Kaleidoscopic Memory: Deconstructing Argentina’s Proceso of 1976-1983
An analysis of three memorial sites in Buenos Aires

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Submitted to the Department of History

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April 12, 2010
Acknowledgments

Over the course of the past year, I have come into contact with a number of individuals who helped shape the direction of this thesis. I would like to take a few lines to acknowledge their contributions.

I would like to thank Brenda Pereyra, Paola Cyment, and Professor Cecilia Fiel, who supervised my field research in Buenos Aires in the Spring of 2009. Together, they showed me how memory, and the right to history and truth about the past, can be conceived of as a human right. Furthermore, my research would have been impossible without their pervasive network of contacts.

I am similarly indebted to the employees at the Parque de la Memoria, the ex-ESMA, and the Casa de la Memoria y la Vida. Even though I was a visiting student, they took the time to patiently answer my questions and introduce me to their line of work.

I would like to also extend thanks to Professor Pablo Piccato and Professor Samuel Roberts. During numerous office hours, they graciously read over outlines and suggested how to improve and develop my thesis. In addition, I would like to thank the students of seminar C4398, who welcomed me into their section this semester. For their feedback, I am grateful to Frontierspersons Brafman, Jenkins, Hirsch, Harris, Stanley, Shapiro, Parsons, Lifshitz, and Weiss.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents, who instilled in me a love of learning. Thank you for always believing in me and supporting me in all of my endeavors.
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Terms and Acronyms

**Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo**: A human rights organization started in 1977 by the grandmothers of the *desaparecidos*. They focus on recovering the *desaparecidos’* children, who were born in captivity.

**ADPH**: Permanent Assembly of Human Rights

**Hebe de Bonafini**: President of the Asociación de Madres de Plaza de Mayo

**CCDtyE**: clandestine center of detention, torture, and extermination

**Detenido-desaparecido**: victims of state terrorism who were “disappeared.”

**Estela Carlotto**: President of the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo

**CELS**: Center for Legal and Social Studies


**ERP**: People’s Revolutionary Army; a Trotskyite guerilla group that emerged around 1970.

**ESMA**: Naval Mechanics School

**H.I.J.O.S**: Children for Identity and Justice Against Forgetting and Silence

**Madres de Plaza de Mayo**: A human rights organization created in 1977 by the mothers of the *desaparecidos*; every Thursday afternoon, they march around the Plaza de Mayo in downtown Buenos Aires and demand the return of their children. They split into two factions in 1986: Asociación de Madres de Plaza de Mayo and Madres de Plaza de Mayo-Línea Fundadora.

**MEDH**: Ecumenical Movement for Human Rights

**Montoneros**: a nationalist-turned-Peronist guerrilla group that emerged around 1970.

**Porteño**: A resident of the city of Buenos Aires.

**SERPAJ**: Servicio Paz y Justicia

**UCR**: Radical Civic Union
Introduction: The Gordian Knot of Argentine Memory

“During their many years of struggle, our country’s human rights organizations have built their missions on the foundation of memory, truth, and justice. In this case, memory takes shape in the form of a monument to the victims. Rock by rock, this work makes it clear that we do not forget them, and that we vindicate their struggle and commitment to fight for a just and cohesive Argentina. We inaugurate this monument with joy because the names of those that compose it are present, they are among us, and they have not been forgotten…. 30,000 detained-disappeared! Present! Now and forever!”

As Marcelo Brodsky stepped down from the podium at the Parque de la Memoria in Buenos Aires, waves of “Presente! Presente! Presente!” rippled through the sundry crowd of human rights organizations, local politicians, and the general public. Brodsky’s speech on November 7, 2007 inaugurated the Monumento a las Víctimas de Terrorismo de Estado, one of the first memorials dedicated to the victims of the Argentine “dirty war.” From 1976 to 1983, the military junta implemented the National Reorganization Process, a series of drastic social and economic reforms, to excise the numerous “tumors” plaguing society. During this time, they systematically silenced any manifestations of political opposition to the proceso, which resulted in the abduction, torture, and murder of approximately 30,000 ‘subversive’ Argentines.

Renowned for his photography activism, Brodsky’s critique of the junta’s human rights abuses earned him a board position alongside other human rights activists and politicians on the memorial’s planning committee. Behind each engraved name is “a life, a family, a project cut short;” listed among them is Marcelo’s brother, Fernando.

In the last fifteen years, there have been a proliferation of memorials, a resurgence of human rights organizations, and attempts to uncover the details of what occurred during the

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proceso. These efforts to piece together a collective memory gave rise to the questions of what, and how the country should remember its past, and this predicament is what Brodsky has labeled the “Gordian knot” that currently faces Argentina.  

While these memorials are hardly the country’s first attempt to commemorate its recent past, they differ from their precedents in three crucial ways: longevity. I draw upon three memorial spaces as case studies of this recent memorialization trend: the Parque de la Memoria, the first monument to enumerate all of the names of known desaparecidos; the “Espacio para la Memoria” at the ex-ESMA, the only clandestine center to function for the entire length of the dictatorship; and the Casa de la Memoria y la Vida at the ex-detention center Mansión Seré, the first memory museum in Latin America. During the proceso, the military appropriated each of sites and converted them into sites of violence. Following this period of social trauma, Marguerite Feitlowitz has posited that “communal space has had to be relearned” in Argentine society and has suggested that memorials are one way to do so.

This thesis demonstrates how human rights organizations and politicians have collaboratively reclaimed spaces tainted by military violence for Argentine society. By reclaiming these spaces for life instead of death, these memorials function as a portal to the past while recasting the site’s history. Given the memorials’ role in educating future generations about the proceso, Argentine society was particularly concerned about the kinds of historical narratives they were presenting. The resulting debates over the memorials’ creation points to the fissures in Argentine society as they wrestle over conflicting interpretations of the past.

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4 Estela Schindel posits the Siluetazo of 1983 and the Madres de Plaza de Mayo’s regularly scheduled marches as the first attempts to memorialize the proceso. While these “memorials in motion” ensure that citizens would remember the disappeared but only as long as they continued. See Estela Schindel, “Las pequeñas memorias y el paisaje cotidiano: cartografías del recuerdo en Berlin y Buenos Aires,” in Trabajos de la Memoria: Arte y ciudad en la postdictadura Argentina, ed. Cecilia Macón (Buenos Aires: Ladosur, 2006), 63-64.

5 Feitlowitz, The Lexicon of Terror, 192.
Due to the clandestine nature of the military’s operations and the systematic elimination of material evidence, the construction of the country’s past is “above all a narrative construction” created from testimonials. In light of this observation, which voices have been privileged and which have been suppressed? What kinds of historical narratives are the Parque de la Memoria, the ex-ESMA, and the Casa de la Memoria y la Vida propagating? Who were the social and political actors behind their creation? How have these memorials advanced the objectives of “memory, truth, and justice,” the rally cry of Argentine human rights groups?

By analyzing the debates surrounding these memorials, and how their proponents reclaim these sites for the community, one can gain a sense of how Argentina’s history is actively being reshaped in the public sphere.

**Methodology**

Primary sources are drawn from a variety of sources that date from 1995 to 2010. In order to examine human rights organizations’ motivations and their responses to this memorialization process, I analyze publications from Princeton University Library’s archive of Argentine ephemera, including pamphlets, flyers, and non-governmental human rights organizations’ publications between 1978 and 2004.

In order to dissect the role of politicians, I analyze the public statements made by Presidents Nestor and Cristina Kirchner; Mayors Jorge Telerman, Aníbal Ibarra, and Martín Sabbatella; and elected representatives. In addition, I examine the nullification of Punto Final and Obedencia Debida and the memorials’ legislative charters.

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Due to time constraints and accessibility, it was not feasible to conduct interviews with the public and members of the surrounding communities. In lieu of these interviews, letters written to the editor and reader comments provided another window into public opinion.7

Given the recency of these events, I turn to the actors most directly involved in the day-to-day operations of the three memorials: the administrators and curators themselves. From interviews I conducted in April and May of 2009, I culled general information about each memorial, and how they situate their work within the larger theoretical frameworks of collective memory. Their testimonies are supplemented with information drawn from ephemera I collected in the spring of 2009 from La Mansión Seré, El Parque de la Memoria, and the Haroldo Conti Cultural Center as well as contemporary media coverage.

By assessing the motivations behind the creation of these memorials, and the gauging the response to their creation, the opinions of human rights activists, politicians, and the general public help shed light on the effectiveness of the memorialization process in Argentina.

**Historiography**

This work draws on the analyses of scholars who have investigated collective memory of traumatic events. In the 1930s, sociologist Maurice Halbwachs asserted that individuals are carriers of recollections, and these memories are “part of a totality of thoughts common to a group,” whether it be social, political, or familial in nature. Since each group carries a different memory, and consequently, there are as many memories as there are groups. Halbwachs was the

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7 I examine letters written to the editor from three Argentine newspapers that span the political spectrum: the conservative *La Nación*, the moderate *Clarín*, and the liberal *Página 12*. In the case of the ESMA, these opinions are supplemented by polls conducted by OPSM Consultants.
first to articulate a presentist approach to this social construction, which states that the “the mind reconstructs its memories under the pressure of the present.”

A flood of scholarship concerning collective memory in the 1980s sprung from Pierre Nora’s concept of lieux de mémoire, or “memory site;”, a place where “we struggle over our tensions between our experience of the past (memory) and our organization of it (history).” Kerwin Klein critically calls this current “New Structural Memory,” which posits that collective memories only exist if they reside out of the individual. As argued by Richard Terdiman (1993), Jeffrey Olick (1999), and Amos Funkenstein (1993), collective memory resides in containers external from the individual, such as rituals, symbols, language, museums, and texts.

Nora’s work sparked an interest in the cultural meaning of memory sites, and this trend is reflected in the work of James Young (1994), Jay Winter (1998), and Andreas Huyssen (2003). The Parque de la Memoria, the ex-ESMA, and the Casa de la Memoria y Vida can be analyzed from Nora’s point of view. Elizabeth Jelin and Victoria Langland categorize memorials as a type of marcas territoriales or “territorial scars;” physical spaces and public places that have historical significance and function as a portal into the past. For Argentine scholars like Jelin (2000, 2003, 2005), Hugo Vezzetti (2003), and Pilar Calveiro (2007), collective memory is not necessarily a unanimous memory. Memory’s interrogation of the past is full of tensions and

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11 Based on his analysis of the Oxford English Dictionary and contemporary social memory studies, Klein identifies new structural memory as a semantic shift within the field. With the onset of secular modernity in the 19th century, scholars shifted away from the notion that memory was preserved in divine relics and primarily defined memory as an individual act of remembering. Now scholars are reverting to its archaic definition, which proposes that memory is preserved in material objects. See Kerwin Lee Klein, “On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse,” Representations 69 (Winter 2000): 131-135.
conflicts, and this creates a combative space where various perspectives fight to assert
themselves. Rather than seeking a monolithic memory, these memorials, at least in theory, hope
to create a historical mosaic based on the diverse viewpoints of the different actors. Given that
the memorials’ proponents demonstrate knowledge of these theories, my analysis, in turn, also
engages with this historiography.

Various ideologies exist about the nature of the proceso. General Ramón Díaz Bessone
viewed the “dirty war” as part of global Marxist efforts to control developing countries.13 During
the 1985 Trial of the Juntas, Admiral Emilio Massera asserted that the “war against terrorism
was just war.” He claimed that in the face of atheistic subversives, it was the country’s Christian
values that needed defending, not his actions.14

Following the fall of the military junta, President Raul Alfonsín, the newly
democratically elected commander-in-chief, argued that during 1976 to 1983 the “country had
been flagellated by ‘two demons,’” and “both must be excised.”15 His teoría de los dos demonios
faulted these two entities, the guerillas and the military, and this ideology is reflected in the
prologue of the National Commission on the Disappeared (CONADEP), the investigative report
ordered by Alfonsín.16 By acknowledging both the scores of innocent victims of state terrorism
and the seeds of terrorism, the CONADEP report treads a more moderate interpretation of the
past than Massera.

13 Díaz Bessone, Guerra Revolucionaria, 9-14.
15 Lewis, Guerrillas and Generals, 199.
16 In the CONADEP prologue, Ernesto Sábato wrote: “During the 1970s, Argentina was torn by terror from both the
extreme right and the far left…The armed forces responded to the terrorists’ crimes with a terrorism far worse than
the one they were combating, and after 24 March 1976 they could count on the power and impunity of an absolute
state, which they misused to abduct, torture and kill thousands of human beings.” See CONADEP, “Prologue by
Ernesto Sabato” in Nunca Más: Informe de la Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (Buenos
Yet human rights organizations and the Left vehemently reject the *teoría de los dos demonios* and take issue with concept of a “dirty war.” American reporter Martin Andersen refutes the necessity of the ‘dirty war,’ and questions the appropriateness of the journalistic term, which assumes that active combatants constituted the majority of casualties on both sides. Under the guise of war, the military could justify their gross abuses of human rights and political power by misconstruing guerilla activity and strength.

I outline my argument over the course of four chapters. Using retired naval officer Adolfo Scilingo’s 1995 confession about his involvement in state terrorism, the first chapter provides an overview of the Argentine “dirty war” and the return to democracy. By forcing the country to confront a past that had been buried under the weight of immunity laws and presidential pardons, Scilingo’s interview reintroduced these events to the public agenda. In the wake of his confession, the government and human rights organizations mobilized to create a series of commemorative sites, including El Parque de la Memoria, the ex-ESMA, and the Casa de la Memoria y la Vida.

Muddied by Scilingo’s revelation that many of the death flights dumped *desaparecidos* into the Río de la Plata, the Parque de la Memoria tries to reclaim the river for *porteños*. Composed of a series of four walls, the Parque’s Monument is the first memorial to list the names of all confirmed victims of state terrorism. The Parque’s creation resulted from select human rights organizations collaborating with the government officials who shared similar

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17 Florencia Battiti, a member of the Comisión Pro Monumento at the Parque de la Memoria, outrightly rejects the *teoría de los dos demonios*. Meanwhile, President Kirchner has called the guerillas “anonymous heroes.” See Florencia Battiti, interview by the author; May 26, 2009; Buenos Aires, Argentina; and La Nación, “Kirchner oficializó el traslado de la ESMA,” November 20, 2007.

values. While these actors were able to establish a broad consensus of the past, there were members of the community who disagreed with their narrow interpretation of “victims.”

The ESMA’s dark history established the estate as the locus for debates on the recuperation of spaces tainted by military violence. Over the course of six years, President Carlos Menem and President Néstor Kirchner respectively proposed demolishing and preserving the former clandestine detention center. Although it was ultimately converted in a memory museum, both plans were criticized by human rights organizations, naval students, and politicians. This chapter argues that the discourse surrounding President Menem and President Kirchner’s diametrically opposed plans transformed the ESMA into a sparring ground for conflicting memories and interpretations of the past.

Located in the heart of Morón, a northwestern suburb outside of Buenos Aires, the Casa de la Memoria y la Vida attempts to reclaim the burnt-over site of the Mansión Seré for the community. Nestled in the middle of the neighborhood, the former detention camp deeply scarred the population. The Casa’s administration has tailored their programming to suit the town’s needs, which has made “memory, truth, and justice” an integral part of the municipality’s agenda.

This paper concludes by evaluating the memorialization efforts in Argentina. On one hand, these memorials indicate that at least on some level, human rights organizations, politicians, and the general public have established a broad, general consensus about the past. However, it is clear that complete concord among these parties does not—and may not ever—exist. As a dominant interpretation of the past materializes, it crowds out the memories that preceded it. In light of this paradigm shift, this thesis ultimately questions what this development means for Argentine history, and how it is changing public discourse on human rights.
Lexicon can be as prismatic as history itself; *el proceso, la dictadura* (the dictatorship), *terrorismo de estado* (state terrorism), and the ‘dirty war’ are all used to describe the events of 1976 to 1983. Those wanting to classify the period in reference to political regimes might elect to analyze the junta’s regime through the lens of a dictatorship. Human rights groups balk at the connotations of the “dirty war,” a term that originated with the military and assumes that the conflict followed the protocol of war and was fought between two equal sides. Instead, they focus on the abuses incurred under state-sanctioned violence by referring to this time period as *terrorismo de estado*. In this paper, I typically refer to the events of 1976 to 1983 as the *proceso*, which refers to the military’s violent restructuring of the economy and Argentine society during the National Reorganization Process.
I. From Dictatorship to Democracy

Scilingo’s Confession: A Window into the Past

With only a tape recorder between them, Lieutenant Commander Adolfo Scilingo detailed his role in the navy’s operations during Argentina’s proceso to Horacio Verbitsky, a renowned Argentine investigative journalist and human rights activist. Scilingo’s open admission of guilt in 1995 broke the fiercely guarded pact of silence surrounding the military junta’s 1976 to 1983 clandestine operations, which involved the abduction, torture, and murder of approximately 30,000 ‘subversive’ Argentines. By forcing the country to confront a past that had been buried under the weight of impunity policies and presidential pardons, his interview reintroduced these events to the public agenda.19

On March 24, 1976, General Jorge Rafael Videla, Admiral Emiliano Eduardo Massera, and Air Force Brigadier General Orlando Ramón Agosti collectively ousted Isabelita Perón from power, citing the Peronist party’s inability to govern. With military leaders at the helm, the three branches of the military launched the “National Reorganization Process,” a violent undertaking that restructured the Argentine economy and society over the course of the next seven years.20 Unlike previous military coups, this time, the three branches of the military engaged in what officers termed a “different kind of war.”21 Scilingo recalled how in 1976, Admiral Luis María Mandía, chief of naval operations, announced that the military’s tactics would be tailored to meet

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19 Both Marguerite Feitlowitz and the preface to Memoria Abierta’s conference on the future of the Memory Museum cite Scilingo’s confession as a turning point in Argentine public discourse on human rights in. See Feitlowitz, A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Terror, 193-; and Primeras jornadas de debate interdisciplinario, Organización institucional y contenidos del futuro museo de la memoria; 2000; Human Rights in Argentina, III; Princeton University Library.
21 Verbitsky, Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior, 30.
the “demands of a fight against an unforeseen enemy in which standard operating procedures would prove inapplicable.”

The “unforeseen enemies” to whom Mandía alluded were the so-called “subversives,” principally the Montoneros and the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP). These groups developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s during and in response to General Onganía’s authoritarian regime, which repressed social movements, restricted freedom of expression, and suspended Congress. The combatants planted bombs, committed bank robberies, carried out assassinations, and orchestrated kidnappings, averaging an attack every two to three days from 1969 to 1973. They primarily targeted police officers and members of the military, resulting in the assassination of 697 individuals during the 1970s. Although the exact number of combatants is debated, each group was bolstered by a mass front organization and a pervasive network of sympathizers and the spread of terrorism greatly concerned government officials. Scilingo noted that the “cellular organization and compartmentalization of the enemy” demanded the implementation of “unusual procedures.” The military’s unorthodox tactics mirrored those of the guerilla fighters, but were carried out on a larger scale and included

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26 Given the clandestine nature of the Montoneros and ERP, it is difficult to determine the exact size of their networks. General Ramón Genaro Díaz Bessone estimated total guerilla strength to be near 30,000 while human right organizations argued that the number of combatants was closer to two to three thousand. Junta leaders Videla and Viola themselves believed that the number of combined combatants hovered around three to four thousand. Although the estimates of total guerilla fighting strength are imprecise, it is widely acknowledged that the ERP was decidedly smaller than the Montoneros. According to María Seoane’s study, the ERP counted on 600 to 1,000 combatants at their peak. In contrast, the Montoneros range from Hugo Moyano’s estimate of 3,000 to Buenos Aires Herald’s Robert Cox’s estimate of 10,000. From the number of attendees at rallies, historians estimate that the combatants counted on a sympathetic network of approximately 100,000. For further estimates of guerrilla strength, see Lewis, *Guerrillas and Generals*, 46-47.
systematic “abduction, disappearance, and torture.” As soon as they were kidnapped, the detenidos-desaparecidos (detained-disappeared) were taken to clandestine centers of detention, torture, and extermination (CCDTyE) and to pass through their doors meant, for all intents and purposes, “to cease to exist.”

Although conceding that “orders [they] were receiving were extreme,” Scilingo believed that “objective was to destroy the enemy, by whatever means and with the materials that were required.” In order to gain information about the guerilla operations, officers subjected their prisoners to sexual assault, mock executions, and la picana (electric cattle prod). Once they extricated all the necessary information, the prisoners were disposed of via firing squads or vuelos de muerte (death flights). Scilingo participated in two of these flights; convinced they were receiving vaccinations in preparation for transfer, prisoners were drugged and then dropped out of airplanes over the Río de la Plata.

Over time, the definition of a “subversive” proved to be quite broad and was expanded to include all manifestations of political activism. Amongst these subversives were lawyers, intellectuals, union members, students, members of religious orders, and professors, all of whom eventually passed on to become desaparecidos (the disappeared). Over half of the desaparecidos were taken from their homes in the dead of night; horrified family members

31 Verbitsky, Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior, 38.
32 Lewis, Guerillas and Generals, 152.
33 Verbitsky, Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior, 49.
looked on as their relatives were beaten, bound, and brutally forced into the junta’s ubiquitous green Ford Falcons. An uneasiness settled over Argentina as terror swept over society.

Secrecy was paramount in every step of the operation. The military transformed police properties, military compounds, and local businesses into CCDTyE—creating a terror network so pervasive that it was as if the country itself had transformed into a “large clandestine center.” Their walls masked a terrifying reality and their activities allowed the military to deny responsibility for their actions because “without cadavers, there is no incriminating evidence.”

Their very existence, and the existence of those who suffered within their gates, was denied by the junta; Videla even sinisterly declared that “The disappeared are not here, they do not exist, they have no entity…” Contrary to the military’s claims, human rights organizations estimate that more than 30,000 desaparecidos passed through the country’s five hundred and twenty CCDTyE during the dictatorship.

In retrospect, Scilingo questioned the effectiveness of the military’s operations, stating that “I don’t think that anyone died who had any tremendous importance that could have affected…Yes, the country was in a chaotic situation. But I’m telling you, today I think the problem could have been solved another way.” CIA memos related to the US-sanctioned Operation Condor, a transnational terror network, verify the naval officer’s doubts and reveal

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37 365 Centros Clandestinos en el País; el País es un Gran Centro Clandestino de Detención; Human Rights in Argentina, III; Princeton University Library.
38 Seoane, “El golpe del 76,” 68.
39 Dirección de Derechos Humanos, Mansión Seré (Buenos Aires: Municipio de Morón, [2009?]); property of author.
41 Verbitsky, Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior, 23.
that South American guerrillas “‘never posed a threat a direct challenge to any government.’”\(^{42}\) Yet during the \textit{proceso}, perception trumped reality, and the military’s manipulation of evidence facilitated the junta’s consolidation of power in the late 1970s.

**Return to democracy**

After spearheading the failed Falklands War in 1982, the military junta struggled to maintain its monopoly of power. Internal discord wracked the junta, and a conflation of social, political, and economic factors ultimately brought the \textit{proceso} to a close. The dire economic climate spurred unions to challenge the junta’s policies, while human rights organizations galvanized after the true nature of the military’s operations began to seep down to the general public. Society increasingly viewed democracy, which was written into their constitution, as a “panacea” for their problems.\(^{43}\) Fearing a political implosion, the military agreed to oversee a democratic transition.\(^{44}\)

In October of 1983, the popular election of Raúl Alfonsín inaugurated a new kind of national process; the process of reclaiming the history of the events occulted by the military. Alfonsín first nullified the military’s auto amnesty law, which had granted them immunity against all allegations of human rights abuses.\(^{45}\) Then, he notably created the Comisión Nacional Sobre la Desaparición de Personas (CONADEP) to investigate these allegations, and their work resulted in the publication of \textit{Nunca Más}, a report based on the testimonies of thousands of survivors and affected persons. The president also requested that the Supreme Council of the


\(^{43}\) Romero, \textit{A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century}, 251.

\(^{44}\) Romero, \textit{A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century}, 247-254.

\(^{45}\) Verbitsky, \textit{Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior}, 162.
Armed Forces press charges against the three original junta leaders. Despite CONADEP’s incriminating dossier, the military court cleared them of any wrongdoing the following year. In response to the acquittal, the Federal Courts claimed jurisdiction and indicted all nine former military leaders. Key members of the Montoneros and the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo were also placed on trial for violating the amnesty of May 1973.

The 1985 landmark Trial of the Juntas worked within the framework of the teoría de los dos demonios, (theory of two demons), which postulated that the “the evil from below [the subversives] engendered the evil from above [the state] with its violent actions.” The state, “who must then put things in their proper place,” responded with excess to the guerilla activity. The court tailored the nine commanders’ sentencing convicted all nine commanders, but their sentencing was relative to how many crimes their subordinates carried out during their tenure as leaders of the junta. Furthermore, the court rejected collective responsibility, which opened the door for the trial of junior officers.

Following the trial, the human rights advocates pushed the courts to prosecute the lower rungs of the military hierarchy for their involvement in the conflict. However, these developments riled the carapintadas (painted face), soldiers under Lieutenant Colonel Aldo Rico, who demanded amnesty. In the face of this conservative opposition, Alfonsín passed Punto Final (Full Stop) in 1986. Punto Final required prosecutors to bring to all penal action

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47 Lieutenant General Jorge Videla, Lieutenant General Roberto Viola, Lieutenant General Leopoldo Galtieri, Admiral Emilio Massera, Admiral Armando Lambruschini, Admiral Jorge Anaya, Brigadier Orlando Agosti, Brigadier Omar Graffigna, and Brigadier Basilio Lami-Dozo served on the first three military juntas. Under congressional decree 157, Montonero and ERP leaders Enrique Gorriarán, Merlo, Mario Firmenich, Fernando Vaca Narvaja, Rodolfo Galimberti, and Ricardo Obregón Cano were charged with violating the May 1973 amnesty. See Lewis, *Guerillas and Generals*, 200.
against alleged offenders to the attention of the court before February 24, 1987—sixty days after its passage. A year later, Congress passed *Obedencia Debida* (Due Obedience), which cleared all subordinate military officers of any wrongdoing during the dictatorship. Collectively, these two laws halted all prosecutions and granted impunity to lower-ranking officers, whose ignorance absolved them of guilt. At the behest of the army, President Carlos Menem issued a series of presidential pardons to those previously convicted, allowing the perpetrators to reintegrate into society.  

It was in this milieu of silence and detachment from the past that Captain Scilingo’s confession took place. Haunted by his actions, he enumerated his troubles for Verbitsky: “There are four things that give me a very bad time. The two flights I did, the person I saw tortured, and the memory of the chains and shackles that were put on the prisoners,” he said. “I barely saw them a couple of times, but I cannot forget that sound. I don’t want to talk about it. Let me go.” Tormented by his memories, the former naval officer admitted that “whether with whiskey or sleeping pills, the hardest thing was getting through the night.” Although Scilingo could dip into his liquor cabinet to forget the past, Argentine society did not have such remedies at their disposal.

Scilingo’s confession unleashed what Verbitsky called a “newly sensitized climate of social catharsis” and was a watershed for Argentine society. By publicly airing the military’s deeds, his admission of guilt lent credence to the long-standing demands of human rights organizations and attempts to memorialize the past. The event pushed the questions of what,

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54 Estela Schindel terms the Madres’ weekly marches, which date back to 1977, and the 1983 Siluetazo as “memorials in motion” and cites them as some of the country’s earliest attempts to draw attention to the military’s human rights abuses and to memorialize the past. See Estela Schindel, “Las pequeñas memorias y el paisaje
and how, Argentina should remember its past into the foreground once again. The three chosen memorial sites, the Parque de la Memoria, the ex-ESMA, and the Casa de la Memoria y la Vida, represent some of the ways in which the country has tried to address these questions.
II. Brick by Brick: El Parque de la Memoria

“Buenos Aires is anchored to the Río de la Plata. We, who inhabit its coasts, are known to the World as Rioplataneses […] The River that gives us our name necessitates special treatment…so our name will no longer be insolubly tied to death.”

Alongside the river’s chocolate-slate waters, President Néstor Kirchner inaugurated the Monument to the Victims of State Terrorism on November 7, 2007 while Mayor Jorge Telerman, national and local city authorities, members of the Comisión pro Monumento, and the general public looked on. For those present, its unveiling represented the culmination of many years’ work, particularly on behalf of the human rights organizations who first lobbied for its creation in 1997. Underwritten by the City of Buenos Aires, the Monument to the Victims of State Terrorism commemorates “the victims of state terrorism, the detained-disappeared, those assassinated, and those who died fighting for justice and equality.” Its four ash-grey walls brokenly zig zag across the Parque de la Memoria’s grassy knoll, cutting into the earth like a gash.

Muddied by Scilingo’s revelation that many of the death flights emptied desaparecidos into the Río de la Plata, the Parque de la Memoria strives to reclaim the river for porteños by acknowledging the site’s history. Situated on the bend of Costanera Norte in Buenos Aires, the Parque de la Memoria is the first public green space dedicated to the victims of state terrorism and its Monument is the first to list all known desaparecidos. As each victim is verified by the Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, one of the Monument’s thirty thousand blank titles

is engraved with the names of confirmed *desaparecidos*. Arranged chronologically by date of disappearance, the 8,700 names are also accompanied by their age and sometimes “embarazada,” (pregnant), denoting state terrorism’s indirect victims: the children of *desaparecidos* that were born in captivity.\(^5^7\) In light of Operation Condor, the transnational terror network that swept South America in the 1970s and 1980s, the memorial recognizes Uruguayan victims of Argentine state terrorism and Argentine victims killed abroad as well.\(^5^8\)

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**Figures 2, 3:** Constructed to resemble a cut, the monument likens state terrorism to an open wound. Photo by author. Illustration from Buenos Aires, Gobierno de la Ciudad, *Parque de la Memoria: Monumento a las Víctimas del Terrorismo de Estado*, (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Cafeimagen.com, [2009?]); property of author.

As a vehicle of memory, the Parque de la Memoria can be analyzed through the lens of Hilda Sabato’s argument that “the construction of a collective memory is a cultural operation based on values.”\(^5^9\) In this chapter, I assert that the Parque’s creation resulted from the collaboration of select human rights organizations and politicians who support the advancement of memory, truth, and justice. United by core values, these social and political actors were able to

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reach a consensus about the nature and content of the Monument. Although endorsed by a broad base of support, the Parque’s most vocal opponents took issue with how the Comisión Pro Monumento interpreted these values, particularly memory. They criticized the memorial’s narrow interpretation of “victims,” and called for the commemoration of all victims of violence—not just those of state terrorism. Yet in spite of these few dissenting voices, the Parque represents one way in which Argentine society has reclaimed a communal space tainted by military violence.

**Actors at a round table**

While select human rights organizations gave impetus to the Parque de la Memoria, it was the local government who provided the necessary funding. In 1997, a conglomerate of human rights organizations collaborated with architects Alberto Varas, Jorge Lestar, and Miguel Baudizone to propose the construction of a national memorial space overlooking the shores of the Río de la Plata. After rounds of revisions, the Legislature of the City of Buenos Aires ratified the plan on July 21, 1998 and consigned funding to build the Parque on city land. In addition to the Monument, the law also stipulates the construction of a multi-purpose room for cultural activities and a commemorative sculpture series. Approved by an overwhelming 57 of the 60 person electoral body, Law 46 created the Comisión Pro Monumento a las Víctimas del Terrorismo de Estado, a committee comprised of human rights organizations, local legislators, and city officials, delegated with the task of turning the ambitious blueprint into reality. By

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61 Although municipal legislators and city officials sit on the Comisión Pro Monumento, human rights organizations form the bulk of the committee. The human rights organizations include: Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, Madres de Plaza de Mayo-Línea Fundadora, Asociación Permanente por los Derechos Humanos (APDH), Buena Memoria, Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS), Familiares de Desaparecidos y Detenidos por Razones Políticas,
requiring the participation of various social sectors, the legislature made collaboration an integral part of the Parque’s development.

Various politicians at both the national and local level oversaw the Parque’s inaugurations and publicly endorsed the project. Mayor Aníbal Ibarra, who served as Mayor of Buenos Aires from 2000 to 2006, presided over the inauguration of the first phase of the Parque. President Néstor Kirchner and Mayor Jorge Telerman presided over the inauguration of the Monument in November 2007. Kirchner’s comments and attitude towards the Parque de la Memoria fell in line with the “kirchnerista formula,” which supports the creation of memorial sites and the investigation of the social and political factors that facilitated the military’s takeover in 1976.62

A handful of dissenting voices also commented on the manner that the Parque grafted human rights into the public sphere. Amongst human rights organizations, these included the Asociación de Madres de Plaza de Mayo; H.I.J.O.S, an organization comprised of the desaparecidos’s children; and the Asociación de Ex Detenidos Desaparecidos. Within the legislature, Ricardo Busacca vehemently opposed the monument’s creation. Since the Parque is located on city land, it is important to note the reactions of those who use and share that space.

Chorus of approval

Together, the Comisión Pro Monumento, President Kirchner, and Mayor Aníbal Ibarra stand behind the Parque’s aim to “construct, recuperate, and preserve the collective memory in

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order to ensure that the past is not repeated.”63 The Parque rejects the theory of two demons, which argues that the subversives’ violent activity provoked the state to respond with force, albeit an excess of force.64 Florencia Battiti explains that a war was never officially declared between the two parties and that “for [the Parque], the equality between the subversives and the state never existed…the two are not comparable in terms of responsibilities, troops, or arms. The state should not turn on the society it is supposed to protect.” Rather than striking an elegiac tone, she hopes that the memorial will generate “discussion, reflection, and debate” amongst its visitors. Working with the Comisión Pro Monumento since 2000, she believes that the memorial showcases various “facets of memory” through art, the Monument, and cultural activities, which provide multiple ways to approach the recent past.65 Ultimately, the memorial space’s principal purpose is to “keep alive the memory of the past while looking towards the future.”66

For the Comisión Pro Monumento organizations, the memorial primarily functions as a site for reflection. Tati Almeyda, a Madre de Plaza de Mayo-Línea Fundadora, appreciated the tactility of the Monument, saying that “We come and touch the names of our children. Every time I come, I touch his name.” The annotation of the thousands of desaparecidos underscores the enormity of the tragedy, and Almeyda believed that this will “help people realize the number of desaparecidos.” Cristina Muro de Chiapolini, the wife of a desparecido, appreciated that the Monument “gives our loved ones back their names, which was the first thing that [their repressors] took from them.” The single criticism came from Nora Cortiñas of the Línea Fundadora, who took issue with the memorial’s aesthetics, deriding it for being “very grey and

64 Coordinadora por la Libertad de los Presos Políticos, Limando Barrotes: Publicación de los presos políticos de la Argentina, December 2003; Human Rights in Argentina, III; Princeton University Library.
very uniform.” Like the majority of the Madres, Marcelo Brodsky, a brother of a *desaparecido* and member of the Comisión Pro Monumento, commented that the Parque “is a place where one can come to reflect, [and] it is not a cemetery, because lamentably, there are no bodies.” While it is true that the Monument does not contain the bodies of the *desaparecidos*, some Madres have made it their dying wish for their ashes to be spread along the estate. Leopolda Segalli and Mabel Gutiérrez both requested for their ashes to be laid to rest alongside their sons’ names.

During the Parque’s various stages of development, it has consistently received accolades from presiding politicians who praise its cathartic qualities. On August 30, 2001, Aníbal Ibarra, Mayor of the City of Buenos Aires, presided over the inauguration of the first phase of the Parque de la Memoria. Held on the International Day of the Detained-Disappeared, Ibarra fondly remembered his high school friends who disappeared during the dictatorship. He shared that, “this is not just any inauguration; when I entered, I felt fury, indignation, and at the same time, emotion.” Six years later, at the unveiling of the Monument, President Kirchner commended the human rights organization behind the project. In particular, he singled out the Abuelas and Madres de Plaza de Mayo, saying that “you have returned to us our dignity.” “I hold all of these bricks close to my heart,” exclaimed President Kirchner, who took the opportunity to encourage the courts to accelerate the military trials. At the conclusion of his speech, he

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68 Leopolda Segalli’s son was Guillermo Segalli. See “Cenizas de una Madre,” *Página 12*, December 14, 2008. Mabel Gutiérrez’s son was Alejandro Gutiérrez. See Diego Martínez, “‘Era una mujer con enorme lucidez,’” *Página 12*, April 11, 2009.


70 *Clarín*, “Kirchner volvió a reclamar a la Justicia más claridad en los juicios contra represores,” November 7, 2007.
personally promised the Madres that he would “continue to work” on the human rights agenda after he left the presidency.\textsuperscript{71}

A few members of the public echoed these sentiments. Following the inauguration of the Monument in 2007, a \textit{porteño} congratulated those who made the Parque possible: “Now we have a place where we can learn that a country without memory does not have a future, because to remember is to build it.” Furthermore, he thanked those who “continue to seek justice and Nunca Más,” citing the rally cry of human rights advocates, which vowed to never let the repression happen again.\textsuperscript{72} Even the editorial staff at \textit{Clarín}, the city’s moderate periodical, admired the “pedagogical value [the Parque] will hold for new generations as a legacy to build the future” while acknowledging that “not all Argentines celebrate the idea” of the memorial.\textsuperscript{73}

\textbf{Dissenting voices}

Indeed, not all Argentines supported the Parque de la Memoria. Within the human rights movements, disagreements arose over the memorial’s form and underlying message. For a few members of the public, the memorial’s failure to include all victims of 1970s violence undercut its effectiveness. Meanwhile, Congressman Busacca wished it had never been built in the first place. Although not representative of the majority, this handful of dissenters challenges how the Parque approaches and interprets memory, truth, and justice.

Although supportive of human rights, the Asociación de Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, and select members of the Asociación de Ex Detenidos Desaparecidos and H.I.J.O.S disapproved of the monument and its proponents. “If necessary we will use picks, hammers, and iron cutters to erase the names engraved on that monument, which in our eyes offends our dear

revolutionaries who opposed the economic policies… endorsed by those building the Parque de la Memoria.”

During the proceso, the guerilla groups took a hard line against the military’s economic reforms. The military dismantled mechanisms of income redistribution, cut welfare initiatives, lifted industry protections, and enacted the tablita, a pegged exchange rate program. In the end, these disastrous attempts to open up the economy concentrated power in a handful of moneyed financial corporations. Penned during the throes of Argentina’s latest crisis, Bonafini’s criticism reveals her frustration with the “capitalist restructuring” of the 1990s that precipitated the 2001 economic collapse.

Congressman Ricardo Busacca, a staunch conservative who served from 2000 to 2005, also attacked the memorialization project’s ideological foundation. Busacca saw no need to “convert the city into a large museum,” especially since the project siphoned away over 1.5 million pesos (4.7 million dollars) of the city’s budget. The politician painted the guerrillas as “terrorists” and condemned the national government’s narrow interpretation of history, believing that “to occupy each corner of public space with elements that only remember certain individuals from our history is to defend them.” In his conclusion, Busacca bolstered his argument by drawing on the rulings of past administrations, which had struck down commemorative initiatives, and whom he worked with in the 1990s during his tenure as a national representative and Minister of Defense. “Does it help us to constantly discredit the political decisions made by previous administrations? Can we keep reopening the painful pages of the recent past?” he questioned.

While Busacca may only be one legislator in a house of sixty, he was a popularly

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75 Romero, A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century, 221-230, 286.
76 Conversions are mine based on the rate published by the Banco Central de la República Argentina.
elected representative, indicating that a pocket of support, albeit small, must have existed for his politics and opinions in Buenos Aires.

Indeed, a small sector of the public voiced concerns over the “discriminatory and exclusive nature” of Law 46 since it only recognized the victims of state terrorism. Jorge Canel, a porteño, advocated for the inclusion of the “hundreds of victims of guerrilla terrorism” and suggested incorporating the victims of the 1994 bombing of the Argentine Jewish Mutual Association (AMIA) building as well. Canel asked, “What sense is there in discriminating when faced with sorrow and death?” Nearly ten years later, Arturo Larrabure garnered headlines in *La Nación* and *Clarín* for denouncing the Monument, which commemorates the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP) combatants that sequestered and tortured his father. On August 2, 1974 Colonel Argentino del Valle Larrabure was kidnapped from a military factory in Córdoba and found dead the following year. After 372 days in captivity, he had lost over 80 pounds, and his body appeared to have been tortured with an electric current. The Parque engraved the names of Larrabure’s four ERP jailers on the Monument’s walls alongside the other victims of state terrorism. “It’s an injustice that the terrorists have a monument, but this is what we are seeing,” said Larraburre in disbelief.

**Distilling the cacophony**

The few dissenting voices point to the ideological fault lines running through Argentine society. When asked to comment on society’s interpretation of recent history, Battiti argues

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79 The details of Larrabure’s imprisonment are gleaned from the letters he was allowed to write to his family as well as his diary. After the roadside discovery of his body, an autopsy revealed that he had lost over 80 pounds and that his body appeared to have been tortured with an electric current. His son identifies Amorosa Brunet de González, her daughters Ruth and Estrella, and Héctor González as his father’s torturers. See José Ignacio Sbrocco, “Denuncian un homenaje a los asesinos del coronel Larrabure,” *La Nación*, August 21, 2008 and Lewis, *Guerrillas and Generals*, 61-63.
while “a general consensus does not exist” in Argentine society and she “[doubts] that there will ever be,” she concedes that “politics can be plural.”\textsuperscript{80} The issues raised by the dissonant human rights organizations and politicians like Busacca underscore these political points of contention.

Although human rights organizations are bound together by a common cause, Hebe de Bonafini’s comments point to long-standing disagreements over memorialization projects. Since the Madres divided into two separate branches in 1986, the Asociación and Línea Fundadora have tended to disagree on how their children should be remembered.\textsuperscript{81} “We have always said no to museums, no to posthumous memorials, and no to flowers thrown in the river,” stated Bonafini.\textsuperscript{82} In general, the Asociación de Madres de Plaza de Mayo advocates for the collective 30,000 and supports the notion of life. In turn, they take a hard line against museums and tendencies to “individualize” the desaparecidos. While their dissent points to fissures within the human rights movement, their disapproval is the exception, not the rule since ten of Buenos Aires’ most prominent organizations form over half of the Comisión Pro Monumento.\textsuperscript{83} Their active involvement in the development of the Parque enabled them to be intimately involved in its construction and allowed them to realize their goals for the memorial.

Larrabure, Canel, and Busacca’s disagreements with the memorials speak to its particular presentation of the past. As Battiti mentioned earlier, the Parque eschews the antiquated Alfonsinista teoría de los dos demonios. Canel recalls that when he shared his opinion at a town

\textsuperscript{80} Florencia Battiti, interview by author, May 26, 2009, Buenos Aires, Argentina.
\textsuperscript{81} Founded in 1977, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo split into two factions in 1986 over irreconcilable ideological differences. With the return of democracy, the Madres were forced to reconsider their role in the human rights movement in light of the changing political landscape. For more on the Madres’ evolution after Alfonsín’s election see Ulises Gorini, \textit{La otra lucha: Historia de las Madres de Plaza de Mayo, Tomo II (1983-1986)}, (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2008).
\textsuperscript{83} Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, Madres de Plaza de Mayo-Línea Fundadora, Asociación Permanente por los Derechos Humanos (APDH), Buena Memoria, Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS), Familiares de Desaparecidos y Detenidos por Razones Políticas, Fundación Memoria Histórica y Social Argentina, Los Derechos del Hombre (LADH), Movimiento Ecuménico por los Derechos Humanos (MEDH), and Servicio Paz y Justicia (Serpaj).
hall meeting, he was blithely dismissed by a reporter as a “dissenting voice.” Furthermore, others in the audience “booed, interrupted, and yelled injurious insults” at Canel and his companions. The response to Canel’s critique hint that the memorials’ supporters are interested in supporting a specific narrative of the past and are willing to cast a stone at those who question it.

Busacca’s critical editorial speaks to how politicians have shifted from pretermitting human rights to actively championing them in the last ten to fifteen years. Kirchner and Ibarra’s endorsement starkly contrasts with President Menem’s attitude. Menem notoriously issued pardons to convicted military officers in the early 1990s, and he was conspicuously absent from all functions commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the coup. In contrast, both Kirchner and Ibarra advocated the advancement of justice, and their encouragement of the military trials challenge Alfonsín’s legacy of impunity laws.

Furthermore, Ibarra and the Kirchners’ actions and political discourse denote a personal investment in the memorialization process and convey a sense of camaraderie with the desaparecidos. During his youth, Kirchner was a member of a student militant group, and during the unveiling of the Monument, his wife Cristina acknowledged the disappearance of Carlos Alberto Labolita, her childhood friend from La Plata. Ibarra even urged the audience to “continue walking alongside the [desaparecidos]” in their search for truth and justice. Nestor Kirchner has seen the memorial, as well as the contemporary military trials, as an opportunity for national unity, declaring that “this does not divide Argentines. On the contrary, justice and memory unite.” Kirchner places a lot of faith in the unifying power of these initiatives, but the

85 Feitlowitz, The Lexicon of Terror, 186-187.
opinions of politicians like Busacca, who are emblematic vestiges of the past, suggest that reconciliation may be more difficult than the President would like to believe.

The debates concerning the Parque de la Memoria gives weight to Elizabeth Jelin’s conclusion that it is nearly impossible to find one interpretation of the past that will be accepted by all of society. However, by collectively rejecting the teoria de los dos demonios, the work of the Comisión Pro Monumento demonstrates that common values enable diverse social actors to emerge into a cohesive unit. Brick by brick, they have constructed a narrative that celebrates life instead of death. Yet as illustrated in the following chapter, these attempts to rewrite a site’s history can transform memorials into sites of political contestation.

III. The Schoolyard: The conversion of the ex-ESMA

Outside, with the rain that no longer touches me,
Outside, with the sun that no longer burns me,
With the tepid October air that no longer caresses my body
Outside, where my son is, who I can no longer hold in my arms
Outside, behind these walls is a world abandoned (…)

Do not lie to me,
Behind me, awaits the end.
Do not lie to me,
Behind me are the memories, the simple joy of living free.
Behind me is a world that no longer belongs to me…

I look at my feet. They are bound.
I look at my hands. They are bound.
I look at my body, kept within these walls,
I look at my soul, it is imprisoned.
Simply, I look at myself.

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I look at myself, and sometimes I don’t recognize myself… \(^9\)

Ana María Ponce wrote these lines during her stay at the Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA), the central node in the country’s extensive network of clandestine detention centers. Her schedule was bifurcated into periods of light and dark, for she was only relieved of her hood and handcuffs when summoned to falsify documents for her military captors. Known as “Loli,” the Montonera bequeathed her poems to a fellow prisoner before her death in 1978, and the friend passed them onto her son Andrés during democracy. \(^9\) Ana María was one of the ESMA’s invisible occupants, one of the 5,000 desaparecidos who passed through its doors over the course of the six year dictatorship. \(^9\)

The ESMA’s dark history established the estate as the locus for debates on the recuperation of spaces tainted by military violence. \(^9\) In 1998, President Carlos Menem slated the complex for demolition but public outcry embroiled the situation in legal disputes. Six years later, President Néstor Kirchner and Mayor Aníbal Ibarra proposed converting the former clandestine center in a memory museum. In August 2004, the Buenos Aires legislature approved Law 1412, which formalized the creation of the “Espacio para la Memoria y para la Promoción y Defensa de los Derechos Humanos” (A space for memory and for the promotion and defense of

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\(^9\) Ana María Ponce, “De repente, la tristeza,” Recited in ESMA, museo de la memoria, Videorecording, directed by Romain Lejtman (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Página 12, 2004).
\(^9\) The ESMA served as the headquarters for Task Force 3.3/2, a logistics operation dedicated to eliminating the members of the ERP and Montoneros. See Memoria, 365 Centros Clandestinos de detención en el país; El país es un gran centro clandestino de detención, 1; Human Rights in Argentina, III; Princeton University Library; and CONADEP, “Navy Mechanics School, Task Force 3.3.2” in Nunca Más: Informe de la Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (Buenos Aires: Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires, 1984).
\(^9\) In 1993, the Instituto Edwards Shields began to host high school gym classes on fields where the military had cremated the bodies of desaparecidos. Although the high school’s policy dismayed many parents, who felt it was inappropriate, the school stood by their decision. Two years later, on the heels of Scilingo’s confession, the Ministry of Education and Sports hosted a citywide swim meet at the ESMA; in protest, over 100 swimmers boycotted the meet. For more on controversial uses of the ESMA, see Feitlowitz, The Lexicon of Terror, 172-174.
human rights). In both instances, the plans were criticized by human rights organizations, naval students, and politicians. Taking into consideration that Jelin defines memory as a “space of political contestation,” I argue that the discourse surrounding President Menem and President Kirchner’s diametrically opposed plans transformed the ESMA into a sparring ground for conflicting memories and interpretations of the past.

**Two proposals, two strains of histories**

Near the end of his decade-long administration, President Carlos Menem in January, 1998, issued Decree 8.98, cementing his reputation as a proponent of controversial legislation. The presidential decree proposed demolishing the ESMA in order to erect a public monument to “national unity” in the recovered green space. In response, human rights organizations and legislators expressed outrage, resentment, and disbelief. “It’s an absurdity,” said Estela Carlotto, the President of the Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo, of the unilateral decision. “Menem is detestable,” remarked Hebe de Bonafini, the President of the Asociación de Madres de Plaza de Mayo, who interpreted the decree as an attempt to “erase our memory.” Legislator Alfredo Bravo echoed her sentiment: “Menem thinks that a decree can wipe away our memory and the popular demand for truth and justice.” Juan Pablo Cafiero, a local representative, dismissed the decree as “completely erroneous” since it was more of a “provocation” than a real attempt at national unity. Meanwhile, legislator Alicia Pierini opined that it was “an excellent idea [for the city to] reclaim the estate” but because of its symbolism, the ESMA should be preserved.

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Scores of potentially displaced professors also vehemently opposed the demolition of the naval academy.\textsuperscript{100} The rankling resentment and the general outcry rendered Menem’s proposed “national unity” farcical.

What ensued was a ten-month period of judicial contest between the relatives of desaparecidos, the administration, and the military. Several families placed an appeal to the judicial service to intervene, and Judge Osvaldo Guglielmino of the Federal Administration ordered the National Executive Power to suspend the presidential decree. He explained that demolishing the building “may erase proof that would allow uncovering the fate of thousands of the disappeared during the military dictatorship.”\textsuperscript{101} Menem’s administration appealed the decision, but Judge Ernesto Marinelli of the Chamber of the Litigious Administration upheld the original ruling and struck down the decree as unconstitutional. Since the military violated the terms of their 1924 contract by utilizing the building for non-educational purposes, the City of Buenos Aires could reclaim jurisdiction. Furthermore, the complex was part of “the country’s cultural heritage” and its preservation “may protect pieces of evidence” that could aid the investigation of the Brunschtein Bonaparte family’s disappearance.\textsuperscript{102} The family’s surviving matriarch, Laura Beatriz Bonaparte, had asked the Supreme Court to invalidate Menem’s decree on behalf of her family’s disappearance, which garnered international attention in the late 1970s.\textsuperscript{103} The city legislature joined the fray two years later to finalize the property transfer.\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{102} Missing members of the Bonaparte Brunschtein family include: Ricardo Omar Lois, Santiago Brunschtein, Aída Leonora Brunschtein de Saidon, Irene Brunschtein de Guinzberg, Víctor Brunschtein, Adrián Saidon, Mario Guinzberg and Jacinta Levi. See La Nación, “Prohíben demoler la ESMA,” October 17, 1998.
\textsuperscript{104} Memoria Abierta, Recorrido por los sitios de la Memoria del Terrorismo de Estado, “Army School of Mechanics (ESMA), 18; 2001; Human Rights in Argentina, III; Princeton University Library.
Fresh off the heels of his 2003 election, President Néstor Kirchner reprised the issue of the ESMA and offered a way to reclaim the estate for society. As stipulated in the agreement between the national state and the Buenos Aires legislature, the ESMA would be converted into an “Espacio para la Memoria y para la Promoción y Defensa de los Derechos Humanos” (A space for memory and for the promotion and defense of human rights). Kirchner challenged teoría de los dos demonios, which divides the blame between the guerillas and the military. The proposal takes a clear stand against state terrorism and indicts the “usurped” State for implementing a “systematic plan of torture and physical elimination of citizens.” However, the recuperation process was challenged by pockets of resistance.

Although those who felt excluded from the memorial constituted a clear minority, their vocal criticisms coalesced around the partiality coloring Kirchner’s proposal. A juror who served on the 1971 and 1973 trials of the guerillas said that unlike Kirchner, he “has not lost his memory,” and emphasized that there are other memories floating in Argentine society that are as just as valid. Similarly, a lieutenant commander expressed concern that if the memory museum did not include the victims of guerilla violence, it would no longer be a “museum of memory but of dismemory.” In the same vein, a newspaper columnist worried that it would be a “impose a hemiplegic memory that solely reflects a political hegemony” of the left. A tucumano suggested dedicating the Museum to María Cristina Viola, a three-year old victim of guerilla violence and an “emblem” of the forgotten “innocents” whose assassins “still walk freely on the streets.”

105 National State and Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, President Néstor Kirchner and Mayor Aníbal Ibarra, Acuerdo entre el Estado Nacional y la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires sobre la creación del espacio para la memoria y para la promoción y defensa de los derechos humanos, March 24, 2004.
deserves a memory that includes “all the protagonists and victims of that sad phase that we suffered.” Meanwhile, a porteño doubted the project’s ability to initiate reconciliation and likened its creation to sticking “a finger in a wound that refuses to heal.”

The economic repercussions of the naval academy’s impending transfer to the Puerto Belgrano Naval Base threatened the future of its employees and students. A naval engineer lambasted the President for “throwing all of this by the wayside” and capriciously moving forward with the memory museum. Not knowing where their next paycheck would come from, or where they would study, was akin to “true psychological torture.” Given the transfer’s 75,000 peso price tag (214,875 USD), another wondered if “those monies, which are generated from the taxes we have paid, and do not belong to [Kirchner]” would better be suited elsewhere. Despite the volume of letters to the editor, these diatribes only accounted for 5% of the polled public.

While its detractors were preoccupied with project’s ramifications for the present, its supporters issued forward-looking statements that lauded the site’s potential to educate future generations. A great-grandchild of Holocaust victims praised the memorial’s pedagogical potential, asserting that to “educate is to unite the parts, into one sentiment, one history and a common future.” Ricardo Roa commended the proposal for ensuring “that no one forgets what happened.” He dismissed the brewing partisan politics, and argued that “History does adapt to

110 In 2007, Enzo Pagani was elected to the Legislature of the City of Buenos Aires as part of the PRO political block. Enzo Pagani, “Museo de la memoria,” Clarín, August 28, 2004.
113 Conversions are mine based on the exchange rate provided by the Banco Central de la República de Argentina. The quote comes from Juan Manuel Cera, “Cartas del lector: La ESMA,” La Nación, September 20, 2004.
114 Interestingly, the responses revealed a clear generational schism. Only 1.2% of the pool aged 18-29 expressed discontent with the museum, compared to 23.7% of the generation who had experienced the dirty war firsthand (aged 50-69). The survey was conducted by OPSM Consultants, and results were drawn from a pool of 1100 individuals. The margin of error was 2.95% and the level of confidence was 95%. See La Nación, “Apoyo popular al proyecto para la ESMA,” March 29, 2004.
the organizational diagrams of political geometry. The events are not from the left, the middle or the right. Memory belongs to all of us.”\textsuperscript{116} A young man defended the memory museum, for even though acts of violence were committed by both sides, saying that it should emphasize the abuses committed by the State, which “had the law on its side in order to act correctly.”\textsuperscript{117} Over 62.8\% of the polled participants responded favorably to Kirchner’s plan.\textsuperscript{118}

Menem and Kirchner’s proposals exemplify how the ESMA was transformed into an ideological battleground on which different interpretations of the past struggle to be heard. The two policies were indicative of their proponent’s attitude towards human rights. Like Menem’s presidential pardons, which attempt to wipe the slate clean, his desire to demolish the ESMA, a tangible symbol of state repression, can be read as an attempt to erase the past. Similarly, Kirchner’s preservation plan accorded with the “kirchnerista formula,” which supports the investigation of the social and political forces that fueled the \textit{proceso}.\textsuperscript{119} Although Kirchner’s proposal ultimately prevailed, the road to its fruition was complicated by fissures, large and small, within the human rights movement and the legislature.

\textbf{Attempts to curate the past}

Unlike in the case of the Parque de la Memoria, the human rights organizations could not agree on matters of the museum’s form, content, and design. The \textit{Acuerdo} detailed little more than that the space would promote the “recuperation, protection, and transmission” of the memory and history of state terrorism. The museum’s actual form would be determined by a bipartisan commission composed of the national state, local legislature, human rights NGOs,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[118] The survey was conducted by OPSM Consultants, and results were drawn from a pool of 1100 individuals. The margin of error was 2.95\% and the level of confidence was 95\%. See \textit{La Nación}, “Apoyo popular al proyecto para la ESMA,” March 29, 2004.
\end{footnotes}
relatives of the *desaparecidos*, and other social civil organizations.\(^{120}\) Over the course of the next few months, Kirchner received over ten different proposals from human rights organizations.\(^ {121}\)

At a conference hosted by Memoria Abierta in 2000, the only point of consensus amongst activists was that the past’s complex intricacies necessitated a “multi-faceted interdisciplinary” museum. Elizabeth Jelin argued that the site should embody democratic values. Whilst totalitarianism presented a sole viewpoint of the past, democracy embraced pluralism, and thus memory too should also be plural. Meanwhile, Hilda Sabato argued for the establishment of a basic consensus of the past, no matter how broad.\(^ {122}\) Although the conference stirred debates on memory, these issues remained unresolved.

Following Kirchner’s *Acuerdo* in 2004, a conglomerate of eight human rights organizations that would later formalize into Memoria Abierta celebrated the president’s initiatives as an unprecedented alignment between their interests and the executive’s.\(^ {123}\) They proposed an interdisciplinary museum that “tells a story of life, not of death.”\(^ {124}\) Patricia Tappatá de Valdez, president of Memoria Abierta, believed that the museum’s educational possibilities could enlighten future generation. All areas affiliated with the clandestine operations would be preserved as historical sites, which have an “unrivaled power of transmission” especially if they become pedagogical.\(^ {125}\) In addition to the educational spaces, they proposed dedicating other

\(^{120}\) National State and Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, President Néstor Kirchner and Mayor Aníbal Ibarra, *Acuerdo entre el Estado Nacional y la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires sobre la creación del espacio para la memoria y para la promoción y defensa de los derechos humanos*, March 24, 2004.

\(^{121}\) For a more in-depth description of the various proposals submitted to President Nestor Kirchner by human rights organizations see Marcelo Brodsky, “Anexo documental,” in *Memoria en construcción*, 212-225.

\(^{122}\) *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, Primera jornadas de debate interdisciplinario. Organización institucional y contenidos del futuro museo de la memoria*; 1, 18, 53; 2000; *Human Rights in Argentina, III; Princeton University Library.*


buildings to general human rights and art galleries. ¹²⁶ Ultimately, they supported Kirchner’s motion to preserve the ESMA since the “the mere materiality of these buildings impede the erasure that society attempted to impose with the passage of time.”¹²⁷

Others waffled over the decision to convert the estate into a museum. Although Hebe de Bonafini, the outspoken president of the Asociación de Madres de Plaza de Mayo, supported the navy’s withdrawal, she maintained her stance against the creation of a memory museum. For her, the museum conveys that the history of the desaparecidos has come to an end, even though “there is no final ending [since] history continues.” Furthermore, Bonafini was upset by the museum’s decision to not display the desaparecidos’ weapons and acknowledge their children’s wish for an armed revolution. “If the museum won’t show what the organizations were like, the battles they fought, and the acts they committed, it doesn’t work.”¹²⁸ She preferred the creation of a cultural center, which celebrates life rather than dwelling on the macabre past. “The white pañuelo (kerchief) identifies with life. Death belongs to the executioner, not to us.”¹²⁹ Meanwhile, the Asociación de Ex Detenidos-desaparecidos, which was later joined by LADH, argued that the ESMA complex should exclusively focus on its history as a clandestine center and should be free of any “state” or “private” institution. To this end, they stressed the “preservation” and/or “reconstruction” of the former clandestine detention center.¹³⁰

Ultimately, these points of dissonance delayed the memorial’s realization. Although the city legislature entrusted the estate to the city in 2004, the site was not fully recuperated until

¹³⁰ Brodsky, “Esma y Museo” in Memoria en construcción, 216.
2007, clarified Nora Hochbaum. The conversion took longer than expected because one had to take into consideration the “value of the buildings” and they needed time to “come to an agreement” over what was to be done to the complex.\footnote{Nora Hochbaum (curator, Haroldo Conti Centro Cultural de la Memoria, “Espacio para la memoria,” interview by author, May 4, 2009, Buenos Aires, Argentina.}

**An uneasy agreement**

As the unveiling of the Acuerdo approached, partisan conflict devolved into personal political attacks as sectarianism reared its ugly head. In particular, human rights organizations prickled at the prospect of Justicialista governors attending the event (the Justicialista Party was formerly headed by Menem, who notoriously granted presidential pardons to convicted military officers).\footnote{Some of the Justicialista governors include Jorge Busti (Entre Ríos), Eduardo Fellner (Jujuy), José Manuel de la Sota (Córdoba), Jorge Obeid (Santa Fe). See *La Nación*, “No habrá invitaciones oficiales para el acto en la ESMA,” March 23, 2004.} Hebe de Bonafini especially begrudged the governors for their voting history. In spite of the fact that not all had voted for *Punto Final* and *Obedencia Debida*, and one of them was a former detenido-desaparecido, Bonafini questioned their commitment to human rights. Saying that they “unbearably reeked of Menem,” and citing allegations of “torture and rape in the jails and police stations,” Hebe threatened to boycott the ceremony altogether.\footnote{Paola Juárez, “Tensión en el PJ por el acto en la ESMA,” *La Nación*, March 23, 2004.} Five of the governors struck back with “Nunca Más,” a manifesto against “ideological discrimination” and arguing that human rights could not be exclusively claimed by one party or another. Facing the wrath of two politically powerful entities, Kirchner declared the event public instead of issuing invitations.\footnote{Diego Schurman, “‘¡Es discriminación ideológica,’” *Página 12*, March 24, 2004; and *La Nación*, “No habrá invitaciones oficiales para el acto en la ESMA,” March 23, 2004.}

While Kirchner managed to narrowly avoid a political minefield, he soon committed the ceremony’s most egregious misstep. On the morning of March 24\textsuperscript{th}, he announced:
“As President, I apologize on behalf of the State for being silent during these 20 years of democracy. To be clear, it is not anger or hate that guides us: it is justice and combating impunity. Those that committed these dark and macabre acts have only one name: murderers repudiated by an entire village.”

The speech alienated political moderates in attendance, particularly the ARI members who had lobbied Congress to repeal the impunity laws. Politicians accused him of creating a political spectacle and abusing his presidential privileges. A macrista said that “It is not the function of the Executive Power to apologize, but rather, to reconstruct society on the foundation of consensus. It is the judges, not the President, who are in charge of carrying out Justice.” Soon after, De la Sota, a Justicialista, supported the teoría de los dos demonios and positioned himself in opposition to Kirchner. Meanwhile, Jorge Rivas of the Partido Socialista said that while the event was of great importance, they needed to “work hard to undo the knots of impunity that still remain.”

Rallying to Kirchner’s defense was ARI legislator Eduardo Macaluse who thought that the initiatives were “positive” and that efforts to know the truth about the past should be supported in order to have a more “just and healthy” society. In light of the tensions brewing in the Justicialista Party, Kirchner conceded that the inauguration of the space at the ESMA, and the response to his remarks, marked the end of his “supposed honeymoon with society.”

Four months later in August, to the delight of the families of desaparecidos and to the disappointment of the naval academy students and professors, the legislature endorsed the agreement 38 to 10. Many of the same concerns flared again, with opinions falling along

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135 ESMA, museo de la memoria, Videorecording, directed by Román Lejtman (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Página 12, 2004).
139 Eduardo van der Kooy, “Kirchner, frente al nuevo tiempo,” Clarín, April 11, 2004.
political fault lines. Gabriela Michetti, who voted for the legislation, acknowledged the delicacy of the situation but believed it was “imperative” for the grounds to commemorate what happened there, and that human rights organizations must have a “living” and “palpable” presence on the estate. While the kirchneristas viewed the step as “sending a clear signal” about “nunca más,” the macristas were concerned with the displacement of the naval students, whose transfer to the Polo Educativo would cost approximately 100 million pesos (310,500,000 USD). The day concluded with the decidedly partisan crowd singing the National Hymn.

Figure 4: President Néstor Kirchner, President-elect Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Estela de Carlotto, Jorge Telerman, Daniel Scoli and Hebe de Bonafini look on at the inauguration of the ex-ESMA. Photo courtesy of La Nación, “Kirchner oficializó el traspaso de la ESMA,” November 20, 2007, http://www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=964039.

The long and winding road to the opening of the ex-ESMA finally came to a conclusion in November 2007 with the inauguration of the “Espacio para la memoria,” which Kirchner dedicated to the “anonymous heroes” that lost their lives at the ESMA. Designed by a

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144 La Nación, “La ESMA pasó a manos de la Ciudad,” August 6, 2004. Conversions are based on the August 2004 exchange rate provided by the Banco Central de la República de Argentina.
bipartisan committee composed of representatives from the national and municipal government, the “Espacio para memoria” incorporated suggestions from the various proposals. Cleared of all furniture and belongings, the stark, beige detention rooms only feature simple plaques that describe the nature of the activity that occurred in the building. Occasionally, the posters feature a testimonial by one of the surviving *detenidos*, describing their stay at the ESMA. The overseeing officials decided to use the ESMA’s central building to explain the context of the conflict, and houses the Archivo de la Memoria de la Secretaria de Derechos Humanos de la Nación.\textsuperscript{146} For the most part, the Espacio borrowed heavily from the Memoria Abierta proposal, with the conversion of the officer’s club with informative posters; the conversion of the Naval School building into the Casa de la Identidad; the installation of the Archivo de la Memoria; the creation of the Centro Cultural de la Memoria Haroldo Conti; and a building of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo-Línea Fundadora and H.I.J.O.S.\textsuperscript{147}

\textbf{Figure 5, 6:} Nestled between Avenida General Paz and the River Plate stadium, the former ESMA occupies a 17-hectare complex in the Buenos Aires neighborhood of Núñez. *Desaparecidos* were kept captive in its officer’s club during the proceso, and the Kirchner administration has now converted this space into a memorial site. Map courtesy of *La Nación*. Photo courtesy of *La Nación*, “Un museo costoso que aún no abrió sus puertas,” July 22, 2007, http://www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=927929.

\textsuperscript{146} Victoria Ginzburg and Werner Pertot, “Para que la memoria tenga futuro,” *Página 12*, June 10, 2007.

\textsuperscript{147} *La Nación*, “Kirchner oficializó el traspaso de la ESMA,” November 20, 2007.
In spite of the estate’s macabre history, Nora Hochbaum argues that the ex-ESMA is a “space for life” that advances the human rights rally cry of “nunca más,” (never again). More than simply paying reverence to the victims of state terrorism, she hopes that it will become a space where one can reflect on human rights in general. Lastly, the ex-ESMA acknowledges the danger of “covering something up without clarifying what happened,” by encouraging visitors to “look forward without forgetting” the past.\textsuperscript{148}

\textbf{A new sphere of contestation}

The 2004 nullification of Alfonsín’s twin impunity laws, \textit{Punto Final} and \textit{Obedencia Debida}, paved the way for the ex-ESMA to become the site of judicial contestation. Moments after her husband’s inauguration of the “Espacio para la memoria,” President-elect Cristina Kirchner took the opportunity to stress Argentina’s commitment to the “political project of memory, truth, and justice.” It was imperative to quicken the pace of the recently resumed military trials. “A country without justice is unbalanced,” and the “foundation of a democratic construction is equality before the law” she said.\textsuperscript{149}

Recalling Judge Guglielmino’s dismissal of Menem’s demolition decree, the preservation of the ESMA hinged on its potential to contain “proof that would allow uncovering the fate of thousands of the disappeared during the military dictatorship.”\textsuperscript{150} At the time of his ruling in 1998, \textit{Punto Final} and \textit{Obedencia Debida} were still in place, freezing all military trials. Thus, the only headway that could be made in the search for truth and justice was to investigate the disappearances of family members, as Laura de Bonaparte had attempted. Yet in seven years’

\textsuperscript{148} Human rights advocates adopted the phrase as a rally cry after the publication of CONADEP’s investigation, which was titled “Nunca Más.” See Hochbaum, interview.

\textsuperscript{149} Mariana Verón, “Gesto de Cristina Kirchner en la ESMA,” \textit{La Nación}, November 21, 2007.

\textsuperscript{150} \textit{La Nación}, “ESMA: la Justicia impide la demolición,” January 24, 1998.
time, circumstances had dramatically changed, and the nullification of these two controversial laws allowed for the halted military trials to resume.\textsuperscript{151}

The groundbreaking Trial of the ESMA, in which 17 officers were brought to trial in connection the disappearance of 86 \textit{desaparecidos}, commenced in December of 2009. With Judges Daniel Obligado, Ricardo Farías and Oscar Hergott presiding over the Tribunal Oral Federal 5 (TOF5), these individuals will stand trial over the course of the next year. Amongst them are the Alfredo “Blonde Angel” Astiz, who notoriously infiltrated the Madres in the 1980s; Captains Antonio Pernías and Juan Carlos Rolón, whose stalled promotions prompted Scilingo’s confession; and Captain Jorge Acosta, the leader of Task Force 3.3.2.\textsuperscript{152} As the trial continues, the next few months will be telling of the ex-ESMA’s capacity to contribute to these proceedings. Once shrouded in violence and secrecy, the ESMA’s recuperation creates the possibility for justice. The following chapter examines a memorial that has successfully issued the justice that the military denied its prisoners.

\textsuperscript{151} Verbitsky, \textit{Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior}, 184-185.

\textsuperscript{152} \textit{Página 12}, “Comenzó el juicio a la patota de la ESMA,” December 11, 2009.
IV. Unearthing the past: La Casa de la Memoria y la Vida

“The same door through which I left, and the same door through which many were dragged to their death, opens today as a space for memory…”

—Pilar Calveiro, an ex-detena-desaparecida at the Mansión Seré

Located meters away from the ashes of the Mansión Seré, a former clandestine detention center, the Casa de la Memoria y la Vida is an attempt on behalf of the neighborhood of Morón to bring to light the estate’s dark history. From 1977 to 1978, the Argentine Air Force used the residence as a clandestine detention center, one of eight in the suburban Castelar community in northwest Buenos Aires. Known as “Atila” or “La Mansión,” the site is a prime example of how the Argentine military used CCDTyE to produce “maximum local terror.” Following the jailbreak of four prisoners, the Air Force committed arson in a desperate attempt to erase all

154 Under the military junta, the army divided the country into a grid-like system, assigning the three branches of the military jurisdiction over different areas. Under the purview of the Argentine Air Force, Mansión Seré corresponded to Zone 1, Subzone 60, Area 160. See Emiliano Ruy Rodríguez (Coordinator, Department of Investigation and Document Production, La Casa de la Memoria y la Vida), interview with author, Buenos Aires, Argentina, May 14, 2009; and El Diario de Morón, “Mansión Seré: declaran funcionarios municipales,” September 2008.
155 Feitlowitz, A Lexicon of Terror, 166.
traces of illicit activity. As the estate has changed hands over the years, nearly all of its owners have eschewed its macabre past for a more practical, sterile one. In 2000, Mayor Martín Sabbatella broke with precedent. Motivated by the “search for truth and justice,” Sabbatella founded the Casa on July 1st to “promote the collective memory of the recent past and to create a space of participation and dialogue related to human rights” in Morón.\footnote{In 1985, the city razed to the ground the scorched remains of the Mansión in order to make room for the Gorki Grana sports complex. A few years later, community leader Juan Carlos Rousselot constructed a meeting house just a few meters away from the clandestine ruins, now a distant memory in the community’s mind. The Mansión’s history only resurfaced in 2000 when Mayor Martín Sabbatella recognized the need to “create a permanent space to promote collective memory” that the neighboring structure was converted into the Casa de la Memoria y la Vida and came to have its present use. See Dirección de Derechos Humanos, \textit{Mansión Seré}, (Buenos Aires: Municipality of Morón, [2009?]); property of author.}

In this chapter, I argue that through the Casa de la Memoria y la Vida’s programming, the Casa’s employees make the community’s past an integral part of the neighborhood’s present. The detention center usurped communal space for torture, and the neighborhood of Morón suffered a loss of 250 \textit{desaparecidos} during the military junta, both rendering deep wounds in the community.\footnote{\textit{El Diario de Morón}, “Mansión Seré: declaran funcionarios municipales,” September 2008.} Coordinated by Hermann von Schmeling, the education division employs cultural activities and human rights workshops in order to raise awareness about the abuses of the past, and to encourage reflection about the \textit{proceso}. Under the coordination of Emiliano Ruy Rodríguez, the Investigation and Documentary Production department leads Proyecto RIBA and Proyecto Mansión Seré in order to uncover the true nature of the Air Forces’ activity on the site. The thoroughness of the archaeological team led by Antonela di Vruno has allowed them to testify to the courts as part of the military trials, creating a legal precedent. Recognizing that memory is “subjective process…socially constructed through dialogue and interaction,” the Casa’s employees consciously try to “include the most amount of voices possible” in its work.\footnote{Elizabeth Jelin argues that memory, “as an interrogation of the past, is a subjective process; it is always active and is socially constructed through dialogue and interaction.” See Jelin, “Memorias en Conflicto,” \textit{Puentes} (August 2000): 8; and Rodríguez, interview with author, May 14, 2009.}
In this manner, the Casa’s programming functions as a portal to the past while its contribution to military trials actively shape the course of the present.

**A center of interpretation**

Since memory is subjective, the Casa’s employees stress the necessary plurality of memory. For this reason, the Casa’s administration tries to:

“include the most amount of voices possible (…) We speak of memories and not of a singular memory because we know that each place has different perspectives. The neighbor’s viewpoint is not the same as that of the detained, or the youth who has not lived through these events themselves (…) They all provide various ways in which to approach the same object or event.”

In contrast to the ex-ESMA, the Casa’s employees resist calling the Casa a memory museum, preferring to call it a “center of interpretation.” By drawing upon history, art, and cultural activities, the Casa’s employees enable its visitors to approach the same topic from different viewpoints and encourage them to reflect on the past.

For Hermann von Schmeling, the Casa facilitates an exchange of information between those who lived through the *proceso* and the youth of today. Von Schmeling’s father and 16-year-old sister Sonia were taken by the junta within two months of one another. Thus, for him, recreating the past means sharing his experience with others, since those who experience events firsthand have an obligation to “enrich others’ understanding” of the past. In this manner, personal testimonies supplement the information panels in the José Luis D’Andrea Mohr salon, which detail the history of the *proceso*. To have the opportunity to hear all these different angles of the past enables them to have “the liberation of thought,” and this freedom lessens the

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159 Rodríguez, interview, May 14, 2009.
160 Rodríguez, interview, May 14, 2009.
possibility of being “indoctrinated.” Overall, the Casa provides an environment in which visitors can soak in all the data, and then come to their own conclusion about the events of the past in order to generate “the most objective memory possible.”

Art also provides an alternative way to access the past since the “medium facilitates the understanding of certain complexities” of history. In addition to the upstairs gallery, which features rotating exhibits themed around human rights, the Casa also hosts film screenings and boasts two art installations: Jorge Martínez’s “Huellas de Fuego” memorial, and a commemorative sculpture garden in the Casa’s backyard. Both installations represent a collaboration between local artists, the community, and the Casa de la Memoria y la Vida, which also functions as the headquarters for Morón’s Department of Human Rights.

*Figures 7, 8: “Huellas de Fuego” (Footprints of fire) by Jorge Martínez was inaugurated in 2003 on the twenty-seventh anniversary of the military coup. Photos by author.*

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161 Hermann von Schmeling, (Coordinator, Art exhibits and cultural events, La Casa de la Memoria y la Vida), interview by author, May 14, 2009, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

162 Hermann von Schmeling, (Coordinator, Art exhibits and cultural events, La Casa de la Memoria y la Vida), interview by author, May 14, 2009, Buenos Aires, Argentina.
“Huellas de Fuego” successfully integrates contributions from different sectors of society and echoes the way in which the local community and government have come together to advance the search for truth and justice. In order to carry out this project, Martínez went from house to house in the neighborhood of Morón, casting plaster molds of the feet of twenty mothers and fathers who had lost their children to state terrorism. The forty bas-relief plaques are labeled with the name of the associated desaparecido and the footprints form a winding path that leads to the door of the Casa de la Memoria y la Vida. During the ceremony, the cast footprints were filled with alcohol and lit aflame by each parent as they acknowledged their missing child. The installation bears witness to the community’s pain and draws attention to the other victims of state terrorism: the fragmented nuclear family, the absent branches of the family tree, the interrupted lineages.  

As a hub of cultural activities and educational opportunities, the Casa’s employees utilize human rights and memory to bring together members of the community. On the last anniversary of the military coup, the Casa’s commemorative events attracted over 35,000 locals.  

It is clearly a place of public interest, and its tours are consistently featured in the “Cultural agenda” of local newspapers.  

The Casa’s efforts demonstrate that “collective memory is a tool that can be used to build a more prosperous future without erasing the past.”

“We are indivisible from the state; we are the state.”

By creating linkages between local politics and human rights, the Casa’s administration grants these issues of memory primacy in the community. In July 2000, Mayor Martín Sabbatella

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163 Von Schmeling, interview by author.
164 El Diario de Morón, “35.000 personas en las actividades por el 33º aniversario del golpe,” March 2009.
ushered in the Casa de la Memoria y la Vida, the first space in Latin America “dedicated to recuperating and exercising collective memory.”\textsuperscript{167} Given their importance, he wanted to take it a step further and “to fight until discrimination and violence are also ‘nunca más.’”\textsuperscript{168} For him, the space was dedicated to all those who throughout the “decades warned and were militant against the economic goals of that dictatorship, to those who showed the ultimate objectives advanced by violence, the great inequality, social exclusion, and concentrations of wealth that gave rise to the crimes of the State in the hands of the military.”\textsuperscript{169} In April 2005, the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires officially ceded the property to the Municipality of Morón, allowing the community to legally recover the land it had already symbolically reclaimed.\textsuperscript{170}

Furthermore, the space questions the state’s obligations to its people and generates political discussion. By showing instances in which life was not respected, and the lives of the people that passed away, the Casa posits that “life, identity, and respect for ideas” should form the “fundamental foundation of society.” The Casa encourages visitors to forge a connection to the past, for as di Vruno explains, “These things happened to you because they happened to your society, which you are a part of.” Thus, the Casa’s administration hopes that visitors’ experiences at the site will reshape their notions of citizenship as well as their “discussion, perception, and idea” of the future.\textsuperscript{171}

By functioning as the headquarters for the Human Rights Department of Morón, the Casa physically conflates local politics with human rights. Although the Casa’s activities resemble much more the activities of a human rights organization or a NGO, they are in fact a division of the state, which funds their salaries. “We are indivisible from the state; we are the state,” said

\textsuperscript{167} \textit{El Diario de Morón}, “El municipio será testigo en la causa por la Mansión Seré,” August 2008.
\textsuperscript{169} \textit{El Diario de Morón}, “35.000 personas en las actividades por el 33º aniversario del golpe,” March 2009.
\textsuperscript{170} \textit{Clarín}, “Del dicho al hecho,” April 26, 2005.
\textsuperscript{171} Antonela di Vruno, interview by author, May 14, 2009, Buenos Aires, Argentina.
Rodríguez. However, their position is unique in that they “position themselves in opposition,” to the former state; they are effectively investigating “what another state in different time period tried to cover up.” In this manner, the state is reclaiming its role as a protector of its community by making human rights an integral part of its agenda.

**Trial by fire**

Most recently, the Proyecto Seré’s attempts to unearth information about the former clandestine detention center have enabled the Casa’s administration to make a tangible contribution to the search for justice. Under this umbrella of investigation, the archaeological division is in charge of excavating, recovering, and preserving the remains of the burnt-over Mansión Seré. Its parallel branch, the community division, conducts neighborhood intakes, culling information from surrounding neighbors, who relay their memories of the camp. These oral histories, in conjunction with the archaeological evidence, have allowed the team to reconstruct the “whole environment” of the clandestine detention center, helping them gain a sense of what happened “inside and out.”

What initially began as an attempt to uncover the truth has become a way to contribute to justice. On August 21, 2008, octogenarians Hipólito Mariani and César Comes were brought to trial on torture charges they had committed during the *proceso* at the Mansión Seré. Over twenty years after the retired military officers’ original cases had been closed off by *Punto Final*. With Judge Guillermo Andrés Gordo presiding over the tribunal Federal 5 of Capital Federal, the case resumed where it had left off, and preceded over the course of the next two months.

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172 Rodríguez, interview, May 14, 2009.
173 Di Vruno, interview.
Figures 8, 9: The Casa de la Memoria y la Vida’s archaeological team turned the burnt-over site of the Mansión Seré into an excavation site. The evidence they collected was submitted to the court in during the trials of Comes and Mariani. Photos courtesy of Dirección de Derechos Humanos, Dirección de Derechos Humanos, (Buenos Aires: Municipality of Morón, [2009?]); property of author and Dirección de Derechos Humanos, Proyecto Mansión Seré, (Buenos Aires: Municipality of Morón, [2009?]); property of author.

On September 18, 2009, Antonela Di Vruno, the director of Morón Human Rights and
Gustavo Moreno, the director of the Area de Investigaciones, took the stand to supplement the testimony provided by ex detenidos. Di Vruno specifically contributed the archaeological evidence, which spoke to the original construction and layout of the Mansión Seré, corroborating evidence presented by those detained there. This, in conjunction with photographs, the croquis—drawings made by the detained in captivity—and accounts from the neighbors, helped to build a case against the former officers.\footnote{Di Vruno, interview.}

All these details, from the “whether the room faced north, the color of the wall, the make of the doorframe,” “are like layers of information that start coming together” and “reinforce the possibility that detainees were kept there.” Her “exhaustive description,” which followed a “scientific methodology” granted her contributions credence, making it nearly impossible to dispute. Gustavo Moren’s testimony complemented di Vruno’s testimony and he spoke of the work they do with the community, gathering oral histories from those that lived in the neighborhood from 1977 to 1978. In this way, the two testimonies contribute the “view from the
inside and outside during the same historical moment.” The importance of their testimony was not lost on Di Vruno; “it was the first time that a municipality and investigative team were used and accepted as testimony in a judicial trial” for the crimes against humanity during the dictatorship. The trial came to a close in November of 2008, with Mariani and Comes each receiving a 25-year sentence.

On the whole, the sum of the Casa’s efforts to recuperate the former Mansión Seré has yielded tangible contributions to the ideas of memory, truth, and justice. By actively involving the community, and making human rights an integral part of local politics, the Casa has managed to transform a site of terror into one that is available to the neighborhood of Morón.
In the final pages of *Le temps retrouvé*, Marcel Proust comments:

“An act of memory is above all this: a personal or collective adventure that consists of going about discovering one’s self thanks to retrospection. A chancy voyage, and a dangerous one! Because what the past holds for men [and women] is undeniably more uncertain than what it reserves for the future.”

Although Proust was referring to memory, this assessment could also be applied to Argentina’s newly created memorials, which are a tangible manifestation of a collective memory. As a tool for reflection, the memorials prompt their visitors to explore and question their feelings and presumptions about their country’s recent history. By reclaiming spaces tainted by military violence, these memorials make human rights a permanent and integral part of their country’s landscape and infrastructure while the debates surrounding their creation reintroduce the past into public discourse.

Yet the controversies surrounding the memorials’ creation point to the fissures in Argentine society, and indicate that it can be difficult—if not impossible—for Argentines to reach a unanimous consensus about the past. These pockets of dissent underscore that history is multi-faceted and memory is ultimately subjective. However, the memorials’ creation reveals that, on some level, human rights organizations and local politicians have established a broad, basic mutual understanding of the past. Moreover, even if these memorials do not reflect the opinions of the entire population, they demonstrate willingness on behalf of Argentine society to unearth, explore, and question the past. By the very fact that it reveals instead of occults, and questions instead of silences, these memorials take an active stance against el olvido (the oblivion).

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Given that these memorials resulted from an unprecedented alliance between human rights organizations and a leftist administration, one wonders if this memorialization trend will continue when power changes hands and if the nature of their content will change accordingly.

Memory is constantly shifting and continually being reshaped in the context of present. Essentially, memory has proven itself to be kaleidoscopic. With the turn of time, the colors swirl, sometimes coalescing to form majorities and sometimes splintering into isolated groups. In light of this dynamic, only time will tell what forms memory takes on during Argentina’s future.
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