH's reports as an authoritative source in cross-referencing specific localized events that victims reported in their own testimonies.

> "What does an evaluator do? They have to evaluate whether the victim was really a victim of the armed conflict, so they would look at…institutional reports (from the CNMH) to see what exactly happened, for example, in the town of Mapiripán

[56] As of March 31, 2024, the National Registry of Victims officially recognizes 9.7 million registered victims of the civil war (https://datospaz.unidadvictimas.gov.co/registro-unico-de-victimas/).

> in 1998. Then they would say, "look, there was a collision between the FARC and the paramilitary that generated a displacement." So you would go back to look at the application and see okay…they are telling me that there were armed groups with rubber boots, so then I could ascertain that they were a member of an armed group—either the paramilitary or FARC—and be able to verify that the "victimizing fact" was indeed forced displacement. So it was a very rapid decision; the evaluator has to decide whether or not this victim is part of the armed conflict."[57]

In this example, the CNMH's materials were used as part of the context with which to make real-world decisions about victim recognition on an individual basis. It is also an illustration of inter-agency legitimacy, as the UPV reinforced the research of the CNMH as "true" through its application in the authoritative process of approving the victim status of individuals. Moreover, it is noteworthy that both the UPV and the CNMH as entities were created through the same legislation—the Victims' Law of 2011. This situates them as complementary of each other in their missions—the CNMH tasked with "dignifying" the memory of victims, and the UPV tasked with granting them legal status for the purpose of allocating material benefits and support. On a technical level, the UPV is also integrated into a decision-making body at the head of the CNMH—the director of the UPV has a reserved seat among the Board of Directors of the CNMH, which has the ultimate authority to steer the research agenda of the Center.[58]

Beyond being used in government settings like the UPV, the CNMH's resources have managed to circulate across many public spaces throughout the country. School curricula, public libraries, and journalists have all harnessed materials from the Center for various purposes.

[57] Interview, November 23, 2021

[58] CNMH. "Decreto 4803 de 2011."

Education researcher Dr. Carlos Amador describes using specific methodological reflections and "tool kits" developed by the Center in building his own historical memory projects in primary schools (the CNMH has 12 such guides in their library so far—geared toward teachers and community-based researchers)[59]. The CNMH also gears its public digital platform to be used for public inquiries into their collection of archives, as promoted by a "virtual assistant" tool that they rolled out in 2020 (see Figure 11). This assistant was personified as "Dorita" the archivist, wearing a lab coat and gloves, and visitors to the site could receive real-time guidance through the digitized collections.



Figure 11 In this graphic, the CNMH positions itself as a resource for the public, featuring a virtual assistant- an archivist named "Dorita," who encourages visitors to consult with her online about any requests. Source: Screen capture from https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/ on October 9, 2020.

Public librarians have also used the CNMH's book collection as a building block for their own library collections in various community reading rooms. I spoke with one public librarian,

[59] The collection of pedagogical and methodological guides published by the CNMH are presented at (https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/micrositios/un-viaje-por-la-memoria-historica/), last accessed April 26, 2024.

Moisés, in the coastal city of Cartagena—far removed from the intellectual hub of Bogotá yet home to several NGO offices and a UNESCO World Heritage Site due to its prominent geography within Afro-Colombian history and culture. Moisés runs a public reading room funded by the *Cooperación Española*, Spain's global development agency, which is integrated within Colombia's National Network for Public Libraries. At one point, he explained that they received a large shipment of donated paperback CNMH books. "All of our books are donations," he clarified. "We don't get to choose what is sent to us."[60] The CNMH reports now fill multiple shelves of their small collection alongside literature, poetry, and other social science texts (see Figure 12). At first sight, the pages appear in pristine condition and the spines remain uncreased. When I asked if these particular books were popular among library patrons, Moisés clarified to me that most visitors come in to use the free computers or check out novels. "The only ones interested in 'historical memory' materials are researchers like you," he said. However, gesturing proudly toward the shelf of CNMH reports, he proclaimed unprompted that:

> "the country wouldn't be where we are today without the work of the Memory Center in the last several years. That's my opinion."[61]

[60] Interview, May 16, 2022

[61] Interview, May 16, 2022



Figure 12 A row of CNMH reports is shelved for public access at a library in Cartagena, Colombia. Source: Kristin Foringer, May 16, 2022.

The CNMH's collection of books has also made its way to a small library in the Amazonian region of Caquetá, Colombia, founded in the particularly war-torn municipality of San Vicente del Caguán through a Ministry of Culture initiative, "Libraries for Peace." At this particular site, the books function less as the focal point and more as the physical background for community-centered memory workshops in the small library space, led by anthropologist Pablo Iván Galvis. For Pablo, the concept of "historical memory" isn't merely something constructed by experts in Bogotá, then delivered in the form of reports to his small library. Rather, historical memory is what emerges from the community dialogues he facilitates at the library, which doubles as a safe gathering space for the residents in San Vicente del Caguán, who themselves have experienced displacement, forced disappearance, and myriad forms of violence in the course of the conflict. Through these regular dialogues, Pablo and his team of volunteers gather

testimonies, anonymize them, and publish them independently from institutions like the CNMH. Speaking about the first book he published in this collection, Pablo explained:

> "What I most like about this book is that there are things that cannot be spoken of in territories of war. Things that have to be kept in silence. So to deal with this, I converted them into a book."[62]

In this way, the circulation of CNMH reports and publications served a supporting role in initially building out the collections in this small community library, but were relegated to a more passive fixture—lining the bookshelves but not defining the vitality of ongoing historical memory projects that Pablo led within the community itself. In turn, the testimonies shared at these workshops were assembled into their own independent publications.[63] This scenario sheds light on the limits of the public life of CNMH's own version of historical memory, echoing the more critical statements at the beginning of this section about the "academ-ized" nature of the Center and the limitations this presents.

Political Vulnerability and Resilience

Another implication of the bureaucratization of historical memory through the CNMH is the unique combination of political autonomy and vulnerability that the Center faces in its work. The CNMH's organizational position as a bureaucratic entity within the Agency for Social Prosperity yet with close ties to the presidency means that it enjoys a relatively decentralized process for setting its own research agenda yet at the hands of a director who themselves are

[62] Interview, June 29, 2021

[63] Interview, June 29, 2021

appointed by the president.[64] In this way, the Center is indirectly vulnerable in to the priorities and biases of individual presidential administrations. The particular character of the CNMH director's position—defined as "of free appointment and removal," which is a category of federal appointment not based on the rules and hierarchies of civil service—has two significant implications.[65] The first is that the director does not need to climb the ranks of civil service through meritocratic means but can be freely appointed by the president, which has consequently led to some appointments in recent years with questionable qualifications (including a historian with a track record for "denialist" attitudes, which will be discussed shortly). This aspect, however, is consistent with earlier investigative initiatives in Colombian history like those explored in the first half of this chapter in 1958 and 1987—the commissioners in these instances were centrally appointed researchers. The second aspect of this "free appointment and removal" quality of the CNMH director is the precarious and abrupt nature of removals, which have effectively changed at the whim of each administration since conservative President Iván Duque in 2018. An anthropologist and close observer of the CNMH relayed in an interview that this feature of the appointment process is fundamentally opposed to intellectual independence—that it is a "detriment" to the construction of historical memory because there is a less of a commitment to "the diversity of voices" depending on who is in power, the left or the right.[66]

In 2019, the political vulnerability of the CNMH was made acutely clear with President Iván Duque's pick for director: the embattled, right-wing historian Rubén Darío Acevedo with a less-than-impressive CV. The public was quick to express outrage over Darío Acevedo's track

[64] For more on the organizational structure of the CNMH as laid out in its founding decree, see Decree 4803 of 2011.

[65] In the original Spanish, this category of position is called "*libre nombramiento y remoción*."

[66] Interview, June 30, 2021

record of denialism of the civil conflict, which followed former President Álvaro Uribe's insistence in absolving state security forces of any blame for defending against a leftist "terrorism."[67] In many media outlets (and in some of my interviews with CNMH academics), he was referred to as a "*negacionista*," or denialist—borrowing language from the Holocaust—and a perpetrator of "memory-cide" who would erase progress that the Center had thus far made in amplifying the narratives of victim (Hernández 2019). The widespread fear was that his leadership would steer the CNMH away from its close proximity to grassroots victims groups—facilitated by Gonzalo Sánchez' early efforts—and work to construct instead an official historical narrative sanitized by the state (Cepeda Castro 2019).

Once Darío Acevedo's appointment was announced, dozens of civil society organizations including *Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres* (Pacifist Route of Women) and the Colombian Network for Sites of Memory (RCLIM) co-signed a letter condemning Acevedo's denialist perspective which violates the "victims' rights enshrined in Law 1448 of 2011."[68] The MINGA Association, which advocates for the human rights of indigenous communities, issued a statement on the day of Darío Acevedo's installation as director that they would reclaim all of the archives that they had previously granted guardianship to the CNMH, given that Darío Acevedo's appointment is an "affront to the country" (Ortiz 2019). Only a few months into Darío Acevedo's term, Senator Iván Cepeda Castro led a formal debate in the Colombian Senate urging the "protection of memory" and condemning the "political control" of the new director (Cepeda Castro 2019). This initiative by Senator Cepeda led to the court-mandated protection of a museum exhibit created by

[67] El Espectador. 2011. "Uribe da 10 razones para no hablar de conflicto armado." May 7. Retrieved March 18, 2023 (https://www.elespectador.com/politica/uribe-da-10-razones-para-no-hablar-de-conflicto-armado-article-268116/).

[68] Red Colombiana de Lugares de Memoria (RCLM). 2019. Carta a Presidente Iván Duque. Feb. 4. Retrieved May 10, 2023 (https://verdadabierta.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Carta-al-presidente-Duque-sobre-Dar%C3%ADo-Acevedo-4-de-febero-de-2019.pdf).

the CNMH under previous leadership so that they would not be tampered with by the new director.[69]

On the other end of the political spectrum, suspicion has also been cast onto leftist President Petro's appointment of Darío Acevedo's replacement: the granddaughter of the legendary populist leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, whose assassination ushered in the chaotic start of the civil conflict in 1948. María Valencia Gaitán is an architect by training, with only minimal experience in government administration and research. Despite her symbolic surname, some have noted that her only "traceable experience" with historical research is related to the theme of urban transportation.[70] A 2021 newspaper article claimed that her "achilles heel" is the lack of administrative experience in her resumé.[71] In addressing Gaitán's appointment, President Petro didn't shy away from naming the symbolic significance of her identity as the paradigmatic "victim" of the civil conflict due to her assassinated grandfather's prominence as a populist visionary for the country.[72] Given the roots of the CNMH—and the "historical memory" movement as a whole—as amplifying the voices of victims, Petro's labeling of Director Gaitán as an idyllic victim hearkened back to the legitimacy the CNMH enjoyed prior to the arrival of denialist Director Darío Acevedo. Only 20 days after beginning the position, Gaitán ordered the

[69] The Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), created by the peace agreement in 2016 to facilitate transitional justice in Colombia, issued statement AT-058 to order "the protection of the collection for an initial period of 90 days, during which any theft, modification, alteration, or elimination of its methodology or content is prohibited." (El Espectador, 2020).

[70] Mesa Nacional de Víctimas. 2022. "Breve perfil de María Valencia Gaitán, nueva directora del Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica." Oct. 6. Retrieved May 8, 2023 (https://mesanacionaldevictimas.org/2022/10/06/breve-perfil-de-maria-valencia-gaitan-nueva-directora-del-centro-nacional-de-memoria-historica/).

[71] La Silla Vacía. 2021. "Quién es quién: María Valencia Gaitán." July 23. Retrieved May 8, 2023 (https://www.lasillavacia.com/quien-es-quien/maria-valencia-gaitan/).

[72] El Tiempo. 2022. "María Valencia Gaitán, nueva directora del Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica." Nov. 3. Retrieved May 8, 2023 (https://www.eltiempo.com/politica/gobierno/maria-valencia-gaitan-directora-del-centro-nacional-de-memoria-historica-714849).

removal of a digital collaborative project between the Center and the Armed Forces, claiming that "any products related to the Armed Forces is not the fruit of research dedicated to memory" (Forero 2022).[73] This project had been initiated by Darío Acevedo in the weeks prior to his departure from the CNMH. While still ongoing, Gaitán's tenure as director of the Center serves as another example of partisan influence from the Left rather than the Right.

From a ground level, sociologist Jefferson Jaramillo Marín has summarized the complicated scholarly autonomy of CNMH as engaging "experts working *within* the state who at the same time may *confront* the state."[74] Despite political appointees at the top of the organization, the Center's practice of contracting and/or independently funding academics for specific empirical projects provides a buffer between purely partisan interests and the results of academic research. Of those affiliated academics that I interviewed, multiple conveyed both initial hesitation and subsequent relief in proceeding with their research agendas without significant intervention by the Memory Center administration. Dr. Merlín Grueso, a social psychologist based in Bogotá, explained that she was initially hesitant to apply to a 2020 grant contest sponsored by the Memory Center and the Ministry of Science because she was aware of Darío Acevedo's "biases." Dr. Grueso also faced challenges recruiting collaborators for the project because some of her professional network "felt that morally it was wrong to participate in a biased project."[75] Similarly, Dr. Juan Carlos Amador, who had previously collaborated with the Memory Center in 2018 under its original leadership, was anxious about submitting an

[73] This initial skirmish has slowly resolved over the course of her tenure, with military collaborations being highlighted in a press release from the CNMH as recently as March 2024. See https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/la-fuerza-publica-tambien-contribuye-a-la-construccion-de-memoria-historica-con-el-cnmh/ (accessed March 11, 2024).

[74] Interview, August 13, 2021

[75] Interview, August 12, 2021

application for this particular grant funding given the "change in focus" with the new administration.[76] However, now as grant winners, both Grueso and Amador reported a surprising lack of oversight in moving their projects forward. Specifically, Dr. Grueso said the Memory Center provided 70% of the funding up front without any requirement to even provide progress reports on the research, which she clarified is rare for similar kinds of funding elsewhere.

Other 2020 grant winners who I interviewed defended their collaborations with the Memory Center citing principled reasons. Philosopher William Farfán Moreno justified his personal decision to apply and his belief that the Memory Center could still maintain its intellectual independence under Director Darío Acevedo, saying:

> "The Memory Center doesn't belong to the government; it doesn't belong to any director. It belongs to the citizenry and especially the victims of armed conflict that are at the core of why the Memory Center was created." (Interview, August 6, 2021)

Another philosopher, Dr. Pedro Serna at the Universidad del Norte in Barranquilla, was emboldened to apply for funding on principle, as a way to "take advantage of the fact these are public funds."[77] Both of these comments illuminate the aspirational scholarly independence of the Memory Center in spite of other political vulnerabilities the organization faces at the leadership level. In fact, none of the academics I interviewed who had received funding from the CNMH—either through an open-call grant submission or by personal recruitment from the Center's leadership—reported interference with the content of their research from a partisan standpoint. This finding lands as somewhat surprising given the heated political climate

[76] Interview, August 2, 2021

[77] Interview, August 6, 2021

described above and still doesn't negate the structural vulnerabilities baked into the CNMH's proximity to the presidency which will continue into the future.

Shaping Broader Trends in the Academy

The historical memory enterprise of the past decade has demonstrated the potential to leave lasting impacts on the Colombian academy as a whole. Far from the insulated class of elite researchers appointed for mid-20th century conflict research in the country—and the committed "violentólogos" and activist-scholars arising since the 1980s—an increasingly diverse group of experts are contributing to the field of historical memory thanks in part to the institutional sway and incentives that these new permanent entities like the CNMH introduce. The constellation of funding, priorities, and incentives that centers around historical memory has influenced the career trajectories of independent scholars as well as facilitated broader shifts among university priorities and even disciplinary alliances. The institutionalized nature of historical memory research since 2011 has also meant that it is no longer a requirement for participating researchers to have an activist imagination or positionality as it was in the early 2000s.

Philosopher Pedro Serna at the Universidad del Norte in coastal Barranquilla was a recipient of research funds from the CNMH in 2020, despite not having earlier experience with investigating conflict history or victim groups (his most recent publication, for example, was focused on the writings of John Locke).[78] Serna relayed to me that the initial motivation for his involvement with the CNMH was the funding, describing how money for research is generally

[78] Serna Serna, Pablo Pedro. 2015. "Economic and Social Guarantees in Locke," *Eidos: Revista de Filosofía de la Universidad del Norte* 22:169-194.

"very precarious" throughout the country.[79] He claims that the scarcity of research funds grows once you look specifically at the humanities and social sciences, and from there—focusing on his own discipline of philosophy—he put frankly that "there are none." As such, after seeing a call for proposals from the CNMH in 2020, Serna worked to establish a connection with an existing NGO already committed to local memory practices in the Montes de María region. He then assembled a team—five philosophers, a linguist, and a communications specialist—and eventually won the grant, which came as a surprise to him given the number of humanists involved.

Similarly, political scientist Diego Vera Piñeros at the Pontifical Javerian University in Bogotá ventured into the subfield of historical memory in large part for the opportunity to boost his CV. He conveyed to me that a key motivator for doing research on historical memory was the opportunity to generate publications for his professional resumé. Dr. Vera Piñeros described that most academics at Colombian universities have a very small fraction of their schedule, if any, allocated to research and publishing, as much of the emphasis is on teaching courses. So when an opportunity presented itself to write a collection of historical memory reports under the sponsorship of a Colombian military initiative and a German thinktank, the Konrad Adenaur Foundation, he took it.[80]

> "We saw an opportunity to publish faster, more swiftly, with someone else's resources and to have these publications guaranteed."[81]

[79] Interview, August 6, 2021

[80] For context, Vera Piñeros did not collaborate specifically with the CNMH but with a parallel historical memory institution housed in Colombia's military institutions (the Center for Research on Historical Military Memory). This institution will be explored in more detail in the Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

[81] Interview, November 9, 2021

For Dr. Piñeros, these publications were not only a boost to his resumé, but a vital contribution to the metrics that the Ministry of Science uses—he referred to them as "scientific points"—to classify scholarship and define eligibility for future opportunities. As such, conducting research in the field of historical memory paid off in tangible professional benefits for Dr. Vera Piñeros and his collaborators.

The historical memory field has also played across traditional disciplinary boundaries and incentivized participation even among unlikely candidates like engineers and business professors. This shows a profound transformation since the emergence of historical memory as the fruit of both grassroots advocacy (detached from elite or technical spaces) and the early prototypes of conflict research that were limited to social scientists. The immense infrastructure and agenda-setting power of the CNMH within the academic landscape of Colombia has shaped conversations about interdisciplinarity. Dr. Merlín Grueso, mentioned earlier, is the primary investigator on a research team that won a Ministry of Science grant through the Memory Center. From her position in a business school in Bogotá, she noticed that business administration was one of the sole disciplines not already embedded in historical memory research like the sort encouraged by the CNMH:

> "I realized that in all of these disciplines—psychology, medicine, political science, law—the faculty were working in this field related to peacebuilding, yet here in the realm of business, this topic wasn't even discussed in a tangential way."[82]

[82] Interview, August 12, 2021

Stepping into this opening, Dr. Grueso and her team sought and won funding for a project investigating how various sectors of industry interact with peacebuilding initiatives.[83] A computer scientist Dr. Aglaya Batz, also based at the University of Rosario in Bogotá, is a member of this project. Batz thinks more engineers and other kinds of scientists should contribute to historical memory, which she sees as dominated by anthropologists and sociologists:

> "I do believe that the exact sciences have to permeate a bit more the social sciences. I think that the integration or convergence of these different knowledges can only enrich or solve a problem in a better way."[84]

With the addition of academic researchers beyond social scientists and historians brought into the fold of historical memory work, an interdisciplinary subfield has the potential to emerge and grow. This diversity—in addition to the academic incentives like citations and funding conferred to researchers who collaborate with the CNMH—demonstrates the structural force that "historical memory" as a permanent institution can exert over the broader academy in the country. Whereas research about the civil war was confined to select commissioners in the case of the 1958 *Investigadora* and only slightly expanded to a core group of social scientists in the 1987 Commission of Experts, the historical narration of the conflict through the platform of a bureaucratized CNMH since 2011 opens up avenues for historical memory as a subfield to actually change the shape of the Colombian academy.

[83] For more information about her group's project, see the description here: https://pure.urosario.edu.co/es/projects/a-look-at-the-peacebuilding-actions-of-colombian-companies-betwee (retrieved Aug. 11, 2021).

[84] Interview, August 30, 2021

Conclusion

At its core, transitional justice—those initiatives aimed at carrying a society from violence to peace—is embedded in the idea of institutional change. As a set of practices and principles, transitional justice aims to "reprogram the state," whereby "agents must align actions, priorities, and resource allocation with the obligations" that a democratic future demands (González-Ocantos et al 2019:47). Part of recovering from violent pasts is developing new institutions to restore social order and to provide a blueprint for more peaceful futures. In the rapid proliferation of these institutions, much attention is focused on the judiciary, national governments, and other vital organizational pillars of functional democracy. Yet this chapter has illustrated that knowledge institutions are important in the arc of transitional justice initiatives, and Colombia tells a compelling story about the long evolution and implications of institutions focused on "historical memory" of the conflict. Specifically, the permanent bureaucratic context of the National Center of Historical Memory highlights a mode of state engagement with experts that is highly collaborative and open to civil society's participation over time.

Historical memory in the contemporary landscape of Colombia has continued to evolve into various institutional forms as the dynamics of conflict has shifted in recent months. Since beginning research on this dissertation, a new Truth Commission affiliated with the Peace Agreement of 2016 (between the FARC and the Colombian state) issued its final report in June 2022 after an extended period of data collection and analysis.[85] Running in parallel with the CNMH, the recent Truth Commission emerged from a separate legal mandate—not embedded in legislation and state bureaucracy but tied specifically to the 2016 Peace Agreement and carrying

[85] See Chapter 5 of this dissertation for more discussion on the Truth Commission, along with the Commission's official website: https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/.

its own connotations of "post-conflict" peace. Many experts from the Memory Center circuit have played roles in this new commission, including an archivist I interviewed who used the expertise he developed while heading the archives department at the CNMH to serve as a consultant for the Truth Commission. Extending the argument from this chapter about the nature of knowledge institutions mapping onto shifting understandings of the conflict itself, the dual existence of the *permanent* CNMH with the *temporary* Truth Commission provides interesting insight into the complicated reality of recent violence in Colombia. Some Colombians and international onlookers attest to a definitively "post-conflict" status for the country, while others point to the ongoing proliferation of violence across multiple actors in the present as evidence that the conflict continues. The coexistence of different institutional shapes for the pursuit of conflict knowledge and historical memory illustrates this fractured consensus.

Chapter 3 Defining Victimhood: The Political Construction of a "Victim" Category in Colombia's Congress, 2007-2011[86]

On 11 June 2011, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos stepped onto a public stage in the national capital of Bogotá alongside UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to ceremoniously ratify the historic Law of Victims and Land Restitution. Ban Ki-moon's presence as a guest of honor at the signing event symbolized to many the unprecedented involvement of human rights actors in the facilitation of this legislative project, which promised reparations in the form of monetary aid and the restoration of property rights to millions of eligible victims of the country's civil conflict.[87] The ceremony celebrated what appeared to be a promising prototype of comprehensive, national-level legislation that could embrace the guidelines of international human rights organizations and the demands of local victim advocates in response to the widespread human rights violations associated with the conflict.

Obscured by the public fanfare of the law's ratification were nearly four years of congressional deliberations that had led up to this date, during which the legal category of "victim" was negotiated and consecrated by voting members of Congress. While the victim definition was influenced initially by international human rights organizations and local civil society actors, it was ultimately determined by politicians assigning their own symbolic and

[86] A version of this chapter appeared in *Comparative Studies in Society and History (CSSH)* under the same title in 2022. I am indebted to the editors, reviewers, and editorial staff of CSSH who helped shape this paper into a useful resource legible to both historians and social scientists.

[87] A survey conducted around the time the Victims' Law was ratified estimated that as many as 18 percent of the country's population, or around eight million people, could be considered a victim of the armed conflict (CNMH 2012).

anecdotal rationales to justify a scope of victim eligibility that was steadily reduced as debates progressed. Boundaries were placed around the *temporal* identity of victims such that, in the end, victim status was granted only to those who had suffered human rights violations between 1 January 1985 and 10 June 2021. This meant that only a particular subset of Colombians who experienced physical, psychological, and economic harm throughout the civil conflict that lasted more than five decades would be recognized as victims. Materially, this has deprived the others of due monetary reparations, land restitution, and other social service provisions allocated to the legally recognized victim population. These citizens were also denied the symbolic resources, in government and popular discourse, that legal victim status would bring.

Victim identification in Colombia has been particularly complex and contested due to the duration of the country's civil conflict and the comingling of numerous forms of violence and diverse perpetrators that have included state, paramilitary, and guerrilla forces. Not only does the production of a singular victim category pose challenges of accuracy and objectivity, but there are considerable material and symbolic stakes for the Colombian state regarding who is eligible for the status and associated reparations. As Winifred Tate (2007) summarized in her book on human rights activism in Colombia, the multiple frames of violence and victimhood there can be credited to the multiple institutional interests at stake, ranging from international and local human rights entities to the state itself. State self-interest in the legal identification of victims is particularly relevant in the Colombian case since national security forces and paramilitary groups with deep political ties are among the perpetrators of human rights violations, rendering the state as first and foremost a *producer* of victims.[88]

[88] The Historical Memory Group's (GMH) foundational "¡Basta Ya!" report (GMH 2013) provides a breakdown of perpetrators associated with identified cases of victimization. Among massacres committed between 1980 and 2012, paramilitary groups perpetrated 58.9 percent and state security forces 7.9 percent. Among selective assassinations

In light of the state's role in the violence, the appearance of transparency and objectivity in naming victims was a priority for the country's fragile democratic institutions, which have been in the international human rights spotlight since the 1990s. As I will explain, actors from the realms of international human rights, local advocacy, and national politics all sought to influence the scope of victimhood in the 2011 Victims' Law. I argue that, though the legislative initiative was originally rooted in human rights discourse, the insulated structure of congressional debates meant that technical knowledge from human rights experts and advocates—discussed in part in the previous chapter—was gradually replaced with the personal memories of politicians in the form of what I call "elite historical narratives." Within a broader conversation of the state's engagement with expertise about past violence, this chapter hones in on the particular limitations of the Congressional context in constraining the participation of civil society experts in a way that ultimately *rejects* this expertise in the final outcome of the law and the historical interpretations it enshrines.

Negotiations surrounding the temporal dimension of the victim category were enabled in part by the historical ambiguity of the Colombian conflict itself, whose lower and upper bounds were both contested during these legislative discussions. As discussed in Chapter 1, the origins of the conflict are sometimes dated back to the 1948 start of *La Violencia* ("The Violence"), a prolonged episode of partisan violence that plagued the Colombian countryside. Others portray the conflict as having developed much later, in the 1960s, when guerrilla groups like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) developed more sophisticated organizational structures (Pécaut 2008). Still other periodizations aim for somewhere in between, depending on

between 1981 and 2012, paramilitary groups perpetrated 38.4 percent and state security forces 10.1 percent. Of the available information on forced disappearances, GMH reports that 42.1 percent were committed by state security forces and 41.8 percent by paramilitary groups.

the narrative task at hand. For example, the state-commissioned Historical Memory Group, composed of Colombian social scientists and historians, used 1958 as the initial date in counting deaths caused by the conflict (Grupo Memoria Histórica [GMH] 2013). From a more critical perspective, some experts like anthropologist Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar (2014) have analyzed the conflict as a continuation of a broader picture of violence rooted in the country's colonial past and other temporalities that evade easy definition.

Beyond these origin stories, different periodizations also rely upon different understandings of the central sites and evolutions of violence, since sustained combat in rural areas has unfolded along a much longer timeline than the instances of bombings and political assassinations in urban centers like Bogotá, which spiked largely in the 1980s and 1990s. Some scholars, like Abbey Steele (2017), clearly distinguish between the earlier stages of violence associated with *La Violencia* and a more distinctively contemporary civil war, the start of which she dates to 1986 and the failure of the Betancur administration's attempt at peace talks.

There are also indecisive ideas about the conflict's end point, and indeed, during the Victims' Law discussions from 2007–2011 both guerrilla and paramilitary violence was ongoing and new criminal groups were proliferating. As Castillejo- Cuéllar (2014) and others point out, Colombia's attempts at transitional justice, including the Victims' Law, have occurred "in the middle of conflict" rather than after its end. These ambiguities regarding conflict history meant that when members of Congress set about adapting a victim definition from UN guidelines, they had an open playing field for constructing their own various conflict histories, especially since the UN guidelines did not account for a situation where the very origins and end of a conflict were contested (Sánchez 2009).

The resulting boundaries that set 1 January 1985 as the *earliest* date for which victims could claim human rights violations and 10 June 2021 as the *latest* date were borne out of political compromise that valued elite historical narratives. These elite recollections were shaped less by interventions of civil society actors who favored more systematic historical claims than by elites' interpretations of limited violent episodes in their own geographic and social purviews. As Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi (2002:36) points out, the "time structures" inherent in narratives surrounding contested pasts help to construct a context that has real ramifications for present political agendas. As such, infusing a victim category with a fixed temporal range provides the basis upon which more explicit partisan claims can be made in the present and future.

I will begin with a discussion of post-conflict victim identification mechanisms both internationally and in Colombian history prior to 2007. I then situate the Colombian case at the intersection of the sociological literature on symbolic state processes of classification and the transitional justice literature on victim category construction. My findings draw from the complete archive of congressional debates of 2007–2011 pertaining to the Victims' Law. I explain how the temporal boundaries drawn around the final victim category were the product of elite historical narratives negotiated against a backdrop of budgetary worries and ideological pressure from a conservative administration that was openly hostile to human rights actors. I show how state classification processes related to victimhood still promote exclusionary outcomes through the negotiation of boundaries like event periodization, which can seem less immediately polarizing than criteria like the ethnic or partisan identities of victims.

Mechanisms of Victim Classification in Post-Conflict Contexts

Victim classification, construed as a large-scale, organized activity with multiple administrative and symbolic aims, often occurs under the broader umbrella of transitional justice processes. Transitional justice encompasses the policies and programs employed in post-conflict contexts to facilitate either (1) regime transition following civil conflict, or, as in the Colombian case, (2) the social, cultural, and secondary political transitions between eras of conflict and peace (Chapman and Ball 2001; Hayner 2001; Evans 2012). Anthropologist Kimberly Theidon theorizes transitional justice mechanisms as a form of "ritual purification" that "make a break with the past and mark the beginning of a new moral community" (2007:88). In a more critical sense, these mechanisms aim to "sacramentalize violence into a useful creation myth" that can benefit nationalist agendas (Grandin and Klubock 2007:3). This storytelling process often encompasses the tasks of identifying victims and perpetrators in legal, political, and cultural venues. Establishing coherent boundaries around victimhood is an integral part of both the material and symbolic aims of a restorative transitional justice program, especially given that victimhood, on its most fundamental level, is symptomatic of "broken order" (Gatti 2017:77).

Regionally, Latin American governments have often turned to truth commissions as a model for identifying and classifying victims of violent national pasts. Unlike Colombia's version of victim classification in the Victims' Law of 2011, which established novel bureaucratic processes distinct from the framework of a truth commission, countries like Guatemala, El Salvador, Argentina, and Chile sought a comprehensive historical account of violence through establishing truth commissions. These processes engaged with a diverse set of experts, including social scientists, clergy members, lawyers, human rights practitioners, and politicians. But while the goals of these truth commissions include producing a comprehensive,

structural analysis of past violence, in practice they are often constrained by limited forensic or juridical approaches to narrating past violence (Chapman and Ball 2001; Grandin and Klubock 2007). Emilio Crenzel (2012) demonstrates that in the case of Argentina's National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (1983–1984) the final historical report regarding disappearances emerged from a relatively haphazard project of collecting individual testimonies and tips for investigations. This departed from earlier designs for the commission that strove for more uniformity, with President Alfonsín first commissioning a group of philosophers to construct a formal definition of "perpetrator" to guide the investigation. The final outcome, while still a model for future truth commissions in the region, was an aggregation of individual cases meant to represent a broader structural reality. In the context of Guatemala's Historical Clarification Commission (1997–1999), Elizabeth Oglesby (2007) similarly underscores what she calls the "epistemological tensions" of reconciling both a juridical framing of violence and richer historical understandings in response to the Commission's broad mandate to investigate the "causes and origins" of the armed conflict. Beyond Latin America, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa (1996–2003) also exhibited challenges that emerged from prioritizing the aggregate truth of individual victim testimonies and depositions in a way that unintentionally obscured the more macro "historical interrelations" between apartheid and preceding forms of segregation, which would be critical to any structural account of violence (Castillejo-Cuéllar 2007).

As provided for in Colombia's Law of Justice and Peace in 2005, the National Commission for Reconciliation and Reparations (CNRR) was an attempt to unify multiple forms of truth, both historical and judicial (Pizarro Leongómez 2019). While not formally a truth commission, the CNRR functioned similarly as a national body composed of twelve

commissioners from across government, civil society, and victim advocacy sectors charged with collecting victim testimonies and delivering a final report to the government (Ambos 2010). Eduardo Pizarro Leongómez (2019), who presided over the CNRR from 2005–2009, also contextualizes its work as unique in the realm of transitional justice, since the historical reports resulting from the compiled victim narratives were given the authority to inform later judicial decisions. Interestingly, the CNRR was only established after pushback from international and local NGOs that criticized the initial formulation of the Law of Justice and Peace as prioritizing the voices of demobilized combatants— perpetrators—over their victims (Evans 2012:215).

The court-centered nature of the Law of Justice and Peace (2005), apart from and prior to the CNRR, meant that victims were identified only as a byproduct of the depositions delivered by perpetrators. That is, a victim was only named and recognized as a victim when their perpetrator admitted to committing violence against them in the context of a formal deposition in court.[89] Because of the uneven nature of these testimonies, Mauricio García Durán (2014:15) refers to them as a form of "partial truth" in lieu of a more comprehensive truth that other mechanisms, like a truth commission, could bring forth. More generally, Savelsberg and Brehm (2015) note the limitations of the courtroom, which was center stage of the Justice and Peace processes, in eliciting comprehensive truth about civil conflict due to restricted "evidentiary standards" that elide what could be evaluated through a historical or social scientific lens. The eventual investigative work of the CNRR, in response to initial deficiencies of the Law of Justice and Peace, succeeded in many respects in establishing an enduring emphasis on academic investigation, eventually evolving into the Historical Memory Group and then the National

[89] The identification of these victims through legal proceedings led directly to some retaliatory attacks (Evans 2012).

Center for Historical Memory, which remains active today.[90] Yet, as the congressional debates of the Victims' Law will reveal, the work of the CNRR was not the final or most influential voice in the construction of the victim category through this new legislative process.

The 2005 Law of Justice and Peace and the CNRR was not the first time the topic of conflict victimhood had surfaced in political consciousness in Colombia. Naming victims has been an important task in the face of violence throughout the country's history, dating back to the aftermath of the *Bogotazo*, a series of riots that broke out in Bogotá's streets following the assassination of populist leader and presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in April 1948. A commission was tasked with identifying the property owners and merchants who were "victimized" by the violence (Espinosa Moreno 2019). The word used in that case—and more generally throughout the 1940s and 1950s as overlapping forms of partisan violence spread across the country—was the Spanish *damnificado* (literally "damaged one") rather than *víctima*, or victim (Rodríguez Idárraga 2017). Historian Nicolás Idárraga points out that the identification of "*damnificados*" was more akin to assessing the damage of a "natural disaster" rather than acknowledging the political context of harm that the contemporary notion of "victim" involves (ibid.:10). Later, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a victim concept emerged in Colombia with the discussion of forced displacement and how to define a "*desplazado*," or "displaced person," in the context of legislation and court rulings (Dávila 2009).

The Victims' Law of 2011 was unique in that it sought to construct a definition of "victim" more comprehensive than in any of the Colombian state's previous attempts. It went further than simply identifying "*damnificados*" and "*desplazados*," terms of more limited scope,

[90] The Historical Memory Group (GMH) was active between 2007–2011 and fed into the creation of the National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH) in 2011, which is still functioning today with public funds granted through the Victims' Law. Both groups produced historical reports and statistical data. The CNMH still does, but now also emphasizes more public participation and outreach.

but it also fell short of the type of synthesizing, historical work that truth commissions like the CNRR were mandated to generate. The Victims' Law also did not construct or rely upon a strictly juridical understanding of victimhood, since the category was not emerging from the courts or relying upon individual testimonies. Instead, the process of victimhood construction in the Victims' Law carried its own epistemological puzzles as members of Congress elevated certain voices while silencing others in the context of legislative debates. The process of the debates enabled the elite historical narratives of politicians to weigh most consequentially in drawing boundaries, particularly temporal ones, around a category of victim.

"Victim" Construction in the Colombian Congress, 2007-2011[91]

The legislative process leading up to the Victims' Law's ratification in 2011 was initiated by the human rights community in Colombia—comprised of academics, NGOs, and victim advocates—and sympathetic senators. Experts from civil society were involved in public hearings that took place at the start of each critical period in the law's development (2007 and 2010), and politicians incorporated various forms of their data and recommendations into their arguments as the debates progressed. Importantly, the victim definition adopted in the law's first draft, in 2007, was drawn directly from a UN guidelines document adopted the year before in the UN General Assembly. Yet, as the debates proceeded beyond 2009, financial constraints worked in tandem with political justifications and the pre-existing ideological biases of Álvaro Uribe's government to limit the initially wide interpretation of victimhood, which, with its universal scope, did not regard the timeline of violence as a contested dimension of victim eligibility.

[91] I draw here on the complete archives of congressional debates from the Colombian House and Senate pertaining to the Victim's Law of 2011. Debate minutes were printed in the Gaceta del Congreso (Congressional Gazette) from 2007 through 2011, totaling nearly three thousand pages of Spanish language text. All translations are my own.

Voting members of Congress bypassed many of the historical assertions of NGO leaders, who represented a wider breadth of knowledge about the conflict. They indirectly relegated their inputs to being contextual information rather than knowledge directly applicable in technical deliberations of the temporal boundaries to be drawn. They instead constructed arguments based on their own personal narrations of meaningful events, which resulted in distinctly "elite" historical narratives. These narratives were more important in determining the specific limits of 1 January 1985 and 10 June 2021 than were either formal human rights expertise or political fears of financial feasibility.

The Road to Legislation: Human Rights Activity and Discourse in Uribe's Colombia

The first prototype of the Victims' Law introduced in the Senate on 5 October 2007 was the result of coordinated efforts by Liberal Party Senator Juan Fernando Cristo— who self-identified as a victim of the conflict due to his father's assassination by National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrillas in 1997—and the NGO Visible Victims, along with other local and international human rights advocates including the United Nations Development Program (Cristo 2012; Mora-Gámez 2016). The initial motivation for this bill was frustration over previous attempts at transitional justice legislation, specifically the Law of Justice and Peace from 2005. Those were seen as having been too focused on perpetrators and not enough on victims, which relegated the latter to a "secondary plane" beneath the perpetrators, whose stories monopolized political and public attention.[92] As Cristo later recounted in his memoir *The War for the Victims*, "The government [Uribe's administration] saw [the conflict] in terms of the distinct actors [or

[92] Gaceta del Congreso de la República de Colombia, no. 634 de 2007, 6 Dec

perpetrators] of the war, legal or illegal, while this legislative proposal precisely sought to change that vision in a radical way, to see the conflict only with the lens of the victims that had suffered it" (2012:75–76).

The coalition's first action step prior to the bill's formal debut in the Senate was to organize a public hearing in Congress, which they referred to as a "Day of Solidarity." It featured testimonies of victims from a wide assortment of identities and circumstances: victims of state actors, guerrillas, or paramilitaries; members of special populations like Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities; and those afflicted by forced displacements, kidnappings, or massacres of family members.[93] They recounted suffering violations of their human rights and of humanitarian law, as defined in international legal discourse. The assembling of testimonies on this day in July 2007 dramatized the work that several Colombian NGOs had been doing over several decades, which had widely been ignored by prior government initiatives. For example, the Jesuit-founded Center for Research and Popular Education (CINEP) had since the 1980s rigorously recorded and systematized testimony from thousands of victims, publishing excerpts in the periodical *Night and Fog*, a title derived from a 1956 French film detailing Holocaust atrocities.[94] Similarly, the Catholic Church in Colombia had maintained records of displaced victims in the country since 1985.[95] Tate (2007:59) explains that this increasing documentary capacity of victim advocacy NGOs in the country, especially from the 1990s onward, enhanced their legitimacy. This, in turn, helped them to better control the framing of the conflict using human rights legal terminology (emphasizing the victims of internationally-legible violations)

[93] Ibid.

[94] Personal communication with CINEP staff.

[95] Gaceta del Congreso de la República de Colombia, no. 187 de 2011, 13 Apr

and to garner the attentions of international and regional audiences like the UN and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

Yet this human rights discourse, now crystallized in the motivations and language of Cristo's law project in 2007, directly contradicted the Uribe administration's efforts to undermine any framing of an internationally-legible "civil conflict" that would imply that the state was responsible for human rights and humanitarian violations (Semana 2005). Uribe's "rebranding" of the conflict as a matter of terrorism rather than civil war became a resounding theme throughout his consecutive presidential terms.[96] This was instrumental in justifying his administration's aggressive security approach, labeled "democratic security," and it also shifted responsibility for victim identification and compensation away from the state. Further complicating Uribe's reputation from a human rights perspective was an onslaught of investigations that began in 2006 into links between paramilitaries and several politicians in his inner circle, including his intelligence chief and a cousin elected to the Senate (Ramsey 2012). The concept of "*parapolítica*" soon emerged to signify the entanglement of paramilitary and government interests and the alarming number of senators and representatives under investigation for such ties (33 percent of senators and 15 percent of representatives among those elected in 2006) (López and Sevillano 2008).

As a result of this political climate and Uribe's resistance to human rights terminology, one local NGO founder remembered that at the time the Victims' Law debuted in Congress "it appeared that human rights organizations were the primary opposition party to (Uribe's) government" (Gómez 2013: 136). Accordingly, Cristo's and Visible Victims' public hearing of

[96] Castillejo-Cuéllar (2014: 49) highlights the way that this revisionist definition of the conflict as "terrorism" decontextualized the violence into a broader transnational discourse and away from state failures of sociopolitical and colonial conflict.

victim testimonies in July 2007 was poorly attended, with only thirty (out of 268) members of Congress staying for the duration (Bautista 2011). The emphasis on widespread victim identification and reparations mechanisms that Cristo's project advocated for when it landed in Senate debates later that year first had to contend with the prevailing governmental discourse that focused on perpetrator identification and actively eschewed any characterization of the conflict in terms of human rights and humanitarian violations, or their victims.

This tension between discourses determined the playing field on which members of Congress from all parties sought to modify a distinct victim category, inherited from a universal human rights framework largely ahistorical and independent from local contexts, using politically amenable criteria to periodize the conflict timeline. The empirical and discursive tools from civil society experts, including testimonies and data sets, appeared at various stages and in various capacities throughout the course of the congressional debates. And yet, members of Congress advocated for their own constructions of conflict history when determining the effective contours of eligible victimhood, especially regarding timelines of victimization. While Cristo's coalition initially presented the bill using a "one size fits all" definition of victimhood from the UN framework, the final definition was the product of extensive modifications based on the politicians' own proximity to violence committed against elites and their personal interpretations of national history.

It is important to note that my analysis here does not rely on any unified understanding of politicians who intervened in the debates as acting out of a singular elite identity; it considers several demographic factors that nuance the social locations of individual members of Congress. First, the role of political parties in Colombia is complex and was especially so during this period where an *uribista* coalition—those parties supporting President Uribe—held the majority in both

chambers of Congress. For this reason, legislators had an additional partisan identity as either *uribista* or not when speaking out in debates. Further, the career trajectory of some politicians meant that they either were involved in local/regional politics in territories where violence was much more prevalent during earlier periods of the conflict, or they were located in major urban areas like Bogotá with business or legal careers. Still another complexity is that some of them made personal claims to victimhood. Beyond Cristo, other key politicians who could claim victim status were Liberal Party Senator Juan Manuel Galán, whose father, a presidential candidate, was assassinated in 1989,[97] and even President Uribe himself, whose father was killed by armed actors in 1983.[98] These identity factors played into the kinds of claims that members of Congress made as debates about the Victims' Law progressed.

Delimiting the Victim Category: Negotiating Conflict History and the Temporal Boundaries of Victimhood

Here I will analyze a crucial aspect of the deliberations around the definition of the victim category—the temporal boundaries of eligible victimhood—to explore the ways in which technical historical knowledge from experts both succeeded and failed to determine its final contours. I argue that congressional debates about the conflict's historical boundaries pivoted away from being technically informed and toward being politically informed as the stakes for specific historical claims grew. The event that precipitated this transition was a demand that the scope of "victimhood" be reduced to one less inclusive than the broad UN definition. This was

[97] Universidad de los Andes. *Congreso Visible* (www.congresovisible.org). Last retrieved April 26, 2024.

[98] The identity of the armed actors responsible for Alberto Uribe Sierra's death is disputed. The family, including Álvaro Uribe, insist that the FARC were responsible, but current senator and former member of the FARC Julián Gallo contends the group was not to blame (El Tiempo 2020a)

instigated by the Uribe administration's internal campaign against the law, founded ostensibly on claims of its fiscal unfeasibility, which resulted in the debates being halted in 2009. Once they restarted under Juan Manuel Santos' presidency in 2010, the government saw a political need to reduce the costs of the law by reducing the number of eligible victims. It sought to impose strict temporal limits, which politicians rationalized through their own elite narratives of conflict history rather than through the technical knowledge of human rights experts and local activists. What right-leaning parties saw as promoting "fiscal sustainability"[99] left-leaning parties saw as "amputating history"[100] by artificially, temporally limiting the scope of true victimhood within a conflict that in fact spanned more than five decades. Thus, what began as an appeal to a material need to reduce the scope of eligibility ended up begging additional rationales that congressmen constructed using their own proximate experiences with violence, along with nationally significant symbolic milestones.

Conflict History as "contextual": Human rights knowledge in the 2007-2009 congressional debates

When the Victims' Law draft was introduced in the Senate on 1 October 2007, the initial definition of "victim" in its Article 15 was copied almost verbatim from the UN's "Basic Principles and Guidelines" document on reparations for victims of human rights and humanitarian law violations. That document, adopted by the General Assembly the previous year, was initially drafted by the UN's Third Committee, dedicated to human rights and humanitarian affairs. It draws explicitly from the founding ideas of the Universal Declaration of

[99] Gaceta del Congreso de la República de Colombia, no. 692 de 2010, 27 Sept.

[100] Ibid., no. 116 de 2011, 23 Mar.

Human Rights of 1948 and the Geneva Conventions of 1929 and 1949, among other international treaties, and it defines victims as follows:

> …persons who individually or collectively suffered harm, including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, economic loss or substantial impairment of their fundamental rights, through acts or omissions that constitute gross violations of international human rights law, or serious violations of international humanitarian law … the term "victim" also includes the immediate family or dependents of the direct victim and persons who have suffered harm in intervening to assist victims in distress or to prevent victimization. A person shall be considered a victim regardless of whether the perpetrator of the violation is identified, apprehended, prosecuted, or convicted and regardless of the familial relationship between the perpetrator and the victim" (United Nations 2006: 5–6).

Significantly, this document mentions no upper or lower boundaries of victim eligibility in terms of any timeline of violations. As legal scholar Nelson Camilo Sánchez (2009) has noted, the UN definition operates with the implicit assumption that the temporal boundaries of victimhood are simply those of whatever civil conflict is at issue. This transfers poorly to a context like Colombia, where the conflict's precise origins and end are disputed. Again, when the Victims' Law debates began in 2007, violence was still very much ongoing; the FARC only signed a peace agreement in 2016 and other paramilitary and guerrilla actors remain active to this day.[101] Even so, the lack of temporal specificity provided by the UN definition implied that any historical speculation during the congressional debates would have no direct bearing upon the scope of victimhood, since time was considered to be outside the definition's purview.

[101] Many in the international community came to see the peace agreement, signed in 2016, as the formal end of Colombia's civil conflict, though the details of that agreement do not enforce accountability among all responsible parties, including paramilitary and state actors who committed or are still committing crimes (United Nations 2021).

Therefore, when the concept of conflict history inevitably entered into congressional discussions from 2007–2009, it was generally contextual, and deployed in rhetorical interludes, such as "these violent actions have affected our society for more than forty years" or "since the start of the conflict in the early 1960s…."[102] Most such assertions occurred during parts of the debates that were isolated from active policy discussion, such as during the "explanatory statements" (*exposición de motivos*) that preceded the presentation of each proposal. In other words, discussion of conflict timelines was restricted by what Francesca Polletta calls "genre boundaries" (2003). Polletta distinguished between the genres of "epideictic" rhetoric, or largely symbolic imaginings of the past or future, and "deliberative" argument, which is speech aimed more strategically at policymaking. Per her framework, both genres were deployed in the congressional Victims' Law debates at this time. Speculations about the temporal boundaries of the conflict were heard in the 2007–2009 congressional discussions, but they were not featured in any "deliberative" arguments about the contours of policy until much later in the debates. Instead, historical narrative was used only to contextualize other talking points, as a sort of backdrop to the policy discussion.

These claims were not devised by congressional members but came from human rights experts such as academics and NGOs like the Red Cross and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Members of the Liberal Party's initial committee, including the main coordinator Senator Cristo, relied upon these entities for background statistics used to frame the "Human Rights Situation in Colombia" section in the first circulation of the bill, on 1 October 2007.[103] While members of Congress in these early legislative discussions were listening to and even repeating these claims from human rights experts in their speeches, they did not try to surpass

[102] Gaceta del Congreso de la República de Colombia, no. 502 de 2007, 5 Oct.
[103] Ibid.

them with their own historical assertions based on anecdotal knowledge, as they would in the 2010–2011 debates.

Tellingly, the only call to formally implement a legal conflict start date originated from widespread public input sessions (*audiencias públicas regionales*) co-sponsored by the UN and national and international victim advocacy groups. In these sessions victim leaders from a range of urban and rural communities, from Sincelejo and Valledupar in the north to central Villavicencio and Pasto in the southwest, were assembled to testify before House representatives prior to plenary debate. Out of a list of seventy-nine "principal points" that resulted from these sessions, one, framed as a demand, was that the conflict should be recognized as having begun in 1948, the start of *La Violencia*.[104] This date is significant because most Colombian historians would consider it the earliest potential conflict starting point, and thus the most inclusive of victims. Recognizing *La Violencia* as the conflict's origin point, as opposed to, say, dates in the 1980s or 1990s, centers the experiences of populations from rural areas, where more of the violence occurred, rather than those from urban centers like Bogotá, where the deliberating politicians were located.[105]

Because this demand was brought into congressional discussion relatively early in the legislative process, on 3 October 2008, and was embedded in a long list of other data points stemming from the community input sessions, it was met with neither explicit acceptance nor rejection. No mention of the 1948 date made it into the bill's text at any point, nor was it debated. The passive acknowledgement of this historical claim points to the environment of the

[104] Ibid., no. 670 de 2008, 30 Sept.

[105] The year of 1948 is primarily significant because that is when Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a charismatic Liberal politician, was assassinated in Bogotá. While this event and the ensuing violence in the streets of Bogotá would be considered "urban" events (Sánchez 2009), the violence in many ways dramatized the partisan conflicts ongoing in provincial Colombia in preceding years (Karl 2017).

initial debates, during which there was no codification of conflict timing as something that might determine who was a victim. To again use Polletta's language of "genre boundaries," matters of time had not penetrated the arena of "deliberative argument" as they would once debates resumed in 2010, when there was renewed partisan pressure to tighten the scope of victimhood.

The only serious attempt to impose a temporal boundary on the victim category during the 2007–2009 period occurred later in the House debates, after public hearings subsided and a conservative majority introduced new key political voices. Representatives Jorge Mantilla and Fernando de la Peña successfully sought to institute a cutoff date whereby new claims of victimization would not be accepted beyond two years after the law's ratification. This decision was rationalized using only budgetary considerations and no historical claims were made about the appropriate length of time to expect violations, and the conflict in general, to continue into the future. The two-year cutoff instead assumed that all violence had already occurred and that the two years would function merely as a grace period for existing victims to go through the appropriate processes of seeking victim status. Even this boundary, intended to control the total cost of the law, was met with dissatisfaction by Representative Carlos Jaramillo, a businessman by trade and an Uribe supporter who hails from the same home region. He claimed it was financially untenable to extend reparations for an additional two years of victims on top of the "fifty years" (thereby acknowledging an implicit assessment of the conflict as roughly fifty-years long).[106] This linkage between the financial burden of the law and the temporal scope of victimhood was starting to take shape as a material political hurdle for the bill to overcome.

The night prior to the final voting session on 18 June 2009, Uribe's Minister of Finance Óscar Iván Zuluaga circulated an urgent letter to Congress projecting the law would carry a price

[106] Gaceta del Congreso de la República de Colombia, no. 54 de 2009, 16 Feb.

tag of 80 billion pesos. This was *more than eleven times* the estimate of 7 billion pesos that had been agreed upon in the preceding drafts and debates. This fiscal panic, intended to dissuade final approval of the bill, served Uribe's ideological opposition to the law and the discursive shift it represented toward assigning the state responsibility for human rights violations. Uribe's administration had a vested interest in terminating the bill altogether because it directly threatened his platform that denied the very existence of a civil conflict. In a public speech the morning of the voting session, Uribe himself parroted the new financial figure, an estimate that Senator Cristo dismissed as a "magic number." In a speech that same day, another senator dismissed the projected sum as a fantasy of the administration, saying simply, "We can't approve the cost of 80 billion pesos."[107] This internally coordinated campaign to portray the Victims' Law as financially crippling led to its failure in the House that summer.[108]

What this meant for the process moving forward is that it publicly coded the Victims' Law as fiscally irresponsible (rather than openly acknowledging that it threatened Uribe's platform). This laid the groundwork for a restrictive mentality that prevailed when the project was revived under President Juan Manuel Santos' administration in 2010, one determined to shrink the universe of victims entitled to reparations. I now turn to how this was achieved in part by restricting the upper and lower bounds of conflict history.

[107] Gaceta del Congreso de la República de Colombia, no. 835 de 2009, 2 Sept.; El Tiempo 2009.

[108] The broader context of economic recession in Colombia in 2008 and 2009 and the resulting decrease in tax revenue made financial apprehensions even more salient as a rationale (and scapegoat) for the Uribe administration when it halted the law's progress (Bocanegra 2009).

Elite Historical Narratives in the 2010-2011 Congressional Debates

In both stages of the debates—before and after the 2009 fiscal panic incited by Uribe's administration—members of Congress drew from an array of justifications to make claims about the proper scope of victimhood. Whereas historical claims about the timeline of violence were contextual and less polarizing in the initial debates from 2007 to 2009, once the fiscal pressure to restrict the scope of victimhood became critical then temporal rationales played a larger role in defining victims. Yet, at the same time that historical considerations about the conflict's timeline became more important, the debate structure left civil society voices of human rights experts, academics, and NGO directors with less of a platform to share historical claims, while the politicians were granted more opportunities to fashion historical accounts based on narratives of proximate violence—accounts of violent acts that personally impacted their own families or social circles—and on national political milestones.

Part of this shift was organizational in nature since the opportunities for public hearings and expert-sourced commissions were front-loaded in the debates. Those were the arenas where activists and academics directly provided input. Representative Alfonso Prada of the Green Party, for example, praised the inclusion of civil society members at the introductory public hearing in October 2010, but in the same speech he questioned whether it represented a sufficient "participatory design" for the legislative process.[109] Speaking on behalf of the First Commission of the House of Representatives, Prada summarized their apprehension due to the "paradox" that civil society's participation had been confined to the public hearing while it was excluded from "the full dimension of design and elaboration of the law."[110] The final boundaries enshrined in

[109] Gaceta del Congreso de la República de Colombia, no. 1.128 de 2010, 22 Dec.

[110] Ibid.

the Victims' Law were a start date of 1 January 1985 for violations eligible for claims, and an end date for future claims that was ten years after the law's passage (which turned out to mean until 10 June 2021). Both limits were a result of elite historical rationale interacting with political and fiscal pressures for a restricted scope of victimhood.[111]

Two sub-debates regarding the conflict timeline began simultaneously when House debates resumed in 2010. The first involved worries over the ambiguous nature of "future victims," which several local NGO directors had testified about in a public hearing on 21 October. These human rights experts emphasized the ongoing nature of the war and that it "adds to its victims daily."[112] This was an attempt to intervene in the conversation about the appropriate duration (*vigencia*) of the law within which *new* victims could come forward and claim reparations.[113] Some senators chose to amplify this demand. For example, Liberal Party Representative Victoria Vargas asked that the law be extended generously enough to incorporate all future victims of increasingly active "neo"paramilitary groups like the Black Eagles. Nonetheless, the Liberal senators reduced their demands for an extension of fifteen years or more to just ten years. This occurred when the debates ceded to the logic of Representative Jaime Buenahora Febres, whose constituency encompassed mainly Colombians living in the United States and who himself had lived abroad for over a decade at this point. He claimed fifteen years would be financially reckless in light of the debt-ridden, "sick" status of the state's finances.[114]

[111] In November 2020, the ten-year duration was extended an additional ten years, so victims can seek reparations until 10 June 2031. The authors of this extension cited the unreasonably slow delivery of reparations to eligible victims over the first ten years and the need to extend funding so that no eligible victims are denied their rights (El Tiempo 2020b).
[112] Ibid.

[113] Gaceta del Congreso de la República de Colombia, no. 98 de 2011, 17 Mar.

[114] Ibid., no. 1.128 de 2010, 22 Dec.

Thus, while this ten-year limit marked an expansion from the 2009 debates' full rejection of future victims, it expressed the same lingering unease over the material burden of issuing reparations, and showed that the temporal scope of victimhood was a terrain upon which these cost-saving measures, or what one critical representative called "mechanisms of exclusion," could play out.[115]

The second sub-debate pertained to the *lower* bound of temporal eligibility of victimhood, which made its debut in the bill's text in the specific context of displacement victims, who would only be eligible to bring forward claims for violations that had occurred after 1984.[116] Although this initial time boundary was an artefact of financial restrictions from the 2007–2009 debates, members of Congress began to construct historical rationale to support the date. For example, Representative Buenahora, of Uribe's party, voiced an argument that included a narration of key conflict events in order to explain why 1984 made good historical sense:

> "I would propose … that we adopt 1984 as the starting date, yes from '84 until now, understanding that then, for example, the victims of that horrible year that was 1989, with the bombings of DAS and at the *El Espectador* building and the Avianca airplane, the violence unleashed by narcotrafficking, three assassinated presidential candidates, and so on—of course they have to be beneficiaries…."[117]

This argument can be understood as an elite narration of conflict events, citing mainly those that impacted businessmen, public officials, and presidential candidates, as opposed to the millions of everyday Colombians victimized in mostly rural areas. Buenahora's reference to bombings at DAS, the intelligence agency of Colombia at the time, and *El Espectador*, one of

[115] Gaceta del Congreso de la República de Colombia, no. 1004 de 2010, 1 Dec
[116] Ibid., no. 692 de 2010, 27 Sept.

[117] Ibid., no. 98 de 2011, 17 Mar.

the country's most notable newspapers, highlights aspects of the conflict that, for other politicians in the room, occurred close to home both socially and geographically. Buenahora himself was educated in Bogotá and had been an active university faculty member there during the 1980s. These highlighted events would also have held particular symbolic valence in Colombian official memory, to the extent they represented attacks on political and democratic institutions. This even though these events had fewer victims than did the daily displacements and massacres of communities further from the capital.

This discriminating timeline of violence was not a natural extension of the evidence expert witnesses had presented at earlier public hearings. Although Buenahora sought to fortify decision-making with historical narration, he did so by asserting his own personal "expertise" about conflict history—conditioned by social proximity to particular violent events—above the debate testimony and statistics previously presented by NGOs and other human rights actors.

Representative Miguel Gómez, of Uribe's party, picked up on this deployment of elite-centered historical narratives to argue for a different timeline for victim eligibility. He advocated for a more generous cutoff date to include the assassination of Uribe's father in 1983 and the FARC's kidnapping of twenty-two Colombian soldiers in 1980.[118] Gómez here contradicted the purely fiscal arguments for narrowing rather than widening the scope of victim eligibility. Historical rationale for paying homage to Uribe's family and elevating the FARC's role as key perpetrators were considered more important than the material goal of paying fewer reparations. This trend became ever clearer in final deliberations about the cutoff date.

During this debate session there was no serious consideration of dates reaching back to the 1970s, 1960s, 1950s, or even to 1948, as proposed at the public hearing months earlier. One

[118] Ibid., no. 178 de 2011, 11 Apr.

exception was an intervention by a conservative politician who thought the conflict should be dated back to 1492, when the "indigenous and native peoples were first violated by the (European) invader." He was trying to undermine the conversation by illustrating the impossibility of delimiting violence throughout a nation's history.[119] Yet members of Congress mostly debated the incremental expansion or contraction of the start date; once 1984 was placed on the table, politicians merely argued for moving it to slightly before or after that date, according to their specific historical rationales.

Starting in the debates of November 2010, various representatives began rallying around either 1991 or 1993 as alternatives to the 1980s dates that had been suggested. Like the elite historical narratives that representatives Buenahora and Gómez had constructed in reference to specific bombings and assassinations, those now pushing for 1991 or 1993 centered their arguments on key events that, according to the vice- president, commemorated "national unity" rather than violence. For example, right- wing representatives suggested that it was sensible to choose 1991 because that would pay homage to the year the country enacted its new constitution, hailed as a symbol of national progress and consecration of democratic norms.[120]

While these arguments gained traction among some members, Liberal Party representatives were enraged at this attempt to use overtly nationalist symbolism as a tool to drastically cut out the eligibility of earlier victims. Representative José Camelo argued that "paying homage to one of the most violated constitutions in our country doesn't make sense." His colleague Jack Jaller, newly affiliated with the Afro- Colombian bench in Congress, claimed,

[119] Ibid., no. 116 de 2011, 23 Mar.
[120] Ibid., no. 116 de 2011, 23 Mar.

"The only homage that should be paid is to the victims."[121] When 1993 was introduced as an option, representatives from multiple parties rallied behind the date for its parity with the passage of the 1993 Law of Public Order, the state's first formal acknowledgement of the civil war.[122] Both 1991 and 1993 were rationalized as viable dates to circumscribe the victim category not because they correlated to any empirical reality of victimization—visible through data that local NGOs had already presented to Congress—but because they paid homage to key political events within the specific purview of the politicians.

By the end of 2010, the debate over the timeline had pivoted so heavily toward nationalist symbolism that one representative opined that this legislative project was not intended to "salute the flag," but neither was it meant to "comply with the parameters" of NGOs and international "human rights norms." Instead, Representative Hernando Padaui Álvarez asserted, the work of Congress was to determine the "truth" about who the actual victims deserving of reparations were.[123] By that December, representatives across the political spectrum had grown frustrated with the "arbitrary" and contested nature of determining a start date, which led Representative Oscar Bravo Realpe of the Conservative Party to proclaim:

> "Of course, the question would be why not 1940 or 1950, or since the War of a Thousand Days (in 1899–1902), well, because we have to be fiscally responsible, and the state and the government has to tell us exactly from what date they promise to issue reparations to victims, or to return their lands, and because there isn't a magical date that the Holy Spirit has deposited in our minds, it has to be a date made from (our) consensus…."[124]

[121] Ibid.

[122] Ibid., no. 1.004 de 2010, 1 Dec.
[123] Ibid., no. 116 de 2011, 23 Mar.

[124] Ibid.

Bravo Realpe's statement reveals what, over the course of the debates, had become a shared underlying belief among congressional members: whatever temporal constraints would be placed on the definition of victims, they should be arrived at through congressional deliberation; they had to weigh fiscal consideration along with historical knowledge, rather than choosing numbers "magically" determined or established by NGO expertise about the history of the conflict (as Padaui Álvarez had emphasized).

The specific rejection of NGO expertise manifested in two ways in the final debates. When 1991 was on the table as a starting date, Senator Juan Manuel Galán—who, as I mentioned earlier, could himself be eligible to be a victim due to his father's 1989 assassination—was ignored when he pointed out the discrepancy between the debate's date consensus and the records of the Catholic Church, which had tracked displacements and identified victims since 1985. "What are we going to do with those years between 1985 and 1991?" he complained, illustrating the gap that had grown between conflict knowledge from the human rights community and the circulating rationale based on nationalist symbolism. Adherents to the latter advocated for reparation awards to begin in 1991, thereby commemorating the adoption of constitutional reform.[125] In another unsuccessful attempt to incorporate expertise from the human rights community, Senator Luis Avellaneda intervened to try to push the date as far back as 1980, based on a host of data from the organization Colombia Never Again and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. That data revealed a sharp uptick in conflict violence during that decade, including increased rates of kidnapping, homicide, and torture.[126] Avellaneda

[125] Ibid., no. 187 de 2011, 13 Apr.

[126] Ibid., no. 253 de 2011, 11 May.

was criticized for trying again to broach the subject of time after, it was asserted, it had been settled in the previous debate.[127]

His proposal, and the historical evidence supporting it, gained no traction, and Cristo retorted that Congress had reached a consensus in the last session that 1 January 1985 would be the start date because it was a compromise among the various dates proposed; it appeased both the left-wing politicians who advocated for the earliest start dates and the right-wingers who sought the latest. What finally sealed this as the date, according to Cristo, was that it was a compromise between financial arguments for limiting the timeframe of eligible offenses and the fact that it upheld the previously established rhetoric of recognizing violence against "their own." After all, he clarified, 1985 would enfranchise the family members of the slain presidential candidates in the late 1980s.[128] Significantly, the historical considerations here tempered what would have been the most financially expedient cutoff dates previously proposed: 1991 or 1993.

When the Victims' Law was passed in a plenary session of the whole of Congress on 1 June 2011, the temporal boundaries instituted were the product of a power struggle between multiple forms of knowledge and rationale that had played out over the debates. The consensus that eventually developed around 1 January 1985 as the start date and 10 June 2021 as the end date was established by political deliberation about key events in conflict history and the overwhelming financial anxieties first professed by Uribe's administration. There had been an opportunity for human rights experts and databases about the empirical reality of victimization over time to determine the scope of the victim definition through testimonies in public hearings and the allocation of statistics by members of Congress, yet they were not decisive in

[127] Ibid., no. 469 de 2011, 30 June.
[128] Ibid.

determining voting outcomes in the later stages of the debates. Ultimately, politicians' own understandings of national history as based on socially- and geographically- relevant violence and deference to symbolic political events steered them toward the more recent 1985 boundary. Temporal limits had been instigated by initial alarm over the law's fiscal tolls, precipitated by the Uribe administration in an effort to undermine the project for what were in truth ideological reasons. Yet, in the end, the dates were sustained by accompanying historical rationales produced by politicians.[129]

Conclusion

Deliberations about the boundaries of the victim category in Colombia played out in a national legislative context with participation by both civil society representatives and politicians from across the partisan spectrum. Although the original proposal was spearheaded by collaborations with local, regional, and international human rights organizations, the initial victim definition was during later stages of the debates extensively modified based on insulated political deliberations. Specifically, the temporal limits placed on victim eligibility were drawn according to Congress members' own narratives related to their historical knowledge of elite traumas and symbolic national events. These justifications were produced in response to broader material and ideological pressures to restrict the victim category that emanated from the Uribe's administration's influence on the early debates, from 2007 through 2009. Following the law's ratification in 2011, though there was widespread popular support for it, some civil society organizations expressed disappointment at having been excluded from both the process and the

[129] In December 2011, the National Planning Department estimated the cost of the law at 54.9 billion pesos (Consejo Nacional 2011). The Uribe administration had hastily estimated in 2009 that it would cost 80 billion pesos (El Tiempo 2009).

narrative outcomes of the law. Shortly after the law's passage, the Movement for Victims of State Crimes (MOVICE) lamented in a memo that though they had submitted proposals to be circulated during the debates, they were simply ignored (MOVICE 2011). The Network for Alternatives to Impunity and Market Globalization, which includes MOVICE along with more than twenty-five local and regional organizations throughout the country, lamented the rejection of "popular memory" in the decision regarding the temporal limit, observing that the 1985 date excluded state-centered violence like the repression of the 1977 National Strike.[130]

These post hoc grievances put into focus the insulated nature of the congressional debates despite provisions to include civil society voices and opinions in earlier stages of the legislative process. Furthermore, the indictment that "popular memory" had been excluded suggests that memory was indeed leveraged in the decision-making process, but memory that emanated from elite historical narratives rather than the testimonies or historical reports from beyond Congress. This particular legislative event exposes the unique vulnerabilities, in Colombia and perhaps other countries, of political bodies as deliberative arenas for determining transitional justice outcomes. Within the broader argument of this dissertation, it reveals the particular limitations of the Congressional arm of the state in facilitating expert-informed interpretations of past violence by marginalizing civil society experts to only specific moments of participation rather than ensuring their engagement from the beginning to the end of the legislative process.

[130] Delgado Barón (2015) discusses in more detail the specific complaints issued by MOVICE and the Red de Alternativas a la Impunidad y la Globalización del Mercado in their 2011 memos.

Chapter 4 All Voices Matter? Discourses of Victimhood within the Colombian Public Forces



Figure 13 Portraits of fallen National Police officers featured in an exhibit about victims at the National Police Museum in Bogotá, Colombia. Photo: Kristin Foringer, Jan 23, 2024.

In a ceremony in Yopal, Colombia on April 9th, 2023, a small crowd gathered to honor the fallen men and women who had served their country in the armed forces and the national police. It was a somber event, with a Catholic priest present to offer a meditation emphasizing the sufferings of the soldiers and policemen who were persecuted for doing good. Other service members and, presumably, friends and family members filled the rows of folding chairs in this small town square, and a modest audience observed virtually in a livestream hosted on the official Facebook page of the Colombian Armed Forces. As the ceremony unfolded with music and a commemorative video— urging the audience to "remember the origins, causes, and consequences of the violence in this country" –a commenter posted on the livestream: "I respect

the human rights of the heroes of Colombia. They are not less than the others."[131] The rather humble ceremony ended with a silent procession of uniformed service members carrying a large wreath to the center of the stage.

While in countries like the United States, one might expect this kind of event to occur in various towns or at specific monument sites on Memorial Day or Veterans' Day, this ceremony in Yopal, Colombia was held on the National Day of Victims of the Armed Conflict. This day was established thanks to the work of human rights activists and was enshrined in the 2011 Victims' Law to commemorate Colombians who had become collateral damage in the civil war between state forces, guerrillas, and paramilitary groups. As will be discussed at other points in this chapter, the image of victimhood that the Victims' Law projected *did* encompass some state combatants, but the overwhelming focus was on providing recognition and reparations for the millions of civilians who were killed, displaced, kidnapped, and otherwise harmed in the course of the conflict. According to the most recent statistics, less than 2% of deaths in the conflict occurred in combat scenarios among combatants.[132] So how did this day of victim commemoration—most commonly celebrated with cultural events that highlight the traditional songs, artwork, and testimonies of the most vulnerable communities throughout Colombia—become an occasion of military fanfare in the case of this ceremony in 2023? And how might this incident represent a broader discursive strategy by the Colombian armed forces—military and police—to position its wounded and deceased members as authentic victims of a civil war in which they are, in part, perpetrators? This chapter analyzes the diverse arenas where "military

[131] The recorded livestream of the event is accessible at: https://fb.watch/qAzcA09PG7/.

[132] Comisión de la Verdad. 2022. "Hay futuro si hay verdad: Informe final de la Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición." Retrieved Sept 15, 2023 (https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/hay-futuro-si-hay-verdad).

victimhood" has been constructed as a counter-narrative to civilian victimhood since the 2010s and diffused through various media including scholarly publications and museum exhibits. I argue that these discursive efforts—centralized within the highest ranks of the Colombian public forces[133]—have reached expanded publics through a concerted effort over the past two decades to increase the visibility of military members' testimonies of victimization alongside supporting legal arguments for their official victimhood.

For additional context, it is important to recall the Facebook comment from the ceremony described above—about the human rights of the military "not being less than the others." This illuminates a key motivation and the reactionary nature of Colombian forces in establishing an identity of "military victim." Some supporters of the military, as will be discussed in evidence below, believe that by focusing on civilian victims of the conflict, it actively detracts from the appropriate honor and empathy due to military service members. One has only to think of the "Blue Lives Matter" movement from a U.S. context, which has fashioned itself in opposition to activists decrying the murder of Black citizens by police as part of the mobilization of Black Lives Matter.[134] There is a zero-sum logic applied through this kind of rhetoric, whereby those in power feel threatened by the acknowledgement or rights awarded to peoples who have experienced oppression— often at their own hands. Although I won't dive empirically into this comparison, it can serve as a helpful example by which to understand the reactionary nature of military victimhood discourse in Colombia. As the evidence below will demonstrate, some

[133] I refer to both the National Police and the Military Forces (Army, Navy, and Air Force) sometimes interchangeably in this chapter, due to the joint nature of their involvement in national defense throughout the scope of the conflict. With the constitutional reforms of 1991, the term "public forces" emerged as a way to reference both the military branches and the police (Vásquez and Gil 2017).

[134] Kim, Juliana and Michael Wilson. 2020. "'Blue Lives Matter' and 'Defund the Police' Clash in the Streets." *New York Times*, July 22. Retrieved March 9, 2024 (https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/22/nyregion/ny-back-the-blue-lives-matter-rallies.html).

members of the public forces believe that their humanity is overlooked when their military identity supersedes their eligibility—real or imagined—for victim status. One military attorney frames his complaint this way: "It's as if their victimhood is erased by the fact they were also in the military."[135]

In the Colombian case, two historical trends helped pave the way for military victimhood discourse. The first is the refashioning of the concept of civil war into the language of left-wing terrorism during the administrations of President Alvaro Uribe from 2002-2010, which softened the culpability of the military as potential perpetrators of war crimes by unapologetically vilifying insurgent groups as terrorists. As part of this pivot, which Uribe called his Democratic Security Plan, the government ceased negotiating efforts with the FARC and instead launched more aggressive tactics to eradicate them through force.[136] This aggression was, again, warranted because of the FARC's new identity as terrorists rather than insurgents, which they had been classified as since the 1960s. On this discursive plane, Uribe enforced a strict policy that warned government agencies and embassies against using the language of "civil war," revised official documents like the National Development Plan to omit the language, and even censored journalists and NGOs.[137] Through these rebranding efforts, Uribe paved an indirect path toward the campaign for military victimhood: if insurgents like the FARC were terrorists, then the military and police who confronted them weren't merely harmed in a symmetric combat scenario

[135] Laura Dulce Romero, "La lucha de los militares para ser reconocidos como víctimas." *El Espectador*, Mar. 19. Retrieved Mar 16, 2019 (https://www.elespectador.com/colombia-20/paz-y-memoria/la-lucha-de-los-militares-para-ser-reconocidos-como-victimas-article/).

[136] *Semana*. 2011. Las tres tesis de Uribe derrotadas en la ley de víctimas. May 11. Retrieved April 24, 2019 (https://www.semana.com/politica/articulo/las-tres-tesis-uribe-derrotadas-ley-victimas/239645-3/).

[137] Gómez Buendía, Hernando. 2011. "Sí hay conflicto, al fin y al cabo." *Razón Pública*, May 2011. Retrieved Mar. 8, 2024 (https://razonpublica.com/si-hay-conflicto-al-fin-y-al-cabo/).

"on the job," but might more easily claim victimhood at the hands of chaotic and illegitimate terrorists.

Uribe's discursive pivot is consistent with a broader trend of the military's role in politics within Latin American state building projects more broadly. In the absence of conflict across national borders in the region, the military has historically worked to identify "internal enemies" as a necessary strategy in reinforcing national sovereignty (Centeno 2002). This kind of symbolic labor requires not only physical aggression (in the context of multi-actor internal conflicts, like Colombia's civil war) but a strategic entrance into politics on the part of the military. As such, Latin America witnesses a tighter relationship between politics and the military as compared to other parts of the world (Potash 1969, Maullin 1971, Stepan 1971, Centeno 2002). This is important context to keep in mind for understanding both how and why the Colombian military is now making efforts to project an identity of victimhood within public debate.

Another specific historical moment that helped pave the way for military victim discourse is the era *post*-Uribe, in which the state began making strides toward peacebuilding and acknowledgement of victims of the war. In the case of the Victims' Law of 2011 and the Peace Agreement of 2016 between the FARC and the Colombian government, the state yielded to civil society's demands to acknowledge the widespread harm and violence against civilians and to award reparations and other legal supports in the aftermath. The creation of an National Victims' Registry (RUV) in 2011, for example, inaugurated victim identity as a distinctive socio-political category that one must apply for using documentation and evidence of their victimization, in return for the state's formal acknowledgement of their condition and associated benefits like monetary reparations.[138] During this "era of the victim" (which I will discuss in more detail

[138] "Registro Único de Víctimas (RUV)," https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/es/registro-unico-de-victimas-ruv/

below), the stakes were upped for claiming victimhood as a primary identity in the public sphere. Because of these stakes, a new incentive was in play for the public forces to establish access to this identity for their members.

Victim Hierarchies and the Question of Perpetration

The line between victim and perpetrator identities in the context of the Colombian civil war is not as rigid as in neighboring countries' legacies of violence. For example, in the dictatorships of the Southern Cone like in Chile and Argentina, the historical circumstances laid clearer demarcating lines between victimized civilians and perpetrating state actors (Gómez-Barris 2009; Guglielmucci 2018). Yet in Colombia, the multiple armed groups on both sides of the political spectrum, alongside the ranging complicity of state actors with "unauthorized" actions of violence and human rights violations, leave more ambiguity for the task of assigning labels within the binary of victim and perpetrator. This means that military and police in Colombia often exist on a spectrum between these two categories.

Conflict scholars in recent decades have pushed to nuance or soften the binary between victim and perpetrator that is normally reinforced through socio-legal discourse following an event of mass violence (Bouris 2007; Baines 2009; Moffett 2016; Weber 2021). Erica Bouris (2007:10) introduced the concept of "complex victim," which signifies "a victim who is no longer chained to characteristics of complete innocence and purity, but remains a victim nonetheless." Conversely, Erin Baines (2009) developed the concept of "complex perpetrator" to emphasize the similar muddiness between innocence and evil and also to emphasize the notion of restricted agency within which perpetrators in highly militarized contexts must make decisions. She argues that especially in contexts with endemic violence stretching several generations, a

complex perpetrator identity can be a more apt description for "young men who know nothing but the way of the gun" (2009:187). Finally, Kiyoteru Tsutsui (2009) has elaborated on the complex experience of perpetrators, especially at a large national level like in the case of Japan which he studies, who grapple with the "collective trauma of perpetration" in response to recent decades of a more mobilized base of victims rights groups that demand accountability.

In tandem with this push to broaden the spectrum of victim—and perpetrator—identities in ways that are context-specific and account for varying levels of actor agency, scholars have also warned about the competitive and sometimes hierarchical nature of victim labels where resources and aid are at stake. In other words, scholars like Bouris have expounded upon the consequences of making too scarce of a victim identity in a way that pits individuals and groups—who have all been victimized—against each other in the competition for recognition and resources. Luke Moffett (2016) has advocated for an inclusive understanding of victimhood to include even "guilty victims," specifically in the context of transitional justice mechanisms, or those programs like reparations policy aimed at restoring societies in the aftermath of civil conflict. In her studies of Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Marie Berry (2018) has observed the competitive and divisive environment that arises among victims when sub-groups are distinguished and awarded different levels of recognition and resources. For example, with Bosniak women who experienced sexual violence, humanitarian aid workers often urged them to take on the label of "rape victim" as their primary identity when seeking resources, since it would result in more success. This had the effect of isolating these women from other women victims such as widows, due to the hierarchical nature of distinctive *types* of victimhood as imposed from external actors like aid agencies. Victim hierarchies, then, in addition to the conceptual rigidity around victim

and perpetrator identities all serve as barriers to effective peacebuilding efforts and the ushering in of post-conflict societies.

"Victim" as a Privileged Subjectivity

What, exactly, is at stake in this discussion about the competition for victim status, and the complicated relationship between victim and perpetrator identities? Knowing these stakes is key to understanding the Colombian military's motivation in constructing and communicating a victim identity for their members—especially at the cost of more gratifying claims like heroism. I argue, building on current scholarship, that victimhood bears specific privileges and both material and symbolic benefits in societies recovering from mass violence. The "victim" has increasingly become a "cultural icon"[139] in the context of transitional justice processes that gain their legitimacy from being "victim-centered" rather than focused on traditional forms of justice that overlook victim agency in favor of focusing on perpetrators (Rudling 2019). Roxani Krystalli (2019) has similarly observed, in her study on the politics of victimhood in Colombia, that "victim" identity bears its own political status and is not merely a descriptor of experiences of harm. Angelika Rettberg (2013) has also described the emergence of victims as an organized political actor on the transitional stage of Colombian post-conflict society, exerting influence thanks to high levels of organization and sophisticated repertoires of action (at the time of her publication, 7% of the over six million recognized victims in Colombia were organized in more than 3,000 organizations).

[139] This language is adopted originally from Chris Gilligan's (2003) study on Northern Ireland and referenced by Adriana Rudling (2019) in framing her essay on the paragons of victimhood in transitional justice discourse.

Indeed, in contemporary post-conflict contexts, to be a victim means to be a particular kind of subject that is due attention, reparation (monetary and symbolic)[140], and esteem from the state as part of a broader remedy for the health of the nation. Because there are such resources at stake with the assigning of victim status, some critical voices have sought to prove the abuse of this social marker. In her 2006 book, *The Cult of True Victimhood*, political scientist Alyson Cole maps the growing discursive campaign against widespread victim claims in the United States—stretching from the welfare state to the criminal justice system to the ubiquitous "culture wars"—that accuses those who claim experiences of harm to be manipulative and even *oppressive* to their oppressors. This suspicion of abuse of the privileges associated with victimhood has seeped into the Colombian context in such arenas as the National Registry of Victims (RUV), where some civilian victims of the war have been accused of being "false victims" and submitting claims to the state agency simply to extract the monetary payments of reparations.[141]

In such a political environment where the "privileges" of victim status are so explicit, the stage is set for diverse actors to position themselves in line with this identity. Krystalli (2019:10) summarized this phenomenon aptly, arguing that in Colombia, victimhood is almost a prize that multiple groups "*vie for*." This surely contextualizes the case at hand, where arguably the most powerful of state actors (in a traditional sense of possessing brute force)—the military and police—would strategically portray themselves as victimized, an identity usually associated with weakness. Without the material and symbolic gains of victimhood in a transitional justice setting, the incentives wouldn't be sufficiently aligned for such a strategy to emerge.

[140] Symbolic reparations have been increasingly emphasized as a key feature of effective transitional justice policy, supplementing monetary payments with symbolic modes of commemoration and acknowledgement by the state (Foringer 2021).
[141] Unidad para las Víctimas. 2022. "Más de 44.500 falsas víctimas del conflicto han sido detectadas durante el actual periodo presidencial." Jan. 20. Retrieved April 26, 2024 (https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/es/mas-de-44500-falsas-victimas-del-conflicto-han-sido-detectadas-durante-el-actual/).

The empirical discussion that follows explores three specific strategies—and their corresponding arenas—where the military has sought to construct a victim identity: (1) *arguing* for victimhood in scholarly publications and collections of testimonies primarily through the military's *Escuela Superior de Guerra* (ESDEG), or College of War, (2) *exhibiting* victimhood in official museum settings and installations, and (3) *partnering* with other government and civil society actors for greater legitimacy in the public imagination. This chapter will describe the key techniques and narratives at play in each of these strategies of constructing military victimhood. Overall, these findings reveal a posture of cooptation between the state and outside experts, relative to what is observed in other arenas of the state engaging in narrative work about the conflict. Because the military is attempting to rewrite or "write over" existing discourse about victimhood through strategic engagement with academic and cultural experts, it ultimately coopts this expertise rather than collaborating with or rejecting it. This chapter's framework flows roughly chronologically, with the earliest efforts in articulating victim identity starting with the scholarly approach of the College of War in 2013, then following with the exhibition of victim narratives in the national museums of the police and military, and then the collaborations with external actors for solidifying legitimacy in the public imagination. I argue that these transitions demonstrate a broader arc in *expanding the publics* that receive and engage with this messaging about military victimhood.

Arguing for Victimhood at Colombia's College of War (ESDEG)

Since 2013, the *Escuela Superior de Guerra* (ESDEG) or College of War in Bogotá, has developed a unique research group known as the Center for Research on Historical Military

Memory (CIMHM).[142] This particular initiative was created through a permanent directive from the General Command of the Armed Forces (No. 82, July 8th 2013) to produce "memory and history in service of truth, justice, and reparation" about acts that occurred during the armed conflict, and to do so in a "balanced manner."[143] It is important to note that truth, justice, and reparation are not arbitrary concepts but constitute three pillars of human rights owed to victims of mass violence according to United Nations guidelines.[144] These concepts thus associate directly to a victim identity for anyone familiar with international human rights law. Functionally, the CIMHM uses in-house researchers (professors at the College of War) from social science and history backgrounds to produce policy memos, newsletters, and self-published books related to the experiences of the armed forces in the course of the civil war. They have also worked in collaboration with select scholars from non-military universities and have received technical support from the well-known National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH) in an inter-administrative agreement issued at the CIMHM's founding in 2013.[145]

Although created in 2013, the first available publications didn't emerge until late 2016—the same year the peace agreement was signed between the Colombian government and the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrilla organization. This timeline is likely not coincidental, as the peace agreement had sparked new public debates about the role of the

[142] The College of War (ESDEG) is a higher education institution embedded in the General Command of the Military Forces that caters to senior-level military officials as well as civilians interested in postgraduate education (masters and doctoral level) related to security. See their official website at: https://esdegue.edu.co/es.

[143] Information pulled from the former Facebook page of the CIMHM, screen captured on October 18, 2019.

[144] United Nations. 2006. Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law. At: https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/basic-princi ples-and-guidelines-right-remedy-and-reparation (retrieved 21 Apr. 2022).

[145] Associación Colombiana de Oficiales en Retiro de las Fuerzas Militares (ACORE). 2013. "Esdegue y Centro de Memoria Histórica suscribieron convenio interadministrativo." June 13. Retrieved April 26, 2024 (https://www.acore.org.co/4027/justicia/).

armed forces in Colombia's past, present, and future. Public imaginations were shifting to form new understandings of social categories like victim and perpetrator, and the military faced high stakes in circulating narratives of absolution despite their culpability as violators of human rights at various points in the conflict. The CIMHM used its early reports and newsletters to launch strong arguments in defense of the military not only as the sole legitimate actors of force throughout the conflict but even as *victims* themselves. Some of these arguments involved careful legal scaffolding to make a claim or invoked social scientific theories to build authority. Two themes that come up most consistently across the CIMHM's repertoire of reports include 1) the insistence that military victims be eligible for civilian reparations and 2) the complaint that civilian victims have dominated the public sphere of "memory" and that military victims should take a seat at the table to tell their own stories of harm throughout the conflict.

Victims, Not Veterans

One of the primary arguments emerging from the CIMHM's earliest publications is the call to distinguish a mere veteran identity from a distinctively *victim*-oriented identity for military members who served and were injured either physically or psychologically in the scope of the civil war. Specifically, the authors of these reports claimed that it is inadequate to refer to these soldiers merely as wounded veterans, due to the "irregular" and excessive nature of warfare in the Colombian context over several decades (Pastrana and Vera Piñeros 2016). This has concrete policy implications when it comes to who is eligible for the reparations—both monetary and symbolic—outlined in the Victims' Law of 2011. If injured soldiers leaving the conflict are classified according to their employee status as veterans, then they must be restricted to the regular process of receiving compensation through the military. This is a separate route than the

reparations detailed in the 2011 Victims' Law for civilian victims, which established new agencies and allocated new pools of government funding for victimized civilians. The standard restitution for injured veterans, however, is processed through the standard (c. 1990) protocol for "disability pension" that must be determined by a military medical board.[146] According to CIMHM author and psychologist at the ESDEG Elizabeth Andrade (2016), the inability of military victims to apply for both veteran compensation and *civilian* victim reparations amounts to:

> "confusing the rights to employee compensation…with the completely different right to reparation as a victim of the internal armed conflict."

As such, Andrade along with CIMHM collaborators Diego Vera Piñeros and Eduardo Pastrana—both political scientists at the University of Javeriana in Bogotá—take the position that the route of veteran compensation is not sufficient to either appropriately "honor" nor repair the military members that they consider to be proper victims of the conflict. Furthermore, they condemn the Constitutional Court's ruling in April 2016 that reaffirmed this distinction between military and civilian victims, with Andrade (*Ibid*.) going so far as to say this court decision constitutes discrimination against the military.

In my interview with an attorney and legal scholar at a military university in Bogotá, he emphasized repeatedly that the public must understand that military members are "human beings and subjects of rights."[147] This commitment stems both from his experience representing military victims in Colombia's courts but also in his own personal biography as the son of a National Police officer in hard-hit Boyacá, who lost many colleagues to acts of violence from guerilla

[146] Ejército de Colombia. 2022. "Sección Indemnizaciones." Mar. 1. Retrieved April 26, 2024 (https://www.ejercito.mil.co/seccion-indemnizaciones/).
[147] Interview, November 23, 2021

forces. The attorney also went on to give examples of the discrimination against military victims that he has seen in his own work, including aggression against off-duty service members on the basis of their vocational identity. Similar to the claims from Andrade and others regarding the veteran vs. victim discussion, Carlos laments that the public has detrimentally severed the "man" from his uniform and has a blindness toward the soldier's human rights as a result.

> "So we recognize him (the soldier) as an agent of the State, but we do not recognize him as a human being. We detach him from his function. It is as if the uniform takes away his claim to being a human; there's a rupture." (Interview, November 23, 2021)

Another CIMHM scholar whom I interviewed similarly invoked the image of the "uniform" as a way to criticize the divide between human and state agent that the public may mistakenly imagine.

> "What is there behind a uniform? There is a human being. A father of a family, who has children waiting for him to come home. And who has worked his whole life for the defense and security of the nation."[148]

This metaphor used by the military scholars here aptly illustrates the legal arguments that Andrade and others presented in these 2016 reports, positioning veterans as humanized victims to the extent that they deserve to claim civilian reparations in addition to the rights and privileges that their employment status offers. These scholars' concern is a more subtle shift toward conceptualizing military members as humans and victims. They spend less rhetorical energy pushing against perceptions of the military as *perpetrators* and focus instead on founding a technical understanding of soldiers as rights-bearing civilian victims rather than just veterans or

[148] Interview, November 11, 2021

employees. In other words, the discursive work the CIMHM engaged in with these early reports was not so much a conceptual leap—from perpetrator to victim—but a conceptual "half-step"—from veteran to victim. And from this forged identity of "military victim," subsequent CIMHM reports continued to build out a portfolio of demands and privileges belonging to this population.

Victim Testimony and the Public Memory of the Conflict

The conceptual scaffolding of establishing victimhood in these early CIMHM reports extends beyond concern over their eligibility for civilian reparations. It also lays the groundwork for a rhetorical battle that plays out across subsequent texts published by the military academy over the following months and years. For these authors, it was important for military members to be considered victims precisely because this grants them access to public debates about historical meaning making and the public memory of the civil war. Soldiers' legitimacy as victims would guarantee them not only an expanded compensation package and increased symbolic status following the war, but also a protected position in ongoing public conversation about culpability and harm within the context of the war. To understand why this might be the case, it's important to elaborate upon the primacy of "victim voices" in Colombian debates about public memory since the early 2000s.

Starting in 2005, the testimonies and perspectives of victims were increasingly prioritized on a national level as the "key" to fostering an equitable public discourse about the memory of the civil war (Milton 2018; Wills 2022). This was in large part due to activism from victims' rights groups that pushed back against legislation like the law of Justice and Peace in 2005 which prioritized the testimonies of combatants who spoke in court as part of their demobilizing process. Groups like the Colombian Commission of Jurists (CCJ) fought to secure more

platforms for victims—that is, *civilian* victims—to share their experiences with the horrors of war. This was partially established through the National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation (CNRR) in 2005, and extended even further organizationally within a standing government agency called the National Center for Historical Memory established in 2011 with the Victims' Law.

Military affiliates expressed awareness of this societal preference for "victim voices," and advisors soon called for a parallel initiative from the armed forces to platform the memories of military victims. According to a founding scholar of the CIMHM, the Army's representative at the negotiation table with the FARC in 2016 informed several high level officers in the public forces that it was a "mistake" to lag behind civil society in the "memory debates" by not accumulating historical narratives and testimonies that can enter into public imaginaries of the conflict.[149] Soon after, key collaborations and initiatives like the CIMHM began as an attempt to narrow the gap in this so-called race for memory. A large part of this effort hinges on the rebranding of military members as victims to render them legitimate narrators in these memory spaces. To accomplish this, the CIMHM has issued sophisticated arguments focused on *inclusivity* to argue for military victims' seat at the table.

The Military's Appeal to "Inclusive" Narratives

The appeal to inclusivity is a recurring theme in most of the CIMHM reports, extending beyond the concrete policy debate about reparations access that Andrade, Pastrana, and Vera discuss. Inclusivity—along with words like "pluralizing" and "widening"—is later called upon in

[149] Interview, November 17, 2021

arguments about whose voices should be included in memory initiatives. CIMHM authors argue for increased representation of the military in memory debates from both a structural standpoint—including getting a seat on the board of directors at the National Center for Historical Memory, which will elaborated upon later in this paper—and from a discursive standpoint, simply circulating more military testimonies across a variety of media. They start doing this with in-house publications, publishing short biographies of military victims in a monthly newsletter "The Time of Memory" and later a book of testimonies titled "Unforgettable Memories: Guardians of Honor," published independently in 2018 and later with a national press *Planeta* in 2020.

These publications build upon a more isolated initiative many years prior in 2008 when the National Army offices self-published a book titled *Scars of Terrorism*, which features full-page color photography of injured soldiers displayed alongside their testimonies of victimization by the insurgent FARC (see Figure 14). This particular book—published as a bilingual edition in English and Spanish, presumably to target a wider international audience—emerged in the wake of President Alvaro Uribe's hardline administration that enforced an official framing of left-wing "terrorism" to replace any mention of "civil conflict" in government discourse. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, these efforts from Uribe's administration opened conceptual space for the military to conceptually be blameless victims of attack rather than embattled participants in war. In the forward to this 2008 book, the Army's Human Rights Office writes that:

> "The majority of crimes whose victims happen to be members of the National Army remain in the darkness of impunity and the perpetrators continue committing horrendous crimes that affect humanity." P. 23



Figure 14 Front cover of the National Army's book *Scars of Terrorism*, published in a bilingual edition in English and Spanish. Source: CINEP library (retrieved on June 26, 2018).

This call to overcome the "darkness of impunity" implies an impulse to "bring to light" the hidden stories of military victims that remain in the shadows of civilian victims. One political scientist and author for the CIMHM whom I interviewed, relayed a similar concern:

> "Okay, so civilians can talk about their experiences with the conflict, but the soldier also has the right to say how they felt, how they suffered, how they lived through the conflict because after all, that is what reconciliation means. That all sides can express themselves and tell of their pain." (Interview, November 9, 2021)

This political scientist goes on to say that:

> "As academics we are trying to construct a pluralist narrative, an inclusive narrative. Giving legitimacy not only, I insist, to voices of civil society—which

> have wide representation in organizations like the United Nations—but also to those voices that aren't well-known or where there are stereotypes, which are the voices of military personnel…Our idea is to use these (CIMHM) publications and ongoing dialogue to reduce these ideological divisions. To reduce these anti-establishment biases." (Interview, November 9, 2021)

In a short article titled "The Voice of Military Victims," published by CIMHM in September 2016, Claudia Rentería—an attorney and military legal advisor—argues for "widening the spectrum" of voices that are included in historical memory projects. She emphasizes that "all" the victims and "all" the voices of those who have been involved "in one way or another" in the armed conflict should be solicited for national-level memory projects. Without saying it was an intentional exclusion by the government, Rentería (2016:3) condemns the "scarcity of testimonies" coming from the armed forces in public-facing projects. In a later policy brief, Eduardo Pastrana Buelvas and Andrés Valdivieso (2017) echo a call to respect "all voices" by arguing that the nation would be best served by showcasing the "largest number of collective memories"—adding a quantitative dimension to this plea for military victim visibility.

Most arguments for elevating military victim voices are paired with loftier goals like peace and reconciliation in the nation. CIMHM authors are careful to seal their arguments within the final goal of ensuring a peaceful transition, generally claiming that enfranchising military members in public discourse about victimhood can increase good will for their cooperation in other more explicitly political tasks of reconciliation. For example, Andrade (2016) argues that increasing the dignity of military members by allocating victim status to them would have a direct payoff to the public in the form of better "cooperation." Affording them victim status would lead to reconciliation among factions since the military members would be more motivated toward peace if they knew they would be honored with the acknowledgement of their

suffering. Similarly, a CIMHM policy paper by Martha Márquez Restrepo and Eduardo Pastrana Buelvas (2016) argues that the exclusion of military victims from recognition in the public sphere would stall the country's progress toward the future and "anchor the community in a traumatic past." Only through allowing military victims to be seen and heard would Colombia enter into a "future where reconciliation is possible."

While some people argue that even non-victimized military members should be able to speak for the sake of reconciliation, most authors argue that the mechanism through which this must happen is their recognition as victims. For example, in a CIMHM policy brief about "epistemological orientations" for historical memory, Luis Felipe Vega Díaz and Eduardo Pastrana Buelvas argue that the military should be seen as legitimate narrators of conflict history simply for the fact they were participants in the conflict and can relay "unique and vivid experiences" that are all their own.[150] Still, the majority of CIMHM arguments are in agreement that it is the victim status of military members that makes them worthy of relaying their testimonies for public consumption and recognition.

Tracing the Narrative Shift in the National Police and Military Museums

Written narrative is not the only tool used by the Colombian military in enforcing and shifting public imagination about its forces—from one of classic heroism to one of nuanced victimhood. Strong visual arguments are deployed in the context of two key military-run museums, located just off of the main capitol plaza in the colonial district of Bogotá, La Candelaria. Both the "Historical Museum Palace" of the National Police and the National

[150] Vega Díaz and Pastrana Buelvas 2016

Military Museum demonstrate clear curatorial decisions to shape narratives of heroism and victimhood, respectively. While the National Police Museum—renovated primarily in the 1980s—clings to a reverential, even god-like portrayal of National Police officers, a recently installed gallery in the National Military Museum (finished in 2015) instills a more complex view of embattled military members as vulnerable to violence and eligible for a status of victimhood.[151]

"History recognizes them with immortal character": The Historical Museum Palace of the National Police

The National Police's central historical museum in Bogotá combines murals, artifact displays, and statues to paint a cohesive picture of the honor and quasi-divine authority of police in the country. Their museum building—referred to as a palace, with stately architecture to match—was initially built in 1926 as the site of National Police headquarters until 1983. When the headquarters relocated in 1984, the building was restored and repurposed as a museum, to be a "temple of police culture" in the words of the Major Humberto Aparicio, longtime director and curator of the museum who recently in 2021 became the oldest official in the National Police force (Kraus et al 2017; Coll 2021). This grandiose museum does not shy away from a narrative of esteem and exceptionalism for the police force as conveyed in their galleries, which follow a chronological story of how the "rule of law" evolved in Colombia from pre-Hispanic times to the

[151] It is important to note, in making this contrast between the two museums, that the National Police Museum has added new exhibits since initial fieldwork for this chapter was conducted in 2022. These exhibits mirror more closely the narrative work of the National Military Museum in introducing the victimhood of police officers. I will go into more detail on the collaborative aspect of one of the newer exhibits in a later section.

present. The museum uses Biblical imagery, in particular, to establish naturalizing narratives about the National Police as the source of authority in the country.

After entering through the entrance gates of the museum and passing a small Catholic chapel immediately to the left of the hall (which was formally blessed in 2006 during a ceremony by the appointed military bishop), museum visitors enter the first gallery which displays a vivid mural of the biblical figure Moses standing in a beam of light and holding the tablets of the Ten Commandments in his hands (see Figure 15). He is surrounded by glass display cases featuring replicas of primitive weapons and stands facing cheap plaster statues of indigenous warriors anchored throughout the gallery (see Figure 16). The interpretive aids of the gallery construct a subtle narrative about the origins of law and order in the world and in Colombia specifically, drawing connections between early indigenous leaders and the modern National Police force. The intended takeaway for visitors is that the National Police are a "civilizing" force within the country's history, possessing status akin to revered historical leaders. This argument is reinforced by the abrupt pivot to modern police history in nearby exhibits; in visitors' line of sight, they can see both these ancient images and a glass case of contemporary police uniforms on display.



Figure 15 A mural at the entrance to the National Police Museum depicting the Biblical figure Moses triumphantly holding a tablet containing the Ten Commandments. Source: Kristin Foringer, May 12, 2022.



Figure 16 A plaster statue of an indigenous warrior, facing the mural of Moses in Figure 15 at the National Police Museum. Source: Kristin Foringer, May 12, 2022.

The demonstration of divine and ancient authority is contrasted with images elsewhere in the museum of the "barbaric," lawless territories of Colombia in prehistoric times. A mural on the top floor of the museum, off to the side of a large gallery displaying various canons and weapons, depicts a naked Neanderthal-like man coming face to face with apes violently wielding stones (see Figure 17). This eccentric portrayal of what one could interpret are the barbaric ancestors of civilians today—vulnerable to violence and in need of law and order—complements the focal point of the entire museum located in the central courtyard: a massive mural titled the "The Pantheon of Heroes" (see Figure 18).

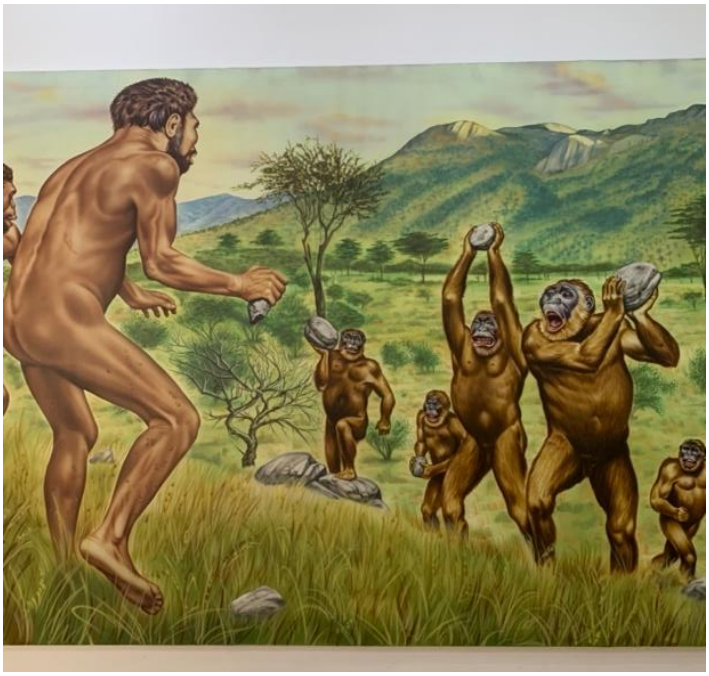


Figure 17 A mural in the National Police Museum depicting a "cave man" confronting a group of apes wielding stones as primitive weapons. Source: Kristin Foringer, May 12, 2022.



Figure 18 A mural titled "Pantheon of Heroes" featuring prominently in the courtyard of the National Police Museum. Photo: Kristin Foringer, May 12, 2022

Narratively, this mural emphasizes the sacrifices of the national police in the battles of history, from independence struggle to contemporary civil war. The majority of the mural focuses on a cosmic backdrop—in faded jewel tones, suggestive of a 1980s aesthetic when the museum underwent renovations—which frames a somewhat abstract depiction of battle scenes closer to eye-level. The sheer scale of the mural, along with its aspirational title referencing god-like heroes in a "pantheon," is meant to induce awe and reverence in museum visitors. A paragraph painted below the mural reads: "Visitor, pause your steps and reverently observe the scene in which the defenders of the patria lie. They took up the 'olive color' (referring to camouflage uniforms) and arms of the republic and have sacrificed their vital breath in pursuit of noble ideals. History recognizes them with immortal character."

The explicitly conveyed narrative of National Police Museum is thus one that rings consistently with a sacrificial hero narrative, attributing god-like legitimacy and esteem to police officers. The combination of Catholic and indigenous warrior imagery along with the Greek-like "pantheon of heroes" mural all points to an untouchable status of active and fallen officers. Despite its eccentricity, this museum maintains the cohesive stance that National Police are far from ordinary civilians and especially from any shared status as mere victims of violence. I will argue in the next section that this narrative contrasts with an emerging victim narrative about the armed forces which is apparent just a few blocks away in the National Military Museum. Whereas the National Police Museum focuses primarily on the sheer valor of the armed forces, the National Military Museum takes steps to humanize this image and emphasize the vulnerability of soldiers in conflict.

Blurring Lines between Hero and Victim in the National Military Museum

Upon first impression, the National Military Museum—situated on a side street next to the national capitol building in the colonial La Candelaria district of Bogotá—aims to instill the same kind of reverence for military members and history as its neighbor the National Police museum. After passing through the metal detector where a uniformed soldier inspects visitors' ID cards in an outdoor alcove off the museum's main gates, guests find themselves in an open courtyard laden with retired canons and statues. Lining the courtyard are bronze busts of famous military leaders, including Simón Bolívar himself—the legendary "Liberator" of colonial South America. At once, the space seems to demand a sort of reverence similar to the pageantry of the National Police Palace down the street. The statues and weaponry are displayed almost in a permanent parade of power that confronts visitors immediately upon entering the museum.

This courtyard also draws connection between military heroes past and present. Immediately besides the bust of Simón Bolívar is a rotating monument featuring a golden wreath dedicated to the "hero of the month," who during the time of my visit was a fallen vice-premier sergeant Hernan Rodrigo Herrera Noel (see Figure 19). According to his brief biography printed on computer paper and framed in the monument, he was a faithful father and husband who was killed in 1999 in combat when the FARC—here referred to as terrorists—took over his station in Chocó on Colombia's Pacific coast. After briefly describing the life trajectories of his children since his death, the text leaves the reader with this conviction: "Today we remember him how he will forever be remembered by his family, his institutions, and Colombia as a whole: a hero."[152]

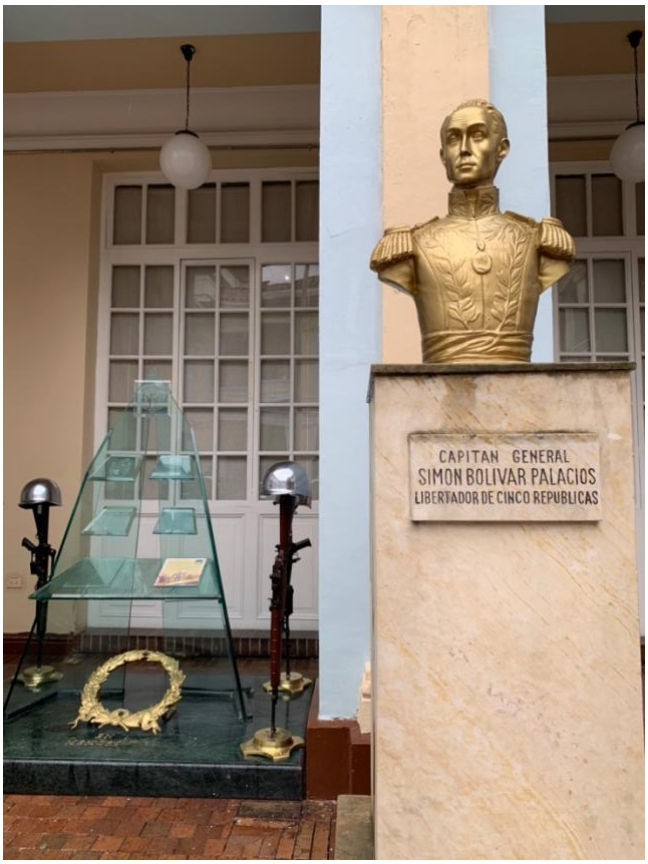


Figure 19 A "hero of the month" display positioned next to a bronze bust of Simón Bolívar, a famous revolutionary figure of colonial South America. Source: Kristin Foringer, May 5, 2022.

[152] Ethnographic notes, May 5, 2022.

Moving to an interior hallway immediately to the right of the courtyard, the aesthetic narrative of classic military heroism and strength becomes complicated by a new gallery which was established in 2015. The Gallery of Memory and Dignity of the Armed Forces, which was created via direct orders of the military's General Command during ongoing peace talks with the FARC, introduces the idea that military members embattled in the civil war might be *victims* as well as heroes. "Yes, military victims exist" flashes across a flatscreen display at the entrance of this gallery. A uniformed docent who himself has been active in the military for over a decade explained to me that this gallery is meant to "show that all victims are not just civilians." This exhibit space achieves this primarily through constructing a timeline of the armed conflict emphasizing the infractions of organized insurgent groups like the FARC and the impacts this has had on loss of life and other violence committed against soldiers and officers. Rather than emphasizing the heroic actions of the military in defending their nation, this exhibit paints in much more detail their own vulnerability. In the introductory statement of the interactive timeline, we read:

> "This timeline presents events of the internal armed conflict…in which members of the Armed Forces were vulnerable in their rights as human beings and as members of the institutions they defended."

Beginning in the 1960s, the timeline organizes information around the modality of violence inflicted by insurgent groups. These include torture, kidnapping, land mines, and bombings. Complementing the text-based narratives, glass display cases in the gallery contained artifacts and "mementos" that were donated by family members of soldiers who were held in captivity by the FARC. These family members also must "opt in" to a registry of military victims

that the museum is trying to build, according to the docent I interviewed, although a centralized list will be impossible to consolidate since the "number is too high," in his words.[153]

In stark visual contrast to the bronze statues in the courtyard, the donated objects conveyed a certain frailty among military members. Among the collection are a bright orange prisoner t-shirt featuring the signatures of police and soldier prisoners following the capture of Curillo, Caquetá by the FARC in 1999. One family even donated a photograph of a large wound on the back of a soldier, inflicted at the hands of the FARC (see Figure 20). The image is plainly displayed among other "artifacts" as material evidence of the soldier's victimization.

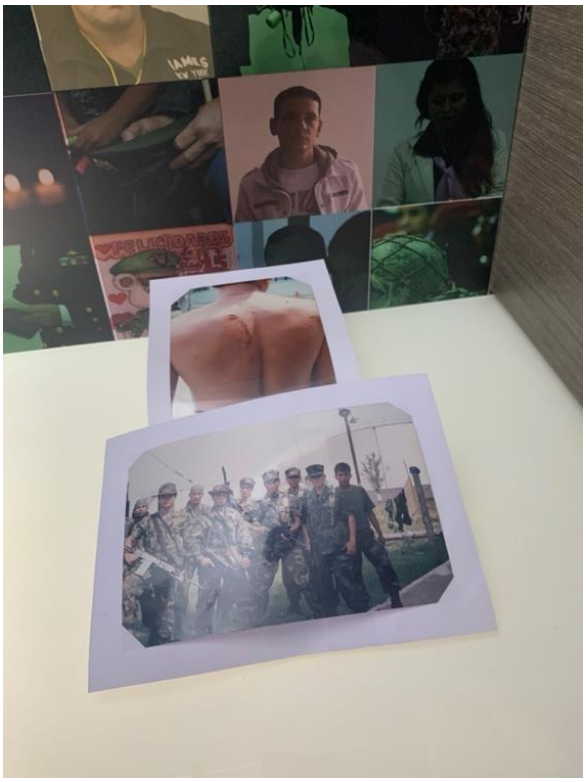


Figure 20 A display case features a photo of a wounded soldier's back, submitted to the National Military Museum by his family. Source: Kristin Foringer, May 5, 2022.

[153] In a return visit to this site two years later (I first visited in May 2022 and returned in January 2024), the same docent informed me that there had been no additional names added to the registry, at least in terms of the names displayed in the exhibit. This is part of a broader reality that there had been no innovations to the entire gallery, and they are only maintaining it at this point due to restricted resources.

With these visual displays and timeline, the Gallery of Memory and Dignity nuances rather than replaces the hero narrative in its entirety. It is notable that the word "hero" still appears alongside the word "victim" in various interpretive texts in the gallery. The overarching demand that this gallery makes of its visitors is that rather than seeing wounded and fallen soldiers *only* as uncomplicated heroes, one should dwell on their condition as *also* victims of the many-decades long civil war. The arguments for this are not complex or particularly erudite, rather they are based in the affective nature of donated family belongings and the emphasis on actions like imprisonment committed by insurgent groups during the civil war. This demonstrates yet another rhetorical avenue in which a victimhood narrative emerges in military-run institutions.

Legitimizing Victimhood through Expanding Cultural Partnerships

Another avenue through which the Colombian military has sought to legitimize narratives around victimhood is in key cultural and scholarly collaborations with external government or civil society actors. Rather than solely use institutional means within the purview of the military—like the War College (ESDEG) and military-run museums—military actors have cultivated various partnerships with "outside" academic scholars, artists, and national governmental entities like the Ministry of Culture and the National Center for Historical Memory to further circulate narratives and testimonies from victimized military officers. These partnerships have also been means of increasing the legitimacy of this cultural campaign and to normalize the presence of military actors in a public sphere where they would not normally interact. Within the broader scope of my argument, this leans more toward *cooptation* rather than

collaboration with of the state with outside experts because it involves transplanting methods and discourse about civilian victims into specific projects for military victims.

One example of such a partnership was the construction of a subversive counter-monument entitled *Fragmentos* or Fragments, designed by internationally-renowned artist Doris Salcedo whose work depicting the violence in Colombia has been exhibited in such places as the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and the Tate Gallery in London.[154] *Fragmentos* itself is a rotating gallery space tucked away three blocks south of the national capitol building in Bogotá. The aspect that makes this space a *counter*-monument is its transient nature—the only permanent object in the space are the floor tiles, which were designed by Salcedo and constructed by (civilian) women victims of the armed conflict (see Figure 21). The material of the tiles, shockingly, is the scrap metal of over 69 tons of retired weapons handed over by the FARC guerrillas after the peace agreement in 2016.[155] Heavy with the symbolic significance of peace, these tiles focus less on the violent capacity of the metal's former purpose as weapons and more on the agency of the victims who gave a new life and shape to the material. As a counter-monument, these tiles shape the ground upon which visitors enter the rotating gallery spaces, which are populated by exhibitions engaging with themes of violence, war, state, and culture. The exhibitions are awarded through invitations or by open calls governed by the artistic committee, housed within the Ministry of Culture.

[154] Guggenheim. "Doris Salcedo." Retrieved April 26, 2024 (https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/doris-salcedo).
[155] Museo Nacional de Colombia. "Fragmentos." Retrieved April 26, 2024 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7rAb2O0JV8&t=581s).



Figure 21 An empty room in the *Fragmentos* gallery space, featuring the floor tiles assembled by victims using the smelted material from surrendered weapons. Source: Kristin Foringer, Jan 16, 2024.

One might be surprised to learn that a key entity in constructing this subversive gallery space was the National Police—specifically its Unit for Peacebuilding (UNIPEP), established as part of the peace agreement in 2016. UNIPEP secured the transfer of the weapons used for *Fragmentos* and participated in a documentary about the counter-monument's construction process that runs on a loop for visitors to the space to view.[156] They also play an active role in the maintenance of the space and have custody of it for certain events sponsored by the National Police.[157] UNIPEP is a unique entity within the broader organization of the National Police. It represents the distinctive cultural strategy that the public forces have pursued in tandem with the

[156] See *ibid.* for the full documentary link on YouTube.

[157] Interview, Jan. 16, 2024

peace process of 2016. From its beginning, UNIPEP was charged with three specific areas of action: (1) managing the police operations for the implementation of a ceasefire with the FARC, (2) implementing the requirements of the peace accords with the FARC, and (3) promoting the National Police's "history, historical memory, and victims" (Macias and Bayona 2019).The coexistence of operationally-oriented action alongside the cultural work of producing history and recognizing victims within the singular entity of UNIPEP points to an institutional priority of the National Police to articulate a victim identity for its members through the work of narrative.

While UNIPEP's collaboration with *Fragmentos* emphasized more generally a commitment to the voices of civilian victims of the war, they have since launched additional artistic collaborations that focus specifically on the historical memory of victims within the police force. Later in 2022, UNIPEP would lead an initiative expressly for police victims of the conflict in the form of a short film series titled "A Pain Kept in the Heart," which uses a vibrant storytelling style and features testimonies of family members of police officers who lost their lives as victims of the conflict (see Figure 22). These short films were produced using clay animation with the technical support of an NGO called the Social Cinema Foundation. This NGO, notably, produces other film projects and runs festivals under the sponsorship of the Ministry of Culture.[158]

[158] Fundación Cine Social. https://www.fundacioncinesocial.org/la-fundaci%C3%B3n



Figure 22 Screenshot from "A Pain Kept in the Heart," published for public viewing on the National Police's YouTube profile. The video had 3,600 views as of April 22, 2024 when last accessed by the author. Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E4t0d6SNd2E

In a press release about the video series, UNIPEP describes it as an "institutional historical memory initiative" for victimized police force members, aimed at increasing public awareness.[159] The press release states:

> "The aim is to make Colombians aware of the risky work performed by members of the National Police and the high price they may pay for doing it. It is also intended to sensitize society to the lived reality of the National Police force and to make them understand that the damage inflicted on the victims creates harm within their entire family circle."

The specific process by which UNIPEP accomplished this—emerging after earlier collaboration with the Ministry of Culture and drawing upon the Social Cinema Foundation, a non-military

[159] La Policía Nacional de Colombia. 2022. "Lanzamiento de Iniciativa de Memoria Histórica Institucional." Dec. 22. Retrieved April 26, 2024 (https://www.policia.gov.co/noticia/lanzamiento-iniciativa-memoria-historica-institucional).

associated NGO—reveals another avenue by which the concept of military victimhood can be broadcast and legitimized in Colombian civil society. The networks and credibility developed in the subversive *Fragmentos* project in 2016 established a foothold through which they could elaborate a specific vision of police victimhood a few years later through this video project, "A Pain Kept in the Heart." These collaborations mark a departure from the more internally-focused projects and have the capacity to reach broader audiences outside the purview of the public forces' own organizational reach.[160]

The National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH)

As the most prolific institution for the publication and circulation of victim testimonies throughout Colombia, the National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH) has a reputation for bringing diverse publics into conversation about the history of the civil war. Since its foundation with the Victims' Law of 2011, the CNMH has brough two primary groups into dialogue with each other: the marginalized communities in the "peripheries" of the country—who have most acutely experienced the violence of war—and the cultural and political elite of Bogotá, who are the primary consumers of the Center's exhibits, publications, and events.[161] The CNMH was largely seen as critical of the military due to the activist lineage of its earliest leadership and researchers until a new director entered the picture via presidential appointment in 2019. Historian Rubén Darío Acevedo Carmona was formally named director of the CNMH in

[160] At the time of revising this chapter, it is important to note that UNIPEP is poised to open a new exhibit on the historical memory of police victims in the National Police Museum, marking a significant narrative shift from the majority of the existing galleries there. A docent in January 2024 informed me that the exhibit will open around March 2024, but no additional information is available currently.

[161] Please refer to Chapter 2 of this dissertation for more a more in-depth discussion on the creation and character of the CNMH, including the transitions of leadership.

February 2019 by presidential decree and immediately raised alarms among intellectual and activist communities due to his track record as a "denialist" of the civil conflict, in the same vein as former president Álvaro Uribe (Hernández 2019). An alarming feature of Darío Acevedo's track record in the eyes of left-wing senator Iván Cepeda Castro were his "numerous meetings" with members of the armed forces upon taking office, which evolved into promises he made to elevate the military's "truth" into protected spaces in the CNMH's platform, including the upcoming Memory Museum under construction at the time (Cepeda Castro 2019). In a speech on the Congress floor in November 2019, Senator Cepeda also condemned the threats made toward audience members in CNMH public presentations featuring Darío Acevedo, where military officials allegedly took photos and videos to intimidate individuals who made critical comments about the new director (Cepeda Castro 2019).

Despite the flurry of public attention that Darío Acevedo and his military alliances accrued upon his arrival to the CNMH, they were able to accomplish several initiatives during his tenure. One of these initiatives was a documentary titled *Anonymous Victims*, focusing on "the military and civilian victims of the Airforce and their families rebuilding from pain," which was launched during a public ceremony in December 2021. In this ceremony—with representatives from the U.S. Embassy, the European Union, and others in attendance—a brigadier general took the stage to introduce the documentary and prefaced his remarks by claiming that "of the nine million victims of the civil conflict, about 380,000 are members of the military."[162] What followed in the screening of the documentary were the voices and faces behind this number—testimonies shared by living relatives of these military victims. CNMH director Acevedo further amplified in his ceremonial remarks that the memory of victims must be "plural," expanding beyond the

[162] CNMH. 2021. "Lanzamiento del documental *Víctimas anónimas*." Dec. 14. Retrieved Jan. 31, 2022 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SlOK0FjCcRg&t=6257s).

definition of only civilian victims. A nephew of one of the featured military victims in the documentary also spoke up during a Q&A session at the ceremony and pleaded that this project be merely the start of a broader recognition for military victims, so that "we don't have to raise children in a country where we don't see the military as victims."



Figure 23 Former CNMH director Rúben Darío Acevedo (second from the right) is featured in the introductory panel to the documentary. Source: National Center for Historical Memory

Documentaries like *Anonymous Victims* represent new inroads of the military's cultural strategy into the public imagination. While initiatives like the College of War's own memory center (discussed in an earlier section) received technical support from the CNMH[163] since its inception in 2013, Darío Acevedo's new enthusiasm to spotlight the testimonies of military victims within the scope of the CNMH's *own* audiences and wider platform (including big players like the EU and U.S. Embassy) was significant in terms of scope. Rather than silo-ing the

[163] Associación Colombiana de Oficiales en Retiro de las Fuerzas Militares (ACORE). 2013. "Esdegue y Centro de Memoria Histórica suscribieron convenio interadministrativo." June 13. Retrieved April 26, 2024 (https://www.acore.org.co/4027/justicia/).

"historical memory" of the public forces within side projects like the College of War's independent research center, Darío Acevedo began to champion the perspective from the public forces in the CNMH. Since 2022, CNMH has collaborated in four additional projects—reports, documentaries, and exhibits—with the armed forces and national police.[164] One of these projects, "Rebirth: While There is Life, There is Hope," is a collaboration with UNIPEP, the same National Police Unit for Peacebuilding mentioned earlier in this chapter. "Rebirth" debuted as a temporary exhibit in the National Police Museum in early 2024, featuring a series of testimonies accompanied by material objects that commemorate the experiences and aftermath of violence in the lives of police victims. These more recent collaborations between the CNMH and the public forces show how the network between these entities have lasted even beyond the direct support and enthusiasm of now former director Darío Acevedo. The CNMH is now under new leadership—a progressive-leaning director María Gaitán Valencia—yet as recently as March 5, 2024, the CNMH issued a press release proudly detailing its latest collaborations with the public forces.[165]

Conclusion

The campaigns for shaping public discourse around the victimhood of military members have gradually sought larger arenas for articulation and legitimacy since 2013. Starting with the College of War's internal research initiative to craft the historical memory and legal support for the concept of military victims, these reports and memos have given way to public-facing

[164] CNMH. 2024. "La Fuerza Pública También Contribuye A La Construcción De Memoria Histórica Con El CNMH." Mar. 5. Retrieved April 26, 2024 (https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/la-fuerza-publica-tambien-contribuye-a-la-construccion-de-memoria-historica-con-el-cnmh/).

[165] Ibid.

exhibits at (primarily) the National Military Museum. Most recently, the same narratives have found broader cultural prestige and reception through the military and police collaborations for the *Fragmentos* exhibit with the Ministry of Culture in 2017 and the testimonial initiatives within the National Center for Historical Memory since 2019. At the time of writing this chapter, the discourse around military victimhood continues to receive wide public attention in the news with the recent advocacy of NGOs like *MilVíctimas* (short for Military Victims) who have sought to preserve a seat at the table for military victims in special judicial proceedings on the national level.[166] These trends underscore the unique relational configurations between the military and external experts in that their engagement has coopted civil society's own construction of victimhood through historical memory. Distinct from the modes of engagement in other branches of the state discussed in previous chapters—in bureaucracy and in Congress—the military's interaction with conflict expertise is most akin to cooptation rather than collaboration or rejection.

The empirical reality of victimhood remains complex. Although the coordinated action of these efforts from the Colombian public forces involves coopting discourse from civil society, the truth remains that the length and complexity of the conflict verifiably *has* yielded diverse types of victims. Based on the type of violation and the circumstances around its occurrence, there is technical grounding for some members of the public forces to claim a legal victim status while at the same time holding the status of a "combatant" and maybe even a "perpetrator."[167] But the implications of attributing victimhood and all of its material and symbolic rewards to the

[166] In March 2024, the MilVíctimas NGO participated in talks at the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), the national judicial body charged with investigating crimes committed by the FARC, the public forces, and other actors during the course of the civil conflict (Instagram post on MilVíctimas profile page, accessed March 15, 2024).

[167] Ley 1448 de 2011

public forces—rather than, for example, expanding benefits for wounded or deceased veterans and their families—is that it can occlude the mass violence committed against innocent civilians throughout the past several decades in Colombia. This is particularly true given the emergence of this discursive campaign as *reactionary* toward the mobilization of victim identity and rights-based claims from the civilian population, which had grown in intensity since the mid-2000s. The military's efforts to embody its own category of victimhood would be more defensible if they arose independently from—rather than in close proximity to—civilian movements for historical memory and victim reparations.

Ultimately, I would argue that discourse remains too volatile in a country still reeling from some of the worst abuses of the state against civilians in the 2000s, when troops kidnapped and killed at least 6,400 civilians in an effort to falsify and boost their "body counts" in the fight against guerrillas.[168] While the public must be careful with too widely attributing a perpetrator identity to all members of the public forces, it is clear that the state's efforts to widely attribute *victimhood* to the military and police is both premature and inaccurate on the broadest level. The concluding chapter of this dissertation will further address the current challenges related to the rhetorical interventions of the state in this current period of ambiguous peace.

[168] Otis, John. 2022. "Colombia's tribunal exposes how troops kidnapped and killed thousands of civilians." *National Public Radio*, June 28. Retrieved April 26, 2024 (https://www.npr.org/2022/06/28/1103324447/colombia-war-crimes-tribunal).

Chapter 5 Conclusion: Epistemological Challenges to Peace

Recently in 2022, coinciding with the conclusion of a historic Truth Commission in Colombia—founded by the Peace Agreement of 2016—a contributing researcher fled into exile. Paradoxically, this Truth Commission had been hailed as a symbol of transition between violence and peace after the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) signed a historic peace deal with the government—joining the ranks of other countries whose truth commissions symbolize a "turning the page" from histories of conflict.[169] Yet this entity proved to be a liability for the safety of one of its own commissioned academics. Political scientist Andrés Celis had spent hundreds of hours interviewing ex-combatants of the conflict—including military, guerrillas, and paramilitaries—as part of his contribution to the database and reports of the Truth Commission. After completing one particularly notable interview with the leader of the still-active Gulf Clan cartel, a group of men entered Celis' home overnight on February 18, 2022 and stole two recorders and a computer (fortunately failing to procure the actual device where the interview was being stored).[170] With this incident and incoming death threats against the researcher, the National Protection Agency furnished Celis with an armored car, a body guard, and a bullet-proof vest. He ultimately made the decision to flee the country for safety, after

[169] This dissertation does not empirically analyze the recent Truth Commission due to its parallel timeline with my own data collection and analysis. I reference it here in the Conclusion because any reflection on historical memory in Colombia would now be incomplete without mentioning it.

[170] Comisión de la Verdad. 2022. "Denuncia pública de la Comisión de la Verdad." Feb. 19. Retrieved Feb. 26, 2024 (https://web.comisiondelaverdad.co/actualidad/comunicados-y-declaraciones/denuncia-publica-de-la-comision-de-la-verdad); Osorio, Camila. 2022. "Andrés Celis, el investigador de la Comisión de la Verdad que tuvo que salir al exilio." Oct. 12. Retrieved Feb. 26, 2024 (https://elpais.com/america-colombia/2022-10-12/andres-celis-el-investigador-de-la-comision-de-la-verdad-que-tuvo-que-salir-al-exilio.html).

describing his heavy security precautions in Colombia as a form of "prison," and currently resides in an unknown location in Europe.[171]

The publication of the Truth Commission's final report also ushered in critical fractures among appointed Commissioners—namely the raucous departure of former Army Major Carlos Guillermo Ospina who announced his "immediate and irrevocable" resignation on broadcast evening news May 2, 2022 after delivering a letter to the Commission that afternoon.[172] In his statement, Major Ospina cited various grievances ranging from "stigmatization" of his identity as a military man to what he believed was the politicization of the Commission in favor of the Left in a way that sought to sway national election outcomes. In response, the Commission issued a formal statement the following day outlining their "lament" of the major's resignation and reaffirming their commitment to including military voices throughout the course of the Commission—"160 milestones of work conducted with military members" including interviews and the exchange of reports.[173]

The cases of both Celis' exile and Major Ospina's resignation demonstrate that, while intended to ritualize and enact a new era of "post-conflict," the Truth Commission instead raised doubts about the freedom and resilience of this kind of academic labor in the midst of intractable violence and volatile partisanship. In a moment of self-reflection, the Commissioners offered a challenging diagnosis in the first few pages of its final report, "Call for a Great Peace."

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[171] Osorio, Camila. 2022. "Andrés Celis, el investigador de la Comisión de la Verdad que tuvo que salir al exilio." *El País*, Oct. 12. Retrieved Feb. 26, 2024 (https://elpais.com/america-colombia/2022-10-12/andres-celis-el-investigador-de-la-comision-de-la-verdad-que-tuvo-que-salir-al-exilio.html).

[172] El Espectador. 2022. "Mayor Carlos Ospina, comisionado de la Verdad, renuncia a su cargo" May 2. Retrieved April 9, 2024 (https://www.elespectador.com/politica/mayor-carlos-ospina-comisionado-de-la-verdad-renuncia-a-su-cargo/).

[173] Comisión de la Verdad. 2022 "Sobre la renuncia del comisionado Carlos Guillermo Ospina." May 3. Retrieved April 9, 2024 (https://web.comisiondelaverdad.co/actualidad/comunicados-y-declaraciones/sobre-la-renuncia-del-comisionado-carlos-guillermo-ospina).

> "We do not intend to end the legitimate debate between those who maintain the status quo and those who wish to change it. We call on society to become aware that our way of seeing the world and relating to others is trapped in a 'war mode' in which we cannot envisage that others think differently." (Comisión de la Verdad 2022: 10-11)

The scope of their work was not, as they clarify, to "end the debate" that led multiple combatants into schism to begin with, but instead to encourage its readership to overcome the *still present* mentality of war that colors the debate. In many ways, the Truth Commission's work over its short five-year period saw two ends of a pendulum swing: the fresh promise of peace introduced by the 2016 Peace Agreement with the FARC, and the now increasingly stagnant hope for peace as violent actors have continued to morph into new ones and negotiations with still-long-standing guerrillas like the National Liberation Army (ELN) have abruptly started and stopped with dizzying succession.[174] Despite rhetorically operating in a "post-conflict" environment, the real timeline and controversial outcomes of the recent Truth Commission have proven yet again the unique ambiguity that researchers in Colombia must wade through to produce knowledge and historical memory of conflict.

Theoretical Contributions of the Dissertation

From a "level removed"—that is, with the buffer of a sociological lens and distanced from the actual investigative work of historical memory that my informants and highlighted actors have engaged in—this dissertation has explored how the state intervenes in knowledge-making about conflict prior to its definitive resolution. This particular focus deviates from the

[174] *Reuters*. 2024. Peace talks with Colombia government in crisis, ELN rebels say. Feb. 21. Retrieved March 3, 2024 (https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/peace-talks-with-colombia-government-crisis-eln-rebels-say-2024-02-21/).

dominant scholarship on state memory politics and "difficult pasts" (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991, Olick and Robbins 1998, and Fine 2001) by focusing on the strategies and outcomes of this narrative work in the midst of ongoing violence—and on the part of distinct branches of the state. Rather than assuming the state only participates in a unitary project to produce official history or a coherent narrative about the conflict (including consistent labels of "victim" and "perpetrator"), this dissertation disaggregates the state to look at the specific courses of action and the diverse narrative outcomes emerging from different units within the state—namely, the bureaucratic, legislative, and military branches. This furthers the initiative proposed by Morgan and Orloff (2017:3) to understand the state as "encompassing multiple institutions (with) varying forms of interpenetration with civil society and multiple and potentially contradictory logics."

Specifically, this dissertation has examined the production of conflict knowledge across three arenas of the state—bureaucratic, legislative, and the military. Across the chapters of this dissertation, I argue that the state has simultaneously collaborated with, rejected, and coopted expertise about violence and victimhood depending on the governmental arena and historical factors at play. In summary, this has meant that conflict scholars and human rights activists have had uneven and fluctuating proximity to (and legitimacy within) the Colombian state's official processes of producing historical memory and defining victims. I will now briefly outline the way that each chapter has illustrated a different aspect of this phenomenon.

Chapter Two focused on the institutional evolution of research commissions since 1958 in Colombia, leading to the "bureaucratized" historical memory scholarship that exists today through the National Center of Historical Memory. I argued that the shifting organizational configurations of conflict research and historical memory construction—from temporary,

presidentially-appointed commissions to a fixed and relatively-democratic national agency—mapped on to evolving understandings about the nature of prolonged violence in the country, from acute partisan struggle to entrenched social conflict. In terms of the state's engagement with experts, I argue that this represents a version of *collaboration* (rather than rejection or cooptation), as the state recruited and legitimized academics at each stage leading to the creation of the National Center for Historical Memory. The research activity of the CNMH and its hundreds of affiliated scholars receiving contracts or grant funds for specific projects about the conflict and its victims demonstrates the collaborative posture of the state's bureaucratic arm toward conflict knowledge production. These findings extend the existing scholarship on the transitory nature of transitional justice and truth commissions by elevating a case of entrenched memory "work" and its embeddedness in an existing bureaucratic ecosystem.

Chapter Three focused on the construction of a legal victim category in Colombia's Congress during debates leading to the passage of the Victims' Law of 2011. I argued that the nature of expertise employed in the legislative decision-making ranged from an initially wide net of human rights activists and experts intervening in public audiences to define victimhood to the considerably more narrow set of facts—embedded in what I call "elite historical narratives"—that led to the ultimate definition of victimhood in the law. In this sense, the state simply *rejected* (rather than collaborated or coopted) some interventions of civil society expertise about the history of the conflict and the status of its victims in favor of congressmen's own recollections and relevant memories of the conflict. This chapter joins with existing critical literature about victim identification in "post"-conflict contexts that calls for moving beyond juridical imaginations of victimhood (Chapman and Ball 2001; Savelsberg and Brehm 2015) to analyze how a victim definition can emerge through the particular shape of the legislative arena.

Finally, Chapter Four examined how a third branch of the state—the military and police—produces its own iterations of historical memory in scholarship and museum exhibits and casts a vision of victimhood onto service members to legitimize their voices for a broader public audience. As compared to the strategies of the state in Chapters Two and Three, the public security forces demonstrate a tendency toward *cooptation* of historical memory and conflict knowledge as they build off of existing frameworks popularized by the National Center of Historical Memory (CNMH) and the victimhood rhetoric legitimized through the Victims' Law of 2011. However, public forces have also collaborated with civil society in various artistic and scholarly initiatives in recent years that goes beyond the simple label of cooptation. These findings are significant in light of scholarship that has called for nuancing the binary of "victim" and "perpetrator" (Bouris 2007; Baines 2009; Moffett 2016; Weber 2021)—demonstrating the rhetorical capacity of an institution that could be classified as a perpetrator to not only argue for its innocence but actually go further to establish its own victimhood.

Overall, examining the case of Colombia's protracted period(s) of violence has illuminated how experts and historical memory producers seek to define an event or a "difficult past" that hasn't yet concluded. In this way, the dissertation takes up the scholarly mission proposed recently by sociologist Robin Wagner-Pacifici (2017:5-6) to resist the "analytical cauterization" of events that memory studies often falls into and the assumption that "events being memorialized are (indeed) *finished*." Future scholarship should extend this tolerance of ambiguity toward cases beyond Colombia where national crises continue to unravel in tandem with efforts to diagnose and commemorate them.

Commemoration or Intervention?

As discussed, this dissertation illuminates the specific implications of how and when historical memory work is conducted in settings with ongoing conflict. In this final section, I want to reflect on the relationship between historical meaning making and interventions in the realm of peacebuilding and those strategic efforts to end conflict. The findings revealed in the previous chapters underscore that, rather than existing in two separate spheres or genres of practice, the state's efforts to commemorate and make sense of *past* violence actually shapes the availability of existing solutions to end *present* violence. In other words, commemoration and intervention may be two sides of the same coin in states with long and unfinished histories of violence.

In the Colombian case, it was clear from the very first efforts at official historical narration of the civil war that any efforts to investigate the violence were also efforts to end it. The original group of researchers in the government's commissioned "*La Investigadora*" (1958) collected data as they journeyed throughout the countryside, but they also facilitated peace agreements among local factions as they went along (Guzmán et al 1962). As historical memory work has evolved across nearly seven decades and has spread through multiple arenas of the state—bureaucracy, Congress, and the military—the entanglement of commemoration and intervention has become more complex. The state has different capabilities (and vulnerabilities) and different incentives in each arena to channel this kind of work into peacebuilding. These configurations are likely to apply to other national contexts of enduring conflicts within and beyond the Latin American region.

These findings particularly challenge the prevailing practitioner mindset within the field of transitional justice that commemoration is something that happens in tandem or after the

"real" work of disarming combatant groups and ensuring peaceful political transition in the pursuit of democratic stability. By some accounts, one could say that Colombia has "put the cart before the horse" in prioritizing historical memory initiatives and the sociolegal classification of victims prior to the definitive end of violence. For example, the 2011 Victims' Law put forward a policy of reparations for victims of the conflict even while ongoing violence continued to "make" new victims. Yet the reality is that these symbolic and knowledge-oriented efforts are significant in projecting state sovereignty. And this sovereignty—imagined or not—makes a difference in the "real" battles of state versus insurgency. This is true on an international scale as well, as powerful states opt to measure the reputation of the Global South according to metrics proposed by the United Nations and other international bodies—which in turn have increasingly prioritized the discursive work of peacebuilding and historical memory preservation in its official guidelines. Thus, from both a domestic and international reputation standpoint, states experiencing entrenched conflict may opt to prioritize the symbolic labor of narrating violence and classifying victims as a direct remedy or intervention into the conflict itself.

Appendices

Appendix A: Expert Informants[175]

Aglaya Batz Liñeiro (Researcher), *Universidad del Rosario*

Alexander Ruíz Silva (Researcher), *Universidad Pedagógica Nacional*

Andrés Góngora (Curator), *Museo Nacional de Colombia*

Camila Osorio (Journalist), *EL PAÍS América*

César Eduardo Osorio Sánchez (Pedagogical Advisor), *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica*

David Zuluaga (Researcher), *Universidad de Antioquia*

Diego Vera Piñeros (Researcher), *Pontificia Universidad Javeriana*

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Elizabeth Andrade Coral (Researcher), *Escuela Superior de Guerra*

Gabriel Alberto Ruiz Romero (Researcher), *Universidad de Medellín*

Gilberto Alejandro Villa Ayala (Archivist), *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica*

Irma María Olis Barreto (Researcher), *Universidad del Rosario*

Juan Carlos Amador Baquiro (Researcher), *Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas*

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Juan Pablo Vera Lugo (Researcher), *Pontificia Universidad Javeriana*

Luz Mery Otálora Rodríguez (Researcher), *Escuela Superior de Guerra*

[175]This list (in alphabetical order by first name) denotes the public-facing expert informants who graciously dedicated their time to speaking with me through formal interviews, sharing resources, and other communications. Their position and institutional affiliation reflect the most relevant details for the present dissertation. The list is not exhaustive of all 40 informants, since not everyone consented to sharing their name publicly.

Mariana Delgado Barón (Researcher and Freelance Journalist)

Merlín Patricia Grueso Hinestroza (Researcher), *Universidad del Rosario*

Pablo Iván Galvis Diaz (Researcher and Librarian), *Bibliotecas para la Paz*

Pedro Pablo Serna Serna (Researcher), *Universidad del Norte*

Sairi Piñeros (Researcher), *Universidad Nacional de Colombia*

William Farfán Moreno (Researcher), *Universidad Santo Tomás*

Appendix B: Note on Language and Translation

Interviews conducted for this dissertation were based primarily in Spanish, with select interviews using English or a combination of Spanish and English. A Colombian-based transcriptionist Lillyam González was a key contributor to this project, as she not only transcribed the interviews but shared her context-specific knowledge of Colombian Spanish and novel terminology that would be otherwise difficult to discern in the course of the interview. All translations that occur in this text (from Spanish-language publications or interviews) are my own.

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