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Archives of Violence:
Case studies from South America

Vikki Bell, Oriana Bernasconi, Jaime Hernández-García and Cecilia Sosa
Research Report
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Cover image: Installation of Erika Diettes' 'Sudarios
(Shrouds)' at the Iglesia Santa Clara in Bogotá.
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All mistakes and misunderstandings remain our own.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research aims and methods

The report 'Archives of Violence: Case studies from South America' draws on a research project funded by the British Academy within its Sustainable Development Programme, which intends to work towards fulfilling the UN's Sustainable Development ambitions. In particular Goal 16, that seeks to promote 'peaceful, just and inclusive societies including through building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions', is relevant to the ambitions of this research project. The research was entitled 'Documentality & Display: Archiving and Curating Past Violence in South America'. The research was conducted in Argentina, Chile and Colombia, and was carried out by a team of four international researchers, led by Professor Vikki Bell. The focus was on three important archives, one in each country, that have documented human rights abuses. In the cases of Argentina and Chile, these archives concern the abuses that occurred immediately before and during military dictatorships that took place in those countries (in Argentina between 1976 and 1983; in Chile between 1973 and 1990). In the case of Colombia, the archive is an institution that has attempted to address the on-going violence of the armed conflict.

The research aims were: first, to share the stories of the origins of these archives, which are distinct in each case, and to offer these histories as ways of understanding the dynamics at stake within and across the three countries; secondly, to explore how the archives have been put to use, with an emphasis on how they have been and continue to be used by legal institutions, as well as their educational and artistic uses; thirdly, to offer recommendations for those who may be considering or in the process of setting up comparable institutions in other countries. To facilitate this, interviewees were asked directly about the challenges that their work had faced, and where relevant, how these challenges had been overcome.

As a sociological project, we mostly employed face to face qualitative interviews with individuals and sometimes small groups. The interviews were semi-structured and in-depth, lasting an average of two hours. In total, 31 individuals were interviewed in 16 interviews. The team also engaged in library-based research, including at the archives themselves. Additionally, there were research trips to other institutions, and the team interviewed other individuals beyond the archives themselves, to give context and to deepen our understanding.

Key findings

The archives each have complex histories entwined with the social and political dynamics of the countries and times in which they have been established. The report takes each archive in turn in order to explain these histories. We adopted this approach in order not to lose the context and the nuances of the stories we gathered at each locale. That said, we can say that there are issues that are shared between all three institutions. These included the following: the importance of ethics and confidentiality; the fragility of the archival institution, at all stages, and in terms of both state and non-state financial support; the complexities of archival systems and the navigation of the materials; the challenges of safety and care for those working at and for these institutions; the issue of how to delimit the archive's scope with limited resources; the question of how to facilitate and maintain access to the collections; how to preserve vulnerable documents; the question of ownership of the archives; the importance of support networks and relationships with other archives and collecting institutions such as museums; the role of research originating from within the archives; the relationship to users of the archives, including victims' families, groups and lawyers; the relationship of the archive to law, both its status as an entity in law and as a resource for use within legal cases and processes; the involvement of photographers and artists within and as users of the archives.

The conclusion offers some more general conceptual areas for discussion around the archive, suggesting that the dynamics at stake revolve around key questions that we answer in relation to the three archives. These are: What is an archive? *When* is an archive? Who owns the archive? Who is the archive for? What is the future of an archive? These questions point to the most important questions that have surrounded, and continue to surround, the conceptualisation and institutionalisation of the archives studied here.

In seeking to offer recommendations that could be useful elsewhere, a list of 'do's and don'ts' in building and archive of violence is offered. These recommendations have been extrapolated from the interviews, that is, they are inspired by them but do not use direct quotations. They are offered here in the hope that they may contain useful advice or spark productive conversations elsewhere.

Introduction

This report arises from research conducted under the project 'Documentality and Display: Archiving and Curating Past Violence in Contemporary South America' (2018-2021) funded as part of the Sustainable Development Programme of the British Academy, a programme supported by the Global Challenges Research Fund of the UK's Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, which seeks to respond to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Our research is a part of these efforts through its attention to the importance of promoting peaceful, just and inclusive societies including through building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions (Goal 16). To live in peaceful societies 'free from fear and violence' is a condition of sustainable development.

Our research project focused on contemporary 'archives of violence' within three countries that have experienced periods of violence, in the case of Argentina and Chile through military dictatorships, and, in the case of Colombia, through several decades of armed conflict that is still, despite the 2016 Peace Agreement, on-going. Significant archives have been established in these countries, and we chose to study one highly respected archive in each. The three case-studies were chosen for the important roles these institutions have played, in terms of providing historical documentation, preserving knowledge and contributing to justice processes.

They are as follows:

- i. In Chile, the FUNVISOL archive, Santiago
- ii. In Argentina, *Memoria Abierta*, Buenos Aires
- iii. In Colombia, the *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica*, Bogotá

It quickly became clear that there are significant differences between the sort of archive each of the institutions is. They differ in terms of range of documents and other contents they hold, the relationships they have to the State and civil society, and the aims and objectives that each pursues. Studying them together has brought to the fore just how crucial the effects of these dynamics and contexts are to shaping how the archive works and how it understands its role.

Research Aims

Our research began from an appreciation of the importance of the archives that have been established in these countries, and a desire to delineate and disseminate the work that they have done and continue to do. The project has confirmed the significant role that the archives have had in these societies' processes of seeking greater understanding of violence, the pursuit of justice for human rights abuses and for peace more generally. The aims of the project were:

- i. To share the stories of the archives themselves. Rather than tell the stories contained within the archives, our focus has been on how the archives have developed, operated and been sustained over time. Through listening to the reflections of those who work, or have worked, in these institutions, we seek to provide a succinct accessible account that will serve as an introduction to the complexities of their historical emergence.
- ii. To explore the uses to which the archives have been put. We were interested to see how the archive has been part of justice processes within wider peace agreements or transitional justice mechanisms. Beyond that, we were interested to see who was using the archives and where the archive was being deployed and 'displayed' beyond its walls.
- iii. Drawing on the wealth of experience that the three archives have had, to share the expertise garnered and through exploring the challenges that they have faced in sustaining the work of the archive, to offer advice and encouragement between and beyond these three institutions and countries.

Methods

Over the two years of the project, the research team made several research trips to visit the three archives, visiting each institution as a team or in smaller groups at least twice (2018-2019). We interviewed key workers at each archive, some ex-workers, as well as some individuals outside the archives where their perspectives were relevant to our interests. The interviews were lightly structured conversations at which we explained the aims of the project and invited the interviewees to highlight aspects of the history, the methods of working and uses of the archives that seemed most important to convey. Most of the interviews lasted at least two hours; several were group interviews. We also had several visits to other organisations, including other archives but also institutions such as cultural and community centres, as well as museums and artists' studios, which gave us context and different perspectives on the role of different forms of documentation, as well as the histories and present dynamics of the violence experienced in each country. Not all of these interviews and conversations are quoted in this current report, but all have informed our perspectives and our other academic publications. Consent forms were presented in both English and Spanish, prior to the interviews, together with information about the project; all interviewees have signed these and given us permission to use their words as well as their names in this report.

In total, we interviewed 31 individuals over 16 interviews. All interviewees signed a consent form before taking part in the interviews, and all chose that their real names were used. The Covid-19 pandemic cut short our research trips in 2020, but we had by that stage already spoken to 29 individuals in 13 separate interviews. A further three interviews were conducted by Zoom. The interviews will be offered to the UK Data Archive at the University of Essex, UK, for consultation and re-use.

Structure of the report

The report discusses each of the archives in turn, offering an analysis of the history and emergence of each, before turning to highlight the ways in which the work and materials have been organised. The focus of each section is on learning from challenges that the institutions have faced. Thus each section includes a discussion of the most important challenges and the ways in which the archives have responded to them. There follows a general conclusion that explores the key dynamics and questions that the report has underscored, and a final section of recommendations that arise from the report. In the form of a list of 'do's and don'ts', we imagine how what we have learnt from studying each archive would translate into a list of friendly advice for those embarking on a similar endeavour. These are not as such direct quotations from the interviews, but are derived or inspired by those conversations. This final section is thus intended to be of interest and to stimulate discussion for those people and in those places where there made be the need to consider organising an 'archive of violence.'

PART ONE

FUNVISOL, the archive of the Vicaría de la solidaridad, Chile

To be by the side of those suffering: the origins and development of the *Vicaría*

On September 11, 1973, the armed forces took power in Chile. The coup d'état removed the first democratically elected government of a socialist president on the continent and brought an abrupt end to his revolutionary project for society. Within hours the repression had spread across the country, and thousands of men and women were arrested.

The military patrolled the streets while individual rights were suspended, political parties were forbidden, unions persecuted and universities taken over. 'Chile was experiencing a situation similar to that of an occupied country.'¹ In this context, targeted people and their families approached their churches for help and guidance. Instead of distancing themselves, the churches responded urgently and jointly to put an end to the use of violence and to seek peace. For this, they established two ecumenical services that they imagined as temporary: the *Comité Nacional de Ayuda a los Refugiados* (CONAR, the National Committee for Aid to Refugees), founded on September 24th, and the *Comité de Cooperación para la Paz en Chile* (COPACHI, Cooperation Committee for Peace in Chile, hereafter Committee for Peace), founded on October 9th.² The first sought to grant refugee status and assist those from abroad caught up in the repression in Chile, and the second worked to collaborate in the 're-establishment of peace based on justice.'³ Without knowing what the future held, the churches thus inaugurated a 'laborious ecumenism, a militant commitment ... assuming as their own the suffering of the other.'⁴

The initial team of the Committee for Peace, formed by both laity and clergy, began to provide 'legal, economic, technical and spiritual assistance' to the many who approached them.⁵ The organisation was structured into three Departments: Penal, Assistance and Labour.⁶ To publicise the existence of the new organisation, 'what was done was to put a notice in the newspapers *El Mercurio* and *La Tercera de La Hora*, which were the only newspapers circulating at that time,' explains María Paz Vergara (interview, January 2019). The notice informed all 'workers without resources' that the churches were offering 'legal assistance ... for issues concerning employment or criminal prosecution.'⁷

The appeal to law was paradoxical considering the exceptional, arbitrary and totalitarian circumstances imposed by the dictatorship. Especially so since the dictatorship led by army general Augusto Pinochet was characterized by seeking its own legitimation and

institutionalization through recourse to the law, employing the strategy of governing through legal decrees and swiftly preparing a new constitution for the republic.⁸ But with partisan politics suspended, the fact that the judicial system and courts continued to operate meant that for the Committee for Peace and the other human rights organisations that followed it, there remained a space that was to be fruitful for their legal activism. The law seemed to retain the semblance of an objective terrain from which to challenge the government for the horrors it produced.⁹ 'Use the law as much as possible,'¹⁰ was the slogan. That 'the work of justice' could bring peace was the hope.¹¹

But the repression continued and within a few months the Committee for Peace found it necessary to extend its work throughout the country through the dioceses of the Catholic Church.¹² Close to 40,000 people requested legal assistance from the Committee in the first two years of the dictatorship, equivalent to 54 people daily.¹³ They helped in situations of dismissal from employment, arrests of professionals, employees and university students, the filing of writs of habeas corpus, in court martials, in cases of illegal detention and in lodging complaints of persons disappeared.¹⁴

Alongside this work, in the Labour and Assistance Departments provided a series of community programmes focused on work, health, and providing food, as well as workshops on agricultural and artisanal skills, in an effort to lessen the economic, psychological and social effects that the repression and unemployment was causing for individuals and families.

After an unsuccessful campaign to discredit the Committee for Peace, there was increasing pressure on the churches that were members, including the persecution and repression of several of its workers. This involved the imprisonment and exile for some, such as the lawyer José Zalaquett, founder and head of the legal department of the organisation, and harassment and threats for others, including nuns and priests. Eventually Pinochet forced the organisation to close in December 1975.¹⁵ But at that time the group had a profound 'commitment to the figure of Allende and his attempt to make a democratic socialism through regular elections (rather than a socialist dictatorship). There [was] support for the activists who worked at the Committee, and there was also support for the work of the institution and its daily legal interventions' explained María Luisa Sepúlveda, a former employee of the Committee for Peace and the *Vicaría*, and

executive secretary of the latter between 1990 and 1992. At that time, the Committee had some 170 workers at its Santiago offices, and around 300 in the country as a whole. 'So, just as they couldn't eliminate the Allende ideals and project, they could not eliminate us' Sepúlveda comments.

Moreover, with nine hundred people missing, thousands detained, thousands more in asylum and exile, the Committee felt unable to give up. In January 1976, at the request of the Cardinal of Santiago, the Supreme Pontiff created a new institution within the ecclesial structure of the Catholic Church that would allow the Committee's work to continue. It was called the *Vicaría Pastoral de la Solidaridad* (the Pastoral Vicariate of Solidarity, hereafter *Vicaría*). Continuing the objectives of its predecessor, the *Vicaría* aimed: '1) to grant legal assistance to those individuals or families affected by the exceptional legal situation that has emerged in Chile since September 11, 1973; 2) to promote respect and give full validation to the principles proclaimed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and 3) to coordinate actions with other institutions' (González, 1981:3).

The *Vicaría* organised its work into the following departments: legal (*Jurídico*), employment (Laboral, active until 1978), landworkers (Campesinos, active until 1983), geographic regions (Zonas), and National Co-ordination. Based on this organisation, between 1976 and 1992, the *Vicaría* denounced the situation of the tortured, unemployed, political prisoners,

disappeared, relegated, and spoke out against repression in general, both before the courts and in public.

As a result of the complicity of the judiciary with the regime, the actions undertaken by the legal team of the *Vicaría* were barely processed. Most of them were dismissed for administrative reasons. However, the legal representation provided certain benefits including: providing knowledge of the geographic spread of disappeared-detainees, commuting prison sentences in exchange for exile, and allowing the relatives of the disappeared to feel in charge of the process, especially when months passed and they had no information about their loved-one's whereabouts. The legal actions also showed who was assisted, and in what numbers, allowing the analysis of each type of crime over time, producing verifiable knowledge that would be recognised by national and international organisations as a legitimate source for tracking the crimes of the dictatorship.

Moreover, through the department of geographic regions, the *Vicaría* assumed a key role in the development of social organisations (labour exchanges, communal kitchens, artisan workshops) across the country. It also developed training programs for the unemployed and educational and recreational activities (summer camps) to help rebuild social ties. In the words of the vicar Cristián Pretch, according to the Gospel, '*no hay denuncia sin anuncio* (literally, there is no complaint without announcement),' recalls María



A display about Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez and the origins of the *Vicaría* at the Museum of Memory and Human Rights, Santiago, Chile (Image: Vikki Bell)

Luisa Sepúlveda, meaning that one has not just to denounce cruelty but also to seek to actively remedy its effects.¹⁶ Violence to individual lives and damage to social ties had to be addressed through positive actions.

As the dictatorship institutionalised and consolidated its power, wider Chilean society, tired of the violations of civil and political rights, and dejected by high rates of poverty and unemployment, began to lose its fearfulness and express its dissent with the regime through protests, rebuilding political activism and taking creative action. These demonstrations were severely repressed by the police forces, leaving hundreds of people dead, injured and wounded, so that the *Vicaría* became 'a veritable field hospital', offering first aid and medical assistance, while denouncing the disproportionate violence against protesters and providing legal assistance to the countless detainees.¹⁷

When Pinochet lost the 1988 plebiscite and allowed for presidential elections to take place in 1989, the *Vicaría* began to think about its closure. The number of requests for attention had decreased and so had the need for personnel. International funds were also decreasing. After Patricio Aylwin's inauguration as President of the Republic in March 1990, moreover, State institutions were to assume responsibility for the processing of cases and for awarding reparations. The *Vicaría* notified the public to this effect via a notice in the newspapers.¹⁸ The cases that were still open were transferred to FASIC (Foundation for Social Aid of the Christian Churches, see below), who had made space within their offices to incorporate the AFDD (Association of Relatives of the Disappeared Detainees, see below).

The *Vicaría* did not close for a further two years after the end of the dictatorship, however, in large part because it was deeply engaged in supporting the work of the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission (the Rettig Commission). The *Vicaría* supported the families of the people who submitted their cases before the Commission in order to record and seek reparations for the most serious human rights violations that had occurred between September 11, 1973 and March 11, 1990.

The decision to close the *Vicaría* in what was still a fragile political context – with the former dictator Pinochet remaining in post as the commander-in-chief of the army – was not without debate. Victims

and their relatives felt that they were losing the support of a powerful ally (the Catholic Church) and an internationally respected organisation (the *Vicaría*). And their struggle was not over; only the fate of eighty of the disappeared had been discovered.

Aware of these sentiments, the *Vicaría* nevertheless decided to announce its closure. It did so in advance so that all who wanted to make inquiries had some time to do so. This also gave time to hold a week of symbolic ceremonies with the most relevant actors in the history of the organisation. An exhibition of photographs at the *Vicaría's* headquarters inaugurated the week. It showed relevant milestones in the organisation's history. The then Vice President of the Republic, Enrique Krauss, as well as several deputies and ministers, attended the event alongside delegates from organisations of relatives of the detained, the disappeared and those executed for political reasons (*ejecutados políticos*). The exhibition was presided over by Monseñor Sergio Valech who declared: 'the honours, in this hour of farewell, must be to the *Vicaría's* workers, who sacrificed everything and even risked their lives to defend the rights of the persecuted'¹⁹. Other ceremony in which various human rights organisations participated was to reveal a memorial plaque at the *Vicaría's* headquarters. The closing event was a homily presided over by Bishop Oviedo. Later on, in December 1992 the Chamber of Deputies approved a special session to pay tribute to the *Vicaría de la Solidaridad's* work.

In January 1993, the *Fundación y Archivo de la Vicaría de la Solidaridad* (FUNVISOL, The Foundation and Archive of the *Vicaría*) was created, based in the offices of the Archbishop of Santiago. Its mission is 'to hold, preserve and manage the documents and audiovisual archive of the *Vicaría de la Solidaridad* and its predecessor the Committee for Peace, as part of the historical memory of the country and of the Church, making them available to civil society as instruments that might assist in the path toward reconciliation and the construction of a society founded on truth, justice and respect for human rights.'²⁰ This is an archive of significant public interest but it also remains the private property of the Catholic Church. It is managed by a board of directors formed by the *Vicaría's* former staff members and priests. The foundation that protects it is funded by the state and receives a regular grant from the Ministry for Culture, Arts and Heritage. During the period 1992-2018, the FUNVISOL archive received 15,594 users.²¹

Human rights activism and its archives in Chile

The Committee for Peace and the *Vicaría* were not alone in their show of solidarity and practical action. Among the most important other institutions were:

- i. The Association of Relatives of Disappeared Detainees (AFDD), a group who have continued to work tirelessly to support families of the victims, to help in their searching, to demand the truth from the state, to seek justice and more. It began its work at the end of 1974 based at the headquarters of the Committee for Peace. It worked alongside the Committee's social workers and would remain at the *Vicaría* until its closure in 1992.²²
- ii. In 1975, a new ecumenical institution, the Foundation for Social Aid of the Christian Churches (FASIC) joined the efforts to defend fundamental rights, focused especially on support for political prisoners who were going into exile with their families.
- iii. In 1978, as a reaction to human rights violations, a group of lawyers formed the Chilean Human Rights Commission, based in Santiago and with more than 100 members throughout the country.
- iv. In 1979 the Foundation for the Protection of Children Damaged by States of Emergency (PIDEE) was born. PIDEE cared for more than 12,000 children who were relatives of victims throughout Chile, providing social assistance, mental and physical health care, pedagogical support, therapeutic workshops as well as assisting returning exiles.
- v. In 1980, the Committee for the Defence of the Rights of the People (CODEPU) was created to assist the persecuted and their families and fight against impunity, mainly through legal and psychosocial assistance.

In terms of mental health, the Centre for Mental Health and Human Rights (CINTRA) was created in 1985, which provides medical and psychological care to people who were victims of human rights violations, especially torture survivors, as well as relatives of disappeared detainees and political killings. Furthermore, in 1988 professionals who had worked at FASIC founded the Institute of Mental Health and Human Rights (ILAS).

Collectively these organisations can be said to have brought about the Chilean human rights movement, key in the international political history of human rights. As Kelly has argued, the Chilean coup and the atrocities it inaugurated acted as a 'catalyst' for a profound turn in international activism, which 'stopped shuffling papers around and for the first time directed their energies towards exposing human rights abuses' (2013: 165). Actions in defence of human rights that today are a familiar part of the repertoire of activities of international intergovernmental and civil organisations, such as the systematic documentation of cases on the basis of the testimony of the victims, and their active denunciation, began with the Chilean case.

As did the Committee for Peace and the *Vicaría*, these human rights organisations also created archives documenting the experiences of repression and the experiences of the victims they had assisted during their years of work. These are known in the Southern Cone as 'the archives of human rights' or the 'archives of the resistance', a series of diverse documents in different forms (textual, graphic, images), including publications, reports and press records that allow us to understand life in the dictatorship period.²³ In 2003, UNESCO accepted the nomination of several of these archives into the registry 'Memory of the World' (AFDD, CODEPU, FASIC, PIDEE, Corporación Justicia y Democracia, Chilean Commission for Human Rights, Teleanalysis, FUNVISOL), along with archives from Paraguay, Dominican Republic and Cambodia.²⁴

To these human rights archives that we could call 'historical', virtual repositories have been added in the last three decades. This second wave of archives seeks to disseminate new and important information about past atrocities²⁵, including the archives established at memory sites – mostly places where serious human rights violations were committed or resisted – that have been 'recovered' and repurposed by civil society organisations. The archives of such sites usually consist of documents referring to the history of the property, donations from former prisoners that have been detained there, and audiovisual archives with testimonies, following *Memoria Abierta's* example in Argentina. This is the case with the *Villa Grimaldi Peace Corporation*, *Londres 38 Espacio de Memorias*, *Estadio Nacional* and *Casa José Domingo Cañas*. The project to create the new Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago promoted the donation of documents and artefacts by hundreds of victims, relatives, social organisations (including unions), collectives (both cultural and territorial) as well as governments and institutions, both national and international. This material has helped shape the museography and supply the documentation centre of this large and important museum. The archives of some of the historical human rights organisations that closed their doors with the transition to democracy, such as PIDEE and CODEPU, were donated to the Museum, where they can be publicly consulted. Since it was opened on January 11, 2010, the Museum has researched and sought to expand its collection. Today it houses more than 1,880 donated collections.

In recent years, the value of the human rights archives has begun to be recognized by the Chilean state. In 2017, FUNVISOL, the archive of the Committee for Peace and the *Vicaría*, was the first of its kind to be declared a national monument by the Council of National Monuments (in the category historical monuments). In 2018 FASIC also obtained the same status. Such recognition is welcome, but FUNVISOL still worries about its survival, as its modest funding from the State covers only enough to pay its small team of workers who care for the archive but are not able, for example, to develop their own research projects or engage in extensive dissemination.

The trace of resistance: the FUNVISOL archive

The FUNVISOL archive is accessible to the public and is divided into three main collections: legal, press and audio-visual. The legal collection is made up of more than 85,000 unique documents, produced as part of the actions undertaken by the legal departments (of both the *Vicaría* and the Committee for Peace) to defend human rights. These include writs of *habeas corpus*, affidavits, reports, letters to international organisations, petitions to the State for information, records of court martials, *inter alia*, and the *Vicaría*'s case files of those who sought their assistance [*carpetas de atención*]. There are more than 45,000 such files, the vast majority of them documenting individual cases. The Legal collection also includes those files relating to cases of disappeared-detainees [*detenidos desaparecidos*] number 1,122 and those that relate to cases of those executed for political reasons [*ejecutados políticos*] number 1,492 (Vergara 2009: 73). The press archive contains more than 650,000 clippings from the period 1973-1992, organised chronologically and by topics (such as human rights, the church, abuses of power, emblematic cases, international, exile). In this archive there are also editions of various magazines and newspapers from the time of the dictatorship, such as *Apsi*, *Cauce*, *Analysis* and *Hoy*. Finally, the audio-visual archive brings together collections of photographs taken by the *Vicaría*'s own photographers, along with images, films and documentaries that show the reality of life during the dictatorship. To date, more than 1,400 documents and 1,200 photographs from these three collections have been digitised and are accessible through the website, forming FUNVISOL's digital library. The video library is made up of 194

documentaries. The archive of the *Vicaría*'s administration and the medical records produced as a result of taking care of the victims and their families remain protected and there is no public access to them. The archive also houses a documentation centre that has more than 8,000 bibliographic records including the publications of the *Vicaría* and the Committee for Peace, as well as articles and books on human rights, jurisprudence, individual testimonies, and more, all searchable via a catalogue.

Because the FUNVISOL archive concerns the denunciation of severe human rights violations that occurred during a particular historic period, between 1973 and 1990, it has now been closed to new documents. 'The only things that we add now are updates on the judicial processes,' explains María Paz Vergara, and the archive of press coverage (interview, January 2019).

The archive stands as a record of the extraordinary work of the *Vicaría*, carried out with a sense of urgency and in defiance of constant threats. Of course, the first impulse to do this work was not archival as such. At first, the registry of the 'irregular situations' known to these organisations was a means to provide assistance to victims and to be able to follow-up on the cases. The documents were a resource of resistance to the dictatorship, its repressive policy and its desire for impunity (Bernasconi, 2019). The testimony of victims and witnesses could prove that state terrorism was really occurring. It could also disrupt the lies and misinformation circulated by the regime and offer a



The women's garden at Villa Grimaldi, Santiago, Chile (Image: Vikki Bell)

measure of dignity to those affected, their families and communities. The records also provided some hope that in some future, all this material could serve as proof of the horrors that were beginning to be gathered before the eyes of these nascent human rights workers. Given the context of this gathering of information, the archive is limited in its telling of the history, unavoidably so. Not least due to the risks associated with recording human rights violations at the time, only what seemed safe to put on paper remains in the archive. More information circulated through those offices, was collected on visits to prisons and detention centres or on trips abroad, but those facts and stories remain only in the memory of those who received them. But these truths do not detract from the *Vicaría's* achievements.

The first serious attempt to begin to organize the archive of documents was in 1976, when the lawyer Javier Luis Egaña became secretary general of the recently created *Vicaría de la Solidaridad* and commissioned the work that he called ROCALimpia – an acronym for the functions of collecting, ordering, classifying and filing the documentation relating to legal cases. From then on, the archive was maintained, organized according to the different departments and functions they fulfilled.

The files that concern individual victims collect the documents relating to that particular case. Each case has a number to identify it within the archive and to facilitate cross-referencing. The individual file gathers all of the administrative and fact-gathering forms that

the *Vicaría* used at meetings with survivors, relatives or others to record information from those reporting an incident or a person missing. The files for those disappeared also contain birth, baptism and marriage certificates, identity cards and unofficial identity documents such as diaries, notebooks, family photographs, sports club memberships and ID pictures.²⁶ Sometimes they contain letters, notes and poems written in captivity by the individual and sent or smuggled out. The need for the *Vicaría* to have such information speaks to the struggle to prove the reality of thousands of 'detainees not located' whose existence the dictatorship denied in order to avoid the charge that it was forcibly disappearing people. The individual files also include the letters and other communications produced by relatives, friends and colleagues – often as part of collective campaigns instigated by the *Vicaría* – in the search for information on the whereabouts of their loved ones, or for any clue about their fate, as well as documents relating to legal actions and other demands for truth and justice. Where these also relate to or mention other individuals, the latter's numbers are written onto the document in order to indicate that the archive also holds their files.

Where known, the files also describe the repressive tactics, name those responsible and give the location of incidents of violence. The workers of the *Vicaría* were able to see patterns in these events and practices, which helped to prove that there were trends in the regime's practices, as well as to understand differences in experiences across the country. Together, in Maria



María Paz Vergara shows one of the files at FUNVISOL with documents concerning a disappeared person. (Image: Vikki Bell)

Paz Vergara words, 'the archive gives an account of the history of repression, the history of the victims, and how the repressive organisations behaved' (interview, January 2019).

The files also contain documents that show how the *Vicaría* recorded the social, economic and health conditions of the families affected by the repression. Importantly, they also hold the data collected on the physical complexion and medical histories of the disappeared, which were then used to identify remains.

The archive does not only document what happened to individuals during this period, in terms of the human rights violations they suffered, but it also documents how people and communities resisted the dictatorship's violent practices. Within the files one will find documents – leaflets, letters, posters, newspaper accounts – pertaining to the important local, national and international solidarity movements that arose. Moreover, there are testimonies from a range of different actors, not only witnesses and relatives, but also for example, those who had been detained and were released, those who deserted from the military and those who had gone into exile. These accounts show the toll that these practices of state violence were taking on the people but also the strength of indignation and resistance that was widespread among the population, and that the *Vicaría* helped them articulate and co-ordinate through concerted legal and social action. The archive's documentation allows one to see how various public personalities from the fields of politics, business, culture and the arts, international relations, the churches, human rights activism, who were contacted by the Vicariate or decided to get involved of their own accord, chose to support its work, providing asylum, disseminating the reports, and demonstrating collectively in their home towns and cities.

The *Vicaría's* co-ordination work is apparent in the bulletins and the periodic magazine *Solidaridad* that they produced, and whose 300 issues are housed in the archive. There they gave the details of new cases of disappearance and state violence, providing a vital source of information concerning the extent of state violence and repression. The magazine ran had a circulation of up to 30,000 per issue and was mostly delivered by hand through the church.

The FUNVISOL archive also informs us about the organisation itself, its working methods, and the modes of intervention that it created and how these were modified over time. It shows how the organisation adapted to the diverse cases that required support through their seventeen uninterrupted years of work, and how it learnt in order to better assist the victims.

This is so at different levels, from the ideologies expressed and modes of analysis employed in the editorial 'opinion pieces' in the *Solidaridad* journal, its tactics of intervention and protest, down to the methods employed to collect information, the modes of organising it and the very materiality of the document.

On these latter points, for example, in the individual files one can see the different forms that were adopted and amended throughout the life of the *Vicaría* as new questions and points of information became important to collect (Bernasconi et al, 2019). Moreover, changes such as additional information and newly found cross references, are observable in the handwritten inscriptions on the documents themselves. At the level of their very materiality, too, one can trace the history of ways of working. The earlier documents are mostly written on a typewriter, copied with carbon paper or on a mimeograph duplicator machine. Only by the beginning of the 1980s, when the first computer arrived at the organisation, did some rudimentary computerised data processing begin (mainly descriptive statistics regarding instances of different types of repression used during protests). The archive was also backed up for the first time in this period using microfilming technology.

Nowadays, as mentioned above, the digitalisation of the archive is well underway, and where appropriate, these documents and images are made available through the website or via the searchable database at FUNVISOL itself.

Finally, it is worth noting that the archive also holds the documentation that bears witness to the attempts to seize it, the defamation against the *Vicaría*, the lies that were circulated by the regime (such as that the Committee for Peace and the *Vicaría* provided shelter for terrorists and were 'means that Marxists-Leninists use to affect citizenry peace'²⁷, repeated many times in the mass media). Its documentation allows one to follow the attempts to infiltrate the organisation through the reporting of false cases, the attempts to seize the archive even after the 1988 plebiscite (that rejected Pinochet's continued rule and returned Chile to a democracy) and the reprisals against its own workers. These reprisals included harassment and intimidation, arrests and interrogations, as well as forcing some workers into exile. Most shockingly, the head of the analysis unit of the *Vicaría*, José Manuel Parada, was murdered in 1985. The archive holds documentation on all of the public statements, articles, editorials and protest actions through which the organisation contested and repudiated these actions against it.

The diverse uses of the archive across five decades

i. During the dictatorship: Denunciation, solidarity and the pursuit of justice

Early on, all the information produced for and during the legal actions, as well as that prepared to seek social and health-care assistance for those affected by state violence and their families, was drawn upon to make national and international complaints against the Pinochet regime. Through the details the *Vicaría* was able to gather, pressure was brought to bear on the dictatorship, exposing its atrocities to the national but mainly to the international community. In a country experiencing repression, fear and censorship, where civil and political rights had been suspended, the efforts to build international solidarity were vital. Such solidarity enabled the provision of asylum and assistance to many forced into exile, and spread awareness of the horrors of what was happening in Chile. Around the world shows of solidarity repudiated the actions of the Chilean authorities, citing the *Vicaría's* documentation as their evidence, and leading in many cases to financial support for the work of the *Vicaría* and other Chilean organisations.

Within Chile, the systematic registration of cases of human rights violations and, especially, those documents associated with the legal assistance and monitoring of cases, provided data which once categorised, processed and analysed, became crucial information for understanding the repertoire of repressive practices. The data proved the regime's modus operandi, identified several of the clandestine

sites to which detainees were taken as well as those responsible for these actions. This information was fed through into the regular reports from the *Vicaría* and circulated nationally. As the dictatorship continued, the *Vicaría's* analyses also began to be cited by the few alternative media outlets that were able to overcome the barriers of censorship, managing, little by little, to communicate the truth.

The collated information was also of use to the on-going cases helped by the *Vicaría* staff. Both the legal and social teams were able to use the archive's data to analyse, reflect and evaluate the methodologies, procedures and approaches they used in providing assistance. The archive includes the records of the work meetings that took place for these purposes within departments, among colleagues sharing the same roles (eg. social workers), and at the level of the entire organisation. There were also inter-organisational conferences such as the one held at *Punta de Tralca* in April 1980 in which the different organisations shared their experiences of social work, and of offering psychological and medical assistance in Chile and abroad.²⁸

ii. Since 1990: justice, truth and education

Since 1990, the archive has quietly played a key role in transitional justice processes in Chile and the Southern Cone. Its existence, together with that of the archives of the other human rights organisations that emerged during the dictatorship discussed above, laid out the



María Paz Vergara and Cecilia Sosa in the FUNVISOL archive. (Image: Vikki Bell)

facts as well as the challenges and the tasks for the human rights policies that the government of the democratic transition would need to implement, and which began to be worked on at the dictatorship's end.

One of the fundamental uses of the archive during the transition has been its role in the processes of proving human rights violations and certifying the eligibility of victims for the reparation offered by the Chilean state. In order to present their case and their eligibility to the two Truth commissions – the first, the National Truth and Reparation Commission (or Rettig Commission, 1991) and the second, the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture (or Valech Commission, 2004, 2010) – many surviving victims or family members asked for evidence from their files held by the *Vicaría* as well as the documents required to confirm that they were received by the organisation during the dictatorship. Indeed, 68% of the cases listed by the Rettig Report were documented by the *Vicaría*; many others, who were not presented at that time, sought the documentation from FUNVISOL and were accepted as eligible at a later date (Bernasconi, Ruiz and Lira 2018).

Vergara explains that the archive has been able to address situations that were unforeseen at the time of the Committee for Peace and the *Vicaría*'s work. 'For example, the habeas corpus writs were presented in relation to [the disappearance of] the parents. [But later, consulting the archive] one realises from the writ that Juan and his wife María had been arrested along with their two children, aged five and two years old, for example. So that proved that these children who appeared before the Truth commissions had been detained with their parents' (interview, January 2019).

The commissions themselves also consulted the human rights archives extensively. As the Rettig Report states, the Commission obtained 'abundant information from the human rights archives created during the dictatorship, especially that of the *Vicaría de la Solidaridad*' (1991: 3). The Commission recorded in its case entry forms whether the person had been assisted by any of the human rights organisations, and requested the documentation produced at that time, especially legal actions (appeals for protection, complaints, affidavits, etc) so that it could be appended to their notes. As a consequence, the case forms used by the Commission maintained the same narrative structure and terminologies as those created by the Committee for Peace and the *Vicaría*. In fact, several former staff members of the organisation, as well as those from FASIC or CODEPU, participated in taking testimony for the Commission or were placed in charge of certifying cases. Some also participated in writing the Commission's report. Moreover, it was not only the information produced by the institution that was useful for the work of the commissions but also the information it gathered. The archive with press clippings was also widely used. As the newspapers were under tight controls and most championed the

dictatorship, any news reports that acknowledged the arrest of a person constituted a form of evidence that could be used in the process of validating the case. Along with their role in aiding the certification of the status of victim, the human rights archives in Chile have been useful for those requesting other allowances and benefits that have been established in law for the disappeared and their descendants. 'For example, a month ago [in 2018], we had two cases requesting certificates so that the grandson of the victim did not have to do military service. Also, [they can ask for documentation of their relation to a victim] in order to qualify for health care or housing benefits', explains Vergara (interview, January, 2019).

Another fundamental use of the archive, especially since 1998, has been in judicial proceedings for cases of crimes against humanity. According to an on-going study of users of the archive, between 1992 and 2018 FUNVISOL received more than 3,200 requests for documentation from judges investigating this type of case, relating to a total of more than 6,000 victims. Requests are also made directly by lawyers taking on these cases and by the plaintiffs themselves. This means that one in every four requests received by FUNVISOL in that period (1992-2018) came from the judiciary, from lawyers and prosecutors, including military prosecutors, investigating cases from the dictatorship period as well as others involved in investigating in human rights cases such as lawyers, investigating police officers, legal support groups, survivors and family members. In such cases, the Foundation responds by sharing the information available for the case, sending a copy of the publicly available documents and an account of the information contained in the victim's reception folder. In very few of these cases (6%), did FUNVISOL have nothing to share. Thus, as Hau et al (2019) and Accatino, Bernasconi and Collins (2021) have shown, the information from the *Vicaría*'s archive has become, these several decades later, important judicial evidence.²⁹

Interestingly, this use of the archive also reveals the extent of inaction of the courts during the Pinochet regime. 'When today we collaborate with justice processes and give information, it is information that the courts already had. You can see that at that time, during the dictatorship, there was no will to investigate,' explains María Paz Vergara. Indeed, it is clear that the regime and courts knew about the existence of centres of detention. Vergara clarifies: 'One comes across legal proceedings carried out on behalf of detained-disappeared victims in which there are people who were summoned to testify to the courts, while in detention. And the official who was in charge of this case appeared in the detention centre, and asked the detained person for a statement. In other words, at that time there were records [of where and how people were held]' (interview, January 2019).

In recent years, surviving victims have begun to file

individual or collective complaints (beyond those associated with reparation claims) for illegal detention, torture, unlawful coercion, kidnapping, among others, for which they have also consulted background information on their cases at the Foundation. Documents from the archive have also served in legal cases in neighbour countries, such as the important trial or mega-causa concerning Plan Cóndor in Argentina (Hau et al, 2019).

The archive has played an important role in the processes of 'recovering' former detention, torture and extermination centres where state repression took place, which have been transformed into sites of memory. The request for the formal protection and re-use of land and property has to be put before the Council of National Monuments (*Consejo de Monumentos Nacionales*). The Council requires proof of the past use of the building or site, for which the testimonies of former political prisoners who were held captive in the place, statements made at that time by witnesses, the complaints lodged by the *Vicaría* and the legal actions pursued on behalf of people who were detained or disappeared, have been fundamental. This type of documentation has also been used to compose the site's museography and the narrative of the guided tours at the sites in the cases of those that have been successfully recovered and are now open to the public, such as the infamous *Villa Grimaldi*.

Along with publicising the existence of the archive, the Foundation seeks to contribute to the field of memory research and human rights education. Researchers and students from disciplines including the social sciences, humanities and the arts make use of the archive and FUNVISOL offer guides of the archive for schools. 'We do a great job in that way. And it is very important to us to deliver guided visits for school children and university students', emphasizes María Paz Vergara (interview, January 2019). Furthermore, the press and audio-visual archive has been consulted in depth by those researching the period for productions of television series and films about the time (examples include titles such as: *Habeas Corpus*, *Los Archivos del Cardenal*, *Los Ochenta*, *Chile las Imágenes Prohibidas*, *El Caso Pinochet*).

Challenges and solutions

i. Safety of the information and of the *Vicaría's* workers.

Recording state violence as it occurred, as did the *Vicaría*, carried serious risks and dangers. The workers of the Committee for Peace and the *Vicaría* used to separate out the most sensitive information. Anything that could endanger someone would be kept among as few as needed to know; it would be jealously guarded to try to avoid possible attacks or the confiscation of papers. The success of the work depended on networks of trust with the victims and their families, who were ultimately the ones who provided the information upon

which the organisation worked. Any mistake could endanger everyone. The staff were keenly aware that the dictatorship 'wanted to make them fall'³⁰ and that part of the job was to be able to identify deceptions and false leads. The stakes were high for the workers' own personal safety; staff members also had to endure threats, investigation, and experiences of prison. As mentioned, one member, José Manuel Parada, was targeted and murdered in 1985.

ii. Maintaining a public voice.

Early on, the Committee for Peace and then the *Vicaría* understood that they had to take a public role to denounce the human rights violations they were witnessing. To maintain their visibility and public voice has been complex. As the archive shows, the *Vicaría* was obliged to use the existent media, but the latter were supportive of the Pinochet regime. Thus they had to find their own means of communication. The *Solidaridad* magazine and bulletins were key to their communication strategy that sought to inform people about the repression and the suffering that so many were undergoing and to promote respect for human rights. The archive of the magazine's research has also left an archive of images and articles that help document life during the dictatorship, including aspects of childhood, poverty, unemployment and more.

In order to maintain the trust and legitimacy they had built up, the organisation also had to repeatedly deny the misrepresentations and erroneous accounts of its work that were peddled in the mainstream press. This involved more work and effort, but the workers felt there could be no ambiguity about their trustworthiness in the minds of those to whom they wanted to reach out.

iii. Facilitating public access to the archive.

Making the documentation of the organisation into a publicly available archive has been the principle challenge since FUNVISOL was set up 27 years ago. Some of the documents are still awaiting restoration, and there is still a way to go to fully digitise the archive and to improve the quantity and range of documents available via the website.

Navigating and finding information in an archive that is not organized according to strict archival criteria but by a principle of provenance has been a challenge for FUNVISOL. On the other hand, the intensive use of the documents during the lifetime of the Committee for Peace and the *Vicaría* produced a series of processes for describing and classifying the material that today allows for various routes of entry into the archive's resources.

'It's like a book in which each word has been indexed,' explains Vergara. 'For example, in a criminal justice process, [not only the names of] the victim or victims who were part of it are [indexed], but also the people who testify in it' (interview, January 2019). The advantage

of this wealth of detail and cross-referencing for the archive has been that now the archive can help individuals who were only identified through their testimony in others' cases to also prove their experiences before the truth commissions. 'This allows us to certify all of them,' explains Vergara. 'That is, to be able to issue a document that certifies that the individuals identified in that process at that time were effectively detained ...which was very important to the truth commissions' (interview, January 2019).

iv. Tracking the uses of the archive.

The on-going work of workers at the FUNVISOL archive has allowed them to track the different users that consult it and they have attempted to record the variety of demands made by these users. However, conducting regular studies on the archive's usage, which would be helpful in terms of having more information by which to decide how to use their funds, only began in 2018.

v. Conducting research.

With its small staff, currently of just four people, FUNVISOL spends the majority of its time answering queries. Self-generated research is limited to the systematic ordering of judicial sentences and the enhancement of the archive has been limited to updating the website. The Foundation's institutional policy has not focused on generating public debate on past nor commenting on current human rights affairs, in the way that the Centre for Legal and Social Studies (CELS) has been able to do in Argentina. This relative restriction of the institution's scope to only the field of conservation and maintenance of an archive could be regarded as a limitation in the Foundation's capacity of advocacy within contemporary society.

vi. Developing human rights awareness and networks of action.

Despite the limitation mentioned, the *Vicaría* has benefited from its many alliances with Chile's other human rights archives as mentioned above. The network brings them together to facilitate the exchange of experiences, joint training, the discussion of common causes, and plans for securing their place in the future

of Chilean society. The archives network has managed to form links with other national archives of public interest in order to foster dialogue within the field of human rights and the memory of the violent past, as well as with other perspectives and fields of knowledge. It has also facilitated regional cooperation, allowing Chile's archives to be part of networks of archives and human rights organisations across the continent.

vii. Confidentiality.

One issue has generated an enormous amount of debate. This is the decision not to allow access to the archive's original files, not even to the direct victims. The reason is that they contain confidential information that often involves other people who have not authorized their disclosure. This has proved difficult for some, and FUNVISOL has had to explain its rationale many times.

viii. The role of the Catholic church and inclusivity.

Remembering that although the archive is publicly accessible it is also private property, another contentious issue has been the role of the Catholic Church in its preservation and management. FUNVISOL has had enough autonomy to be able to make its own decisions, but the fate of the archive has also fluctuated according to the interests of the presiding archbishop. This is what happened with the relocation of the archive from its original headquarters in Santiago's city centre to a much quieter, residential neighbourhood in the east of the capital, where it occupies the premises of a former school and shares the space with a parish church. Another related question concerns the capacity of the Foundation's board, formed by ex-members of staff of the organisation and priests, to represent the widest possible breadth of the public whom the archive aspires to bring into dialogue.

ix. The future of the archive.

Almost three decades after the end of the dictatorship, a challenge for the *Vicaría's* archive is to consider its future. Who will use the archive when the victims and their perpetrators are no longer here and the number of trials diminishes? What use will the collection have beyond the legal one? How can it be sustained?

PART TWO

Memoria Abierta, Argentina

Beginnings: the 'guardians of memory'

One of the legacies of Argentina's last dictatorship (1976-1983) is that the country is now associated not only with the shocking stories of State violence and the numbers of *desaparecidos*, but also with the remarkable human rights movement that emerged to resist and respond to these horrors. What began with the dramatic images of the mothers of the disappeared silently walking in a circle around the *Plaza de Mayo* in front of the *Casa Rosada*, the House of Government, in Buenos Aires, wearing white handkerchiefs on their heads with the names of their missing children embroidered onto them, demanding that their children be returned to them '*con vida*' (alive), grew to include many different groups. The battle against State violence and to uphold human rights has been sustained and re-articulated through several generations over the last four decades. The resilience of this movement has been a profound inspiration within and beyond Latin America wherever people have been affected by trauma and loss. The umbrella group *Memoria Abierta* provides an interesting case study in this regard, one where the process of forming an archive has been an endeavour undertaken by civil society.

The organisation emerged at the beginning of the 21st century, when the so-called 'laws of impunity' were still in place in the country.³¹ 'It was a sign of civil society taking charge of memory work. Who else was going to do it if the government at the time was raising questions about "reconciliation"?' asks Verónica Torras, *Memoria Abierta*'s current director. 'Our conviction was that civil society had the right and the responsibility of preserving, looking after and providing access to the archives of the past', explains Celina Flores, coordinator of the institution's archive. In this context, where it was feared all would be forgotten, the organisation's emergence 'responded to the need to create a new organisation with professional knowledge of archiving that could gather together and train other organisations in the skills of memory transmission', Flores explains.

Rather than an autonomous entity, therefore, *Memoria Abierta* was initially conceived as a 'centre of documentation', which aimed to gather, strengthen and give access to the archives of state terrorism that had been already collected by six pioneering organisations in the country under one umbrella.



A poster of an archival photograph by Rafael Wallmann showing the Madres walking by the military, posted on the side of a wall in the ex-ESMA estate, Buenos Aires. (Image: Vikki Bell)

The organisations were: *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*, *Madres de Plaza de Mayo Línea Fundadora*, *CELS*, *APDH*, *Familiares* and *SERPAJ*.³² At the peak of the dictatorship's violence, many of these organisations had already begun important archival work, interviewing survivors and relatives of the victims, gathering information and details about the disappeared. This systematic documenting and archiving of information emerged as a tool to make visible the existence of a systematic plan of terror, torture and disappearance. 'To give [state violence] existence it had first to be documented and proved', says Marcela Perelman, director of research at the Centre of Legal and Social Studies (CELS), one of *Memoria Abierta's* member institutions, which early on focused on offering social and legal assistance, with an aim to pursue justice through judicial processes. In the early stages, including during the democratic transition from 1983, however, it is true to say that the organisations' 'memory work' was less a professional labour than an urgent, activist and highly affective one.³³ In that context, *Memoria Abierta's* principle aim was to transform this vast, emotional and somewhat 'intuitive' (as Perelman describes it) practice of gathering information, into a more professional practice. In this way, *Memoria Abierta* took sides early on in relation to one of the main dilemmas regarding memory work: who should be the guardians of memory? 'If it is the State, the

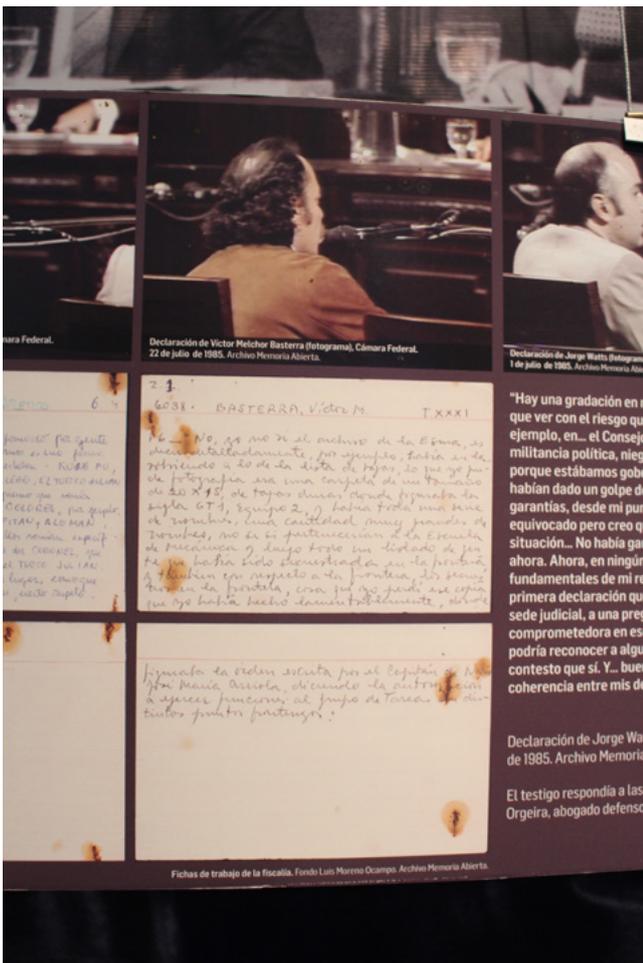
danger is that the information is not secure enough if there is a change of government', remarks Flores, adding 'and this is precisely what is happening in Colombia at the moment.' Significantly, *Memoria Abierta's* structure did not understand memory work as a job to be conducted by a single institution, but rather as collective endeavour carried out by a network of social organisations.³⁴ By 2000, representatives of the six different organisations had started gathering at *Memoria Abierta's* board 'where everything is decided'.³⁵ In fact, as Torras describes it, technically *Memoria Abierta* 'is' those organisations. In those early stages, moreover, one crucial decision was to avoid dependence on official funding. 'Not relying on state resources was a decision taken by the board. This provided us with autonomy. *Memoria Abierta* is a civil association. We don't owe explanations to anyone', said Conte, key member of *Memoria Abierta* and coordinator of the 'Topographies' project. Two decades later, *Memoria Abierta* still wishes to be perceived in this manner, that is, as an 'alliance of Argentine human rights organisations that promotes memory of the human rights violations committed in the recent past'.³⁶

Areas of Work: Between professionalism and activism

Memoria Abierta has had and continues to have three main areas of work:

1. To coordinate, catalogue and provide access to the archives of the six organisations. It is not a physical depository for these documents itself.
2. To conserve and manage the personal archives that were donated to the care of the institution, including former prosecutor's Luis Moreno Ocampo's personal archive; those that belonged to the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo Carmen Lapacó, María del Rosario Cerruti and Marta Vásquez, as well as the materials that belonged to the rabbi Marshal Meyer, among others.³⁷
3. To produce new audio-visual material for its own Oral Archive on state terrorism, for which it is very well known and respected, and also for a broader audio-visual archive (including the digitalisation of the 530 hours of the famous 1985 Trial of the Juntas, which currently constitutes one of the most consulted archives), and for the Topography of Memory project, an ambitious project dedicated to mapping and surveying the many historical sites of repression during the dictatorship, digitally reconstructing their original features and developing tools to inform and contribute to the prosecution of those accused of crimes committed during the dictatorship.³⁸

Memoria Abierta's collective structure, especially the fact that it co-ordinates but does not own many of the archives, led to some of the dilemmas and tensions that still accompany their work, not least because the



A photograph and card from Víctor Basterra's appearance at the 1985 trial of the juntas, now displayed as part of an exhibition in *Memoria Abierta's* entrance hall. These are part of the Luis Moreno Ocampo archive held by *Memoria Abierta*. (Image: Vikki Bell)

boundaries between the collective and its different constituent members were not easy to define. For instance, since the decision was taken early on that the material archives should physically remain within the original organisation, the public consultation of the files also had to take place at the organisation. 'We believe the producing institution should remain the depository institution unless the organisation closes down', explains Flores. Yet 'they all have their own idiosyncrasies and styles of work', as Conte puts it. So *Memoria Abierta* had to focus its efforts in generating new expertise and knowledge to manage and support the assets of the six organisations and their different modes of archiving.

To address this challenging task, a team of librarians working at each of the six organisations was in charge of describing their archives, uploading their descriptions to *Memoria Abierta's* website. Technological problems with an outdated computer system for uploading documents delayed this work. It had to be replaced, and eventually, in 2005, the first collective online catalogue was launched, including a description of the documentary funds, based on international standards (ISAD-G). 'This was one of *Memoria Abierta's* greatest achievements. Looking back now it is still amazing', says Flores. The cataloguing work was organised like a 'library', even although 'this is the opposite of what is done by professional archivists', she notes. Furthermore, although an index card of each document including basic data, a thematic classification, a brief summary of its content can be seen online, potential users have to get in touch with *Memoria Abierta* to set up a visit to the organisation where the file is located to see the original document. The co-ordination is vulnerable at this point because 'sometimes the people who work there don't know anything about the files', pointed out Flores.

Furthermore, *Memoria Abierta's* strong conviction that it should be civil society that archives and preserves the memory of state terrorism tended to generate tensions each time the organisation had to work alongside the state. During its first period, the so-called 'years of impunity', *Memoria Abierta* could take an active role demanding state policies for collective memory and managed to extend its international links building a wider network and support. During the Kirchnerist period (2003-2015), however, the state started occupying a central role in the work of memory, propitiating a crisis of sorts within the organisation. 'Most of the organisations that were part of *Memoria Abierta's* board decided to work in close proximity with the state. Most of them, practically *married* the state', says Flores, wryly, so that as a coordinating institution, this situation rendered *Memoria Abierta* seemingly superfluous.

From 2005, with the re-opening of the trials against those responsible for human rights violations during the dictatorship, extra pressure was felt in the human rights movement.³⁹ Many of *Memoria Abierta's* member organisations started focusing on helping

these prosecutions, so faced the need to gather and submit all the relevant materials and documentation. While organisations with expertise on the judicial process, such as the *Asamblea Permanente por los Derechos Humanos* [Permanent Assembly for the Human Rights] (APDH) or the *Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales* [Centre for Legal and Social Studies] (CELS) could cope with this work, it was more difficult for the rest.⁴⁰ Relatives of the victims would come to the different organisations to ask for the particular files. 'They had to deal with someone saying 'I want my dad's file', explains Flores, 'And yet there was no protocol in relation to how to proceed. The process was very informal and some of the documents were lost or compromised [as people took pieces or added pieces to files]'. In this context, the co-ordination of transferring information between *Memoria Abierta* and its members became quite complicated. 'It was impossible to satisfy the demands posed by each of the organisations' archives', says Conte.

From its inception, *Memoria Abierta's* funds mostly came from international cooperation (as fluctuating as this could be), but by 2010 international funding bodies changed their strategies.⁴¹ 'They moved on from funding human rights institutions [as a whole] to funding particular projects. *Memoria Abierta*, with no official support, found it difficult to adapt to the new global conditions', argues Conte. In fact, by 2010, during the Kirchnerist years, barely half of the staff remained, and most of them were working part-time. The library team was made redundant and the coordinator of the archive left. Moreover, the organisation's constituent members seemed to have no common horizon. In fact, in 2011 both the organisation of the relatives of the disappeared (*Familiares de Desaparecidos y Detenidos por Razones Políticas*) and *Servicio de Paz y Justicia* (SERPAJ) left *Memoria Abierta's* board, although they were to return at the end of the Kirchnerist period.

Thus the Kirchnerist years spelled a change for *Memoria Abierta*. 'For the first time, an administration was totally expansive in its embrace of memory policies. It went into all the relevant fields: truth, justice, education, sites of memory. The human right organisations had enormous confidence in the administration; they seemed to transfer of all kinds of affective and political hopes on to the state. As a result, '*Memoria Abierta* somehow stopped making sense', comments Veronica Torras; it had emerged to fill a political void, but now this void ceased to exist.

2004 saw the creation of the Archive of National Memory. It holds the archive created by the *Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas* [National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons] (CONADEP) and the archive that belonged to the Secretary of Human Rights. While the first democratic government had created CONADEP to investigate the fate of the disappeared and human rights crimes committed during the dictatorship, the Secretary of Human Rights continued its work after 1984, receiving

further cases of human rights violations.⁴² By gathering these files together – ‘the two most valuable archives of the dictatorial past in the country’, as Torres puts it – the Archive of National Memory attempted to emerge as ‘a place where the human rights documentation could be centralized’. However, this role tended to be diminished through a lack of active partnerships; a new paradoxical situation emerged. ‘It was curious. A new official archive was created and all the human rights organisations had a lot of faith in it. However, they did not transfer a single archive there’, says Flores.⁴³ From *Memoria Abierta*’s perspective, the National Archive of Memory became less a centre for archiving than a centre for research. ‘The objective was to accompany the process of justice’, says Torras. That is, since the State became prosecutor in the reopened trials to judge the crimes committed during the dictatorship, the Archive of Memory had the implicit mission of looking for the requisite documentation and supporting the process of Justice. In *Memoria Abierta*’s analysis, Torras suggests, some of the organisations were hesitant about the State assuming the role of prosecutor in court.

Although as we have seen *Memoria Abierta* was not intended to be a deposit for archives itself, in 2005, while working with international NGOs such as Archivists Without Borders, the organisation started receiving personal archives donated to the institution. ‘This



The entrance to the building where *Memoria Abierta* is based in the ex-ESMA estate. Once a dormitory, it has been renamed the ‘30,000 *campañeros presentes*’ building. (Image: Vikki Bell)

situation inaugurated another stage in the heritage project: *Memoria Abierta* started establishing itself as a depository institution, something that had not happened before’, recalls Flores. ‘Establishing ourselves as a depository institution was problematic; it is a responsibility and our way of working had to change. It was not something that *Memoria Abierta* was looking for, but the donations came from the trust and the legitimacy that our work had inspired within the rest of the organisations’, explains Conte. Faithful to its original convictions, when receiving these first donations *Memoria Abierta* tried to organise the material, systematize and digitalise the information and enter them into its catalogue. Thereafter they sought to return the archives as for them ‘the physical archive should return to the original institution’, says Flores. For example, Carmen Lapacó’s archive returned to the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo’s building where ‘it is used all the time’, Flores explains. Adelina Dematti de Alaye, another of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, agreed to donate the physical archive to the Historical Archive of Buenos Aires province. However, the decision proved problematic. ‘Two months before Adelina died, she was very, very angry. They didn’t let her see her own archive. So we had to bring her the digital copy. Now, thankfully, they have put it in order and it is open to consultation’, says Flores. If the instinctive response from *Memoria Abierta* is that the archives should be with the original organisations or the personal owners, in the long term, this may cause problems that are not easy to resolve. ‘It’s inevitable, as over the years the Mothers pass away and it is difficult to decide who or where the final depository should be’, says Conte, pointing out the sensitivities of the human rights movement’s ownership and heritage.

During the following years, and throughout Mauricio Macri’s neo-conservative administration (2015-2019), *Memoria Abierta* continued to develop its own archival production. The Topography of Memory project created more sophisticated content linked to former sites of repression through collaborative workshops that offered tools for mapping and creating digital cartographies with survivors and others. ‘The main strategy is that the former clandestine centers as recovered spaces of memory can themselves complete, or begin to complete, their [understanding of what occurred there], their “identity process”’, explains Conte. *Memoria Abierta* has managed to encourage the involvement of almost thirty former sites of repression in the country.⁴⁴ ‘They have all had very profound and difficult experiences, ones related to their site, their lines of approach, their ability to sustain a space when public policies do not help them to’, says Conte. This mapping work contributes to developing what Conte calls a ‘new [form of] expression for the human rights movement’. Through this project two new organisations joined those under the umbrella of *Memoria Abierta*: the civil association dedicated to the victims of Vesubio, the former detention centre, and the Northern Zone Commission for Memory, Truth and Justice, which is devoted to memory work in the north of Buenos Aires province, bringing the number of civil society organisations to eight.

The Oral Archive: the power of the story

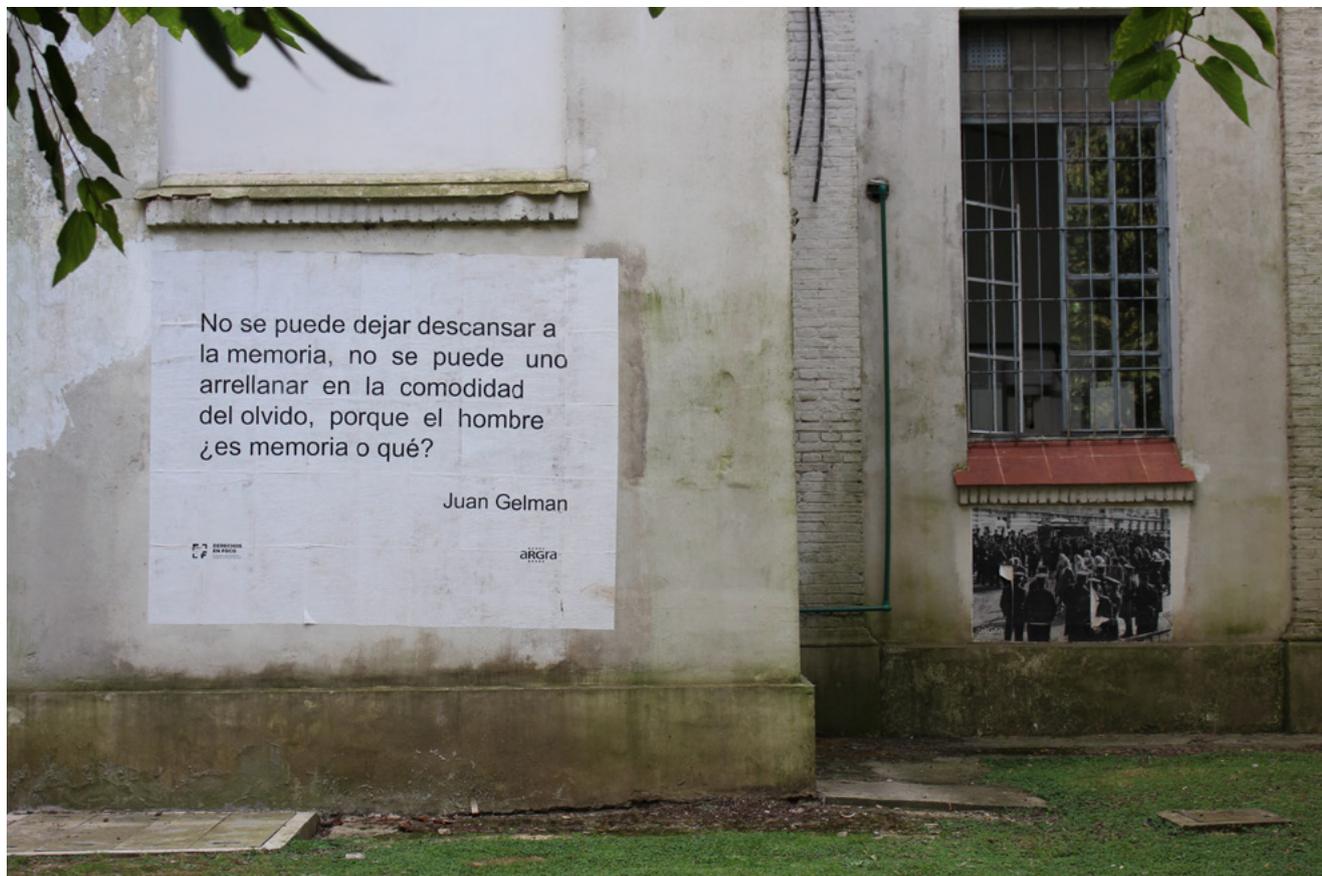
Memoria Abierta attributes its growing institutional recognition mostly to its Oral Archive, which has earned it respect and is widely understood as its institutional focus and specificity; '[it is] our pre-eminent achievement', smiles Conte.

Unlike the collective database, *Memoria Abierta's* Oral Archive was created by specialists and drew upon the technical resources and expertise in oral history that already existed in the country. Since 2005, *Memoria Abierta* has also used its experience in oral archiving to aid other memory initiatives, including Villa Grimaldi's space of memory in Chile and the Museum of Memory in Rosario, Santa Fe, Argentina. *Testimonio y Archivo*, a manual detailing the procedures used for collecting testimonies, has been uploaded to the institution's website and has circulated among a wide range of organisations.⁴⁵

The sociologist and oral history expert Alejandra Oberti has been working at the Oral Archive since 2005. If, as she says, the main strategy has been 'being opportunistic', technical aspects have always been an issue for the institution. Great efforts were made to incorporate the latest technological developments for the recording of testimonies and for their conservation. However, this has always involved decisions about how to make the best possible use of very limited economic resources. Still, for Oberti, there has been a main ethical commitment guiding the assembly of the archive and

to produce the testimonies in order to be able to grasp personal experiences with all their nuances and textures. 'This has meant caring about the quality of every single case. Not watching just five minutes of an interview to look for the moment of kidnapping but to care about the whole life story instead', she explains.⁴⁶ Another crucial aspect of the Oral Archive is the immediate access the public have to consult the testimonies. 'The video files are brought to *Memoria Abierta* and the testimonies are made available for the visitors the day after the interview', assures Oberti.

While deciding the process of indexing the testimonies, 'we wanted to provide a way of searching within the collection by what happened to the interviewee', explains Oberti. Therefore, apart from regular aspects such as 'name', 'gender', or 'group activism', the archive incorporated a 'respondent category', which allowed *Memoria Abierta* to catalogue the interviewees' personal experiences, choosing for example among 'political prisoner', 'detainee-disappeared', 'exiled', and so on. 'This type of data allows someone to look for instance for the category of "ESMA survivors", and they will quickly find 100, 200 interviews recounting experiences', explains Oberti. In addition, the archive can also be searched for other aspects of what the interview can tell us because each interview includes an analytical summary comprising the events covered in the testimony through main topics and key words.



A quotation from poet Juan Gelman posted on the side of a wall in the ex-ESMA estate, Buenos Aires: 'One cannot let memory relax, one cannot settle in the comfort of forgetting, since humankind is memory or nothing, is it not?' (Image: Vikki Bell)

Over the years, *Memoria Abierta* has developed a distinctive approach in relation to the interview data: it is considered and treated as 'primary material'. Therefore, unless interviewees explicitly request it, testimonies are not cut or edited. This is true for all but a few cases, where the people working at the archive felt obliged to make ethical decisions based on the need to protect the privacy of the interviewees or people being named in the testimonies. For example, in one case, when an activist spoke about a number of military actions – including kidnappings – conducted by his organisation, he named a lot of people involved. In this case, it was decided to erase the names. Conceiving the interviews as 'primary material' also had positive longer-term benefits. 'You can return to the interview from different perspectives and times. Everything is there', Oberti argues. In 2010, while the team was writing a book on sexual violence against political prisoners during the dictatorship, Oberti decided to revisit testimonies of detained women who had been activists during the 1970s and had given their testimony for the archive between 2001 and 2010.⁴⁷ It was then when she realised that testimonies on sexual violence were in fact present from the first interviews. 'The aspect of sexual violence had been little discussed in the public scene and was often overlooked. The problem was that nobody wanted to know [at that time]', she says. The process of writing the book shed new light on the interviews. Having maintained the entirety and the integrity of the interviews was fundamental. 'Every time a new issue is put on the agenda, we have the opportunity to revisit the old testimonies and find new and valuable information there', says Oberti.

Given that the full potential of the testimonies is revealed only afterwards, maybe even years after its recording, *Memoria Abierta's* golden rule is to make the most of each testimony. 'We try to talk about every topic, to make the questions as open as possible to really try to get to know the person providing testimony', said Oberti. Thus, in preparation for each interview the team conducts a thorough investigation of the person's background and their environment. 'Social media networks are very helpful in this context, something that earlier on would have been impossible. Google, too, is the most infinite archive you can imagine!', she smiled.

When the first meeting with the interviewee takes place, it has three main objectives. The first is 'to tell the person about the Oral Archive project and to invite them to visit *Memoria Abierta* to see the archive and the public consultation room', said Oberti. Since 2013, when the organisation moved its headquarters to the Space of Memory and Human Rights [ex ESMA], these invitations to visit are sometimes refused. During the dictatorship, the Navy School of Mechanics' premises housed the main detention centre in the country. Even though it is now a Space of Memory and Human Rights, 'there are still people who have not entered here. It is such a physical and emotional place', says Oberti. Yet, the team is flexible, so if someone prefers not to come to *Memoria Abierta*, the members of the archive will go to them: 'we can go anywhere', she adds. This

initial meeting aims to get the measure of the person's style, what Oberti calls their 'narrative modality'. 'How does [the person] recount something? Does she or he tell a long narrative or does she or he answer monosyllabically?' explains Oberti. This is important because 'you need to think hard about how to generate a situation in which a person can talk.' Moreover, the first meeting gathers information about interviewees' particular paths. 'You have to ask them what they are able to effectively tell you', as Oberti puts it. 'There are some things that people don't want to talk about now but maybe they will in two years' time', she added. All the information contributes to the design of the questionnaire that will eventually guide each interview. Although the questionnaires might include some basic guidelines and standard questions for each type of experience (for instance, 'you cannot forget to ask an exiled person to which country they went!', Oberti exclaims), they are mostly customised for each person. Still, 'you might not need to ask all the questions during the interview. And [in some cases], the questionnaire may not even be opened.'

Importantly, the actual interview is made as private as possible. 'The person is introduced to the team; we all chat but then everyone leaves. The interview is more like a little private moment and this is very important', says Oberti. As a rule, only two members of the team conduct the interview. 'We do not have a sound engineer or a lighting technician, so one person has to do everything: control the sound, the light and film with the camera', she explains. The other conducts the interview, an encounter in which unexpected themes do sometimes arise. 'The person might decide to talk about certain things that were not mentioned before, maybe because they talked to someone or remembered more things', states Oberti. Phrases like 'Now that you ask me ...' or 'I had never thought about this, but ...' tend to precede unexpected memories. 'There is a lot of "mise en scene"', asserts Oberti, describing the interview as a sort of unique theatrical performance that takes place just once.

The duration of the interview is also flexible. Some are completed in just one session, while others require four or five meetings. The majority last around two hours and include two sessions. 'At the beginning we were playing a game between technology and more political-conceptual decisions', recalled Oberti. Until 2010, the interviews were recorded on DV-CAM tape, which running at its highest quality lasted a little less than three hours. 'So we decided that the limit should be one tape. It was a rule driven by materiality, the need to preserve the interview data'. However, they soon realised that spending more than three hours in an interview was often not feasible for the participants. 'I would say that even more than two hours is unfeasible. You are not talking about holidays. Interviews can be really very tense', she suggests.⁴⁸

By contrast, Oberti recalls a particular interview that only lasted half an hour. She regrets the situation. 'I have always had the feeling that I did everything wrong. I shouldn't have interviewed that person at all', she says. The person in question was the mother of a

sixteen-year-old girl who was kidnapped and disappeared in Córdoba. 'The girl was a militant of a Zionist group that switched to the ERP political-military organisation. The case was very emblematic but the mother didn't want to talk and yet she did not dare to say no', laments Oberti.

In terms of how the Oral Archive is used, this has been varied. It has been used for public consultation by diverse audiences, including students of all levels and a long list of local and international researchers. It has also informed artistic and fictional work, including a series of drawings by the well-known artist Remo Bianchedi. Many scholars have also drawn upon the archive's material. For instance, Barbara Sutton's *Surviving State Terror: Women's testimonies of repression and resistance in Argentina* (New York University Press, 2018), is mostly based on fifty-three audio-visual interviews that she watched at the Oral Archive. The archive also aims to help other memory institutions in their own activities. For example, Rosario's *Museum of Memory*, an important museum dedicated to memory of the dictatorship – and that does a lot of outreach work as well as receiving multiple regular visits from schools – based its narrative of the dictatorship period on the archive's collection, and shows clips from *Memoria Abierta's* oral archive in its permanent display.

The archive has also inspired educational material. During the Kirchnerist period, the Ministry of Education, led by Daniel Filmus, implemented an important educational programme concerned with the transmission of memory. 'There was an intense production of educational material that was made available for teachers, and is still available. Our idea was never to compete with the state but just to fill the gaps', said Oberti. In fact, in 2005, the series *De memoria* was published by the archive including three CDs to be used in the classroom. The CDs covered issues related to dictatorship and Human Rights politics and included fragments of interviews extracted from *Memoria Abierta's* collections. Yet this format is already becoming obsolete. 'Although it was not so long ago, this technology today seems very old: the CDs cannot even be opened in most of today's computers! At the time, however, it was very revolutionary material: it was the first interactive material produced for educational purposes on the theme', remembers Oberti.

Many of the uses of the archive may be unknown to *Memoria Abierta*, or unacknowledged in the final product. Although Oberti acknowledges that the work of the transmission of memory goes beyond any sense of authorship or copyright, she also sounds a note of regret that the archive has also been used for artistic and fictional projects and purposes without proper acknowledgment. There is a simple form that users have to fill out recording the material that has been consulted and with what propose. But sometimes the archive loses track of how it is eventually used. 'We do ask people to give us a copy of articles they write, or films they make. This is a common thing in other archives, but is a pending issue for us. We are worried because we might lose track', says Oberti.

Lessons for the future?

Over the last two decades *Memoria Abierta* has developed its knowledge and expertise. 'When *Memoria Abierta* was created archives didn't matter to anyone. Now, archives have become objects in themselves. They are objects of funding, objects of visibility, and there are more discussions and disputes in the field', says Flores. In this changing and fertile terrain, *Memoria Abierta* highlights the collective nature of its work as its main endeavour and an important achievement. '*Memoria Abierta* has become a collective space where organisations can delegate someone to work or to become involved in some specific aspect of the work of memory, including the preservation of archives, the production of new sources of information or other content', Flores continues. In fact, all the 'products' that have emerged from the institution, namely the oral archive, the online collective catalogue and the topographical mapping of the sites of repression, have been collaborative and collective projects. All of them have been controversial at times, for different reasons as they touched upon important disputes within and between the many human rights organisations. However, 'having managed to preserve this collective space for twenty years is the richest and most valuable achievement', asserts Flores.

Indeed, *Memoria Abierta's* archival expertise has been required in Colombia, Paraguay and Chile, where teams of experts have travelled to offer their technical advice. 'Out of an empty field and through the experience of lots of [getting things] right and wrong, we have created a methodology that today is highly developed', says Flores. Among the strengths of the institution, Oberti highlights the work to build the archive of oral testimonies, especially the way in which they work to achieve the best from the interview while following careful ethical and procedural guidelines. By contrast, she suggests that the cataloguing system requires further attention. 'It is clumsy and time consuming', she says. She suggests that they should have focused 'on specific issues when preparing the summaries of the interview. I would strongly advise [someone setting up an archive like ours] to make more systematic syntheses working on the basis of keywords and blocks of ideas rather than producing an extensive summary', she notes. This would have helped the work that *Memoria Abierta* has been doing over the last few years, which is to create 'collections', which is to say, series of interviews concerning a certain topic or situation.

Another area to improve is dissemination. Oberti suggests there are two things that an archive should keep in mind: how to protect its materials and how to disseminate them. 'We need to work harder on dissemination and find a balance between the material being preserved and adequately protected, and a way of producing pieces that allow us to reach out to wider audiences to share the job we do here', she says. In fact, the lack of dissemination and also the fact that the uses of the archive have not been systematically recorded, suggests a basic weak point in their procedures over the years. This is partly a result of a lack of personnel and personnel changes

as Oberti explains: '*Memoria Abierta* is a very small institution. We have fifteen people working here currently. The Oral Archive team has changed over time. We never have enough human resources to do everything we have to do.' In 2020, however, amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, *Memoria Abierta* celebrated its twentieth year, and several materials have been made newly available, including an interactive guide that reviews all the collections available for consultation; a document that brings together the organisation's methodological work in different areas; and a new master general catalogue with all the information from the different archives of all the organisations members, including archives and personal documentary files as well as those produced by *Memoria Abierta*. This latter material is likely to be a turning point. 'We believe it will be a massive boost to facilitate the access to the material', suggests Alejandra Oberti (personal communication, October 2020).

On reflection, the team considers that the management of the archival assets of the organisations' members has been a persistent struggle for *Memoria Abierta*. 'We now regret not having called upon experts to set up the basis of the archival work. It could have prevented some of the main problems arising', says Flores. Issues concerning communication among the institutions, the extent of their archives, the transfer of knowledge, how to make internal political decisions about some of the materials, what should be made accessible and what should not, were subjects of endless debate. 'There were no clear rules regarding everyday strategies to produce documents, nor any written agreement about the role of the organisations in relation to their archives. The criteria regarding preservation and protection of the certain materials was decided by each organisation separately', reflects Flores.

In many ways, *Memoria Abierta's* main problems during the past two decades do not only concern a single institution. Rather, they speak to the nuances and internal debates within Argentina's human rights movement as a whole. 'It has been difficult to synchronise it' admits Conte, 'it has often been a provisional work, full of tensions, sensitivities and sometimes also jealousy'. Still, Torras, the current director of the institution, says: '*Memoria Abierta* has managed to put the archives of the different organisations in dialogue: it has connected them, it has summarised their contents. This would have been impossible for any organisation to do by itself, since they know only their own archives. [Moreover], if the State had been the repository of all this immense information, it would have lost the perspective of the civil society', she opines, and adds: '*Memoria Abierta* managed to put together the whole field of archives of civil society, of the human rights organisations. In Argentina, where these historical human rights organisations have a very strong identity, this was very important'.

Even with its current precarious context, in which the lack of resources is perhaps the most familiar and persistent challenge, *Memoria Abierta* continues to redefine its plan of action in relation to the political scenario. The institution envisions important milestones that still lie ahead. 'It's easy to say that civil society has to manage its own archives, the big issue is to see if you can effectively do it, right? The main advice is to try, as much as you can, to generate beneficial alliances. And this implies with public institutions as well', says Flores.



Oriana Bernasconi, Alejandra Oberti, Cecilia Sosa, Gonzalo Conte, Vikki Bell at Memoria Abierta. (Image: Jaime Hernández-García)

PART THREE

Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, Colombia

The *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica* is the main Colombian archive that has documented the internal conflict that the country has suffered for more than fifty years. Legally, the archive began in 2011 with Law 1448, known as the 'Victims' law', but its antecedents go back to 2005 with Law 975 or the 'Justice and Peace law', created to facilitate the process of demobilising paramilitary groups. Under this law, the *Grupo de Memoria Histórica* was created and began its work in 2007, becoming the *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica* in 2011, with the further responsibilities given to it by Law 1448. The *Centro* continues today, and maintains a similar structure.

However, with the election of the new right-leaning government in August 2018, most of the managing directors of the *Centro* – many who had also been part of the initial *Grupo* – resigned to allow the appointment of a new staff. They were fearful of what the Centre would become under this new regime. Certainly, in February 2019, when the new director was appointed,

criticism was raised by several social organisations, particularly by victims' groups, as the new director is described by many as a 'negationist' of the conflict.

Thus the *Centro*, and the research and documentation of the armed conflict in Colombia linked to its role in Colombia's construction of historical memory, has had three stages: the first as the *Grupo*, between 2007 and 2011; the second as the 'golden age' of the *Centro*, between 2011 and 2018; and the current 'contested age' of the *Centro* which started in 2019 and is ongoing. By Law, the *Centro* will remain in existence until 2021 when the provisions of the Law 1448 come to an end (although it is possible that its term will be extended) and the *Centro* becomes enfolded into the planned 'Museo de la Memoria' as described in Law 1448. With their central mission to bring clarity to the complexity of the conflict, both the *Grupo* and the *Centro* have attempted to document the armed internal conflict of the country while conflict is ongoing, a task of 'memory' that is highly unusual and that many would deem paradoxical.



'Auras Anónimas' by Beatriz González, art installation at the columbarium of the central cemetery in Bogotá. (Image: Vikki Bell)

The Historical Context

Arguably, conflict in Republican Colombia dates back to 1839 when the first civil war (1839-1841) took place, a few decades after the country's liberation from Spain in 1819. Between then and 1871, moreover, there were scores of further documented civil wars (Sánchez, Solimano, and Formisano, 2005: 120). However, the 'modern' conflict started with the 1946 election, which was lost by the Liberals, and the assassination of the Liberal presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán that followed in 1948. These events marked the beginning of *La Violencia* (the Violence), a period in the country's history that many commentators regard as the starting point of the political violence that Colombia experiences still. A military coup in 1953 installed General Rojas Pinilla in power for a five-year period, after which civilian rule was reinstated in 1958 by the *Frente Nacional* (National Front). This was a power-sharing arrangement between the Liberals and Conservatives and was to last for 20 years. Although the arrangement can be said to have brought an end to *La Violencia*, it did not address the concerns of guerrilla groups and excluded leftists in the political arena from government (Sánchez, Solimano, and Formisano, 2005: 120).

Some of these excluded groups formed independent enclaves in rural parts of Colombia, including the best known 'independent republic of Marquetalia' as the region was dubbed by commentators, a commune located in the Andes. Largely ignored by the state for some years, these enclaves were eventually attacked, following the advice of the USA, to remove their 'threat', in 1964. Following these attacks, the plan to establish the FARC guerrilla group (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia), a peasant self-defence organisation, emerged (Bottia 2002; Gómez Buendía 1991). Other guerrilla groups also appeared in the country during the same period, such as the ELN (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*, National Liberation Army), which continues to this day, and the M-19, which disbanded some twenty years ago. Paramilitary groups – self-styled self-defence groups – appeared some years later, and especially in the 1980s, and were sponsored by landowners, and often with the help of state agents, to fight the guerrillas and leftists. They would come together to form a counter-insurgency organisation called AUC (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, the United Self-Defence of Colombia). In the 1990s, this organisation grew to more than 10,000 members. Some of the leaders were captured or killed, and as a result the various groups went into a demobilization⁴⁹ processes in 2005. Some factions, however, are still active and have joined organized criminal groups (*bacrim*s).

Drug trafficking appeared in the 1980s, when Colombia became the largest cocaine exporter globally, enabling the guerrillas and the paramilitaries to finance themselves by demanding 'tax' on these activities (Sánchez, Solimano, and Formisano, 2005). This

'industry' seemingly decreased its activity in the 1990s and 2000s, although some commentators argue that they have merely re-organised themselves, becoming less visible than the 'Pablo Escobar' mode of earlier times (e.g. *Revista Semana*, 2000). Nonetheless, their activities still led to violence among the cartels, guerrillas and government, and weakened government and judicial institutions of the country. Moreover, despite the dismantling of the country's cartels, an increase in coca cultivation in the 1990s led to increased activity by the guerrilla groups, expanding their military capacity and intensifying the conflict. All three armed groups in Colombia – guerrillas, paramilitaries and drugs cartels – have aimed to control populations and territory through violence or the threat of violence, and contributed to the expansion of their numbers through drug trafficking and other crimes. Thus 'over time, political and criminal violence in Colombia became indistinguishable' (Sánchez, Solimano and Formisano, 2005:129).

Several peace processes and demobilisations of combatants have been attempted through these years of conflict in Colombia, but for our purposes the two most recent, those with which the *Grupo* and then the *Centro* have dealt, are of most importance. These are the demobilisation of paramilitaries between 2003 and 2006, under the government of Alvaro Uribe, and the peace agreement signed in 2016 with the FARC, under the government of Juan Manuel Santos. The peace agreement was the product of four years of negotiation, and was finally approved despite the result of a national referendum that took place in October 2016 in which the electorate had narrowly rejected its terms based on concerns about the impunity and apparently generous demobilisation settlements, which were widely regarded as rewarding criminal behaviour. This position was promoted by Alvaro Uribe's party, *Centro Democrático*, which was in opposition to Santos' government at the time, and is the party of the current president Ivan Duque. Despite the agreement, conflict and atrocities continue. In the first three months of 2020, more than sixty social leaders and human rights activists were killed, and twenty-four FARC demobilised combatants were assassinated, making a total of nearly 200 since the peace agreement was signed (*Revista Semana*, 2020). In November 2020, it was reported by INDEPAZ, the Institute for Studies in Development and Peace, that the number of social leaders and human rights activists murdered since the peace agreement was signed had now reached 1000 (indepaz.org.co). The Covid-19 pandemic did not stop the violence, as 187 leaders and 37 demobilised combatants were murdered since the first case in the country in March 2020 (as reported by Movice, the National Movement of Victims of State Crimes, movimientodevictimas.org; figures correct for period from March 2020 to 9th November 2020; see also somosdefensores.org).

The Legal Context: A Framework for the Centro

As mentioned above, the *Grupo de Memoria Histórica* began its work in 2007 as part of the measures that were put in place to fulfill the requirements of the 'Justice and Peace' law of 2005 (Law 975). That law arose from the government's negotiations with the paramilitary groups, and it aimed to facilitate the peace process through its principal focus which was the reincorporation of the combatants from these illegal armed groups, mainly paramilitaries, into politics and society in general. The *Grupo* was set up as a unit within the *Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación* established by articles 50 and 51 of that law, in order to facilitate key aspects of the legislation, the most important of which were: first, to enable perpetrators to deliver their public acceptance of their crimes in order for them to be able to receive legal and other benefits, and secondly, to produce a report that explained the rise and development of the illegal armed groups in Colombia. As will be discussed further below, the *Grupo* were given, for the most part, the freedom to decide the best ways to approach these tasks, and were able to use that freedom to establish structures and methods of working that were both autonomous and expansive.



'Justice, Commitment, Respect, Diligence, Honesty', the staircase at the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, Bogotá. (Image: Vikki Bell)

With the 2011 'Victims' law' (Law 1448), the *Grupo* became the *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica* (CNMH), its role officially acknowledged and its tasks defined in law. The Law itself was a 'watershed [*parte aguas*]' moment, according to Andrés Suárez, member of CNMH until 2018, because it addressed the imbalance created by the 2005 legislation that had focused on perpetrators, by focusing instead on the needs of the victims of the conflict. 'We now had a new mechanism of transitional justice focused on the victims and that sought reparation for victims, all victims, included those victimized by the State' (Suárez, November 2nd, 2018 interview). The law established a set of actions, 'judicial, administrative, social and economic, individual and collective, for the benefit of the victims of violations' (Law 1448, article 1)⁵⁰. Within a transitional justice framework, the stated aim of these actions was to offer victims their 'rights to truth, justice and reparation with a guarantee of non-repetition', recognising them as victims and granting them dignity through the acknowledgment of their constitutional rights.

Articles 146-8 of the Law created the *Centro* and gave it specific tasks. Article 147 describes the task of the *Centro* as to seek out and bring together all the documentary materials, including oral testimonies, relating to violations that have occurred. Its task was defined as to make this material available to investigators, and citizens in general, through exhibitions, pedagogic activity, and other means in order to 'provide and enrich knowledge of the social and political history of Colombia'. Furthermore, the *Centro* was charged with the additional task of designing, building and organising a museum of memory in order to 'strengthen collective memory about the facts of Colombia's recent history' (Article 148).

New transitional justice structures were established through the 2016 Peace Agreement, so that the *Centro* now sits within a new legal and institutional landscape called the Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-Repitition (SIVJRN). The Agreement did not alter the independence of the *Centro* or tasks as given by the 2011 law, but it re-arranged the transitional mechanisms so that the *Centro* is now obliged to work and co-operate with newly created institutions to complete its tasks. The three institutions of the system are: the *Special Jurisdiction for Peace* (JEP) which is the judicial branch of the system; the *Commission for the Clarification of the Truth, Coexistence and Non-Recurrence* (CEV) which is the closest institution requiring the Centre's collaboration, and the *Unit for the Search for Missing Persons* with its specific task to seek out the truth and if possible the location of those disappeared during the conflict (See Appendix).

The Work of the *Grupo* and the *Centro*

The first director of the *Grupo*, who remained in post as Director of the CNMH until 2018, was Professor Gonzalo Sánchez, an academic who had worked on issues of conflict and violence for many years. At first, he was somewhat reluctant to take on the task as director, not least because he thought that the making of memory before the conflict's end was going to be a complex and formidable task. However, after listening to several victims' groups, and having established certain principles safeguarding the autonomy of the *Grupo*, he agreed. The guarantees meant that his post was funded internationally – with funding secured from the Swiss government – so that he was independent of the Colombian state in that sense. Moreover, he was guaranteed an international advisory board, for the same reason, and complete autonomy over both the appointments to the Centre and methods of working adopted by the team (Sánchez interview, April 2020).

i. The initial work of the *Grupo de Memoria Histórica* (2007-2011)

The *Grupo de Memoria Histórica* started its work with the two main tasks allocated to it by law. First the *Grupo* worked on the '*Acuerdos de la Verdad*' (Truth Agreements). These were the oral testimonies given by paramilitaries about their actions, testimonies they gave in order for them to be able to access the reintegration programme and receive the judicial benefits offered by the state through the 2005 law (Law 975, and also by 2010's Law 1424). The demobilised paramilitaries who had committed serious violations of human rights would confess and give accounts of their crimes at the public prosecutor's office, with the public prosecutor, the prosecution and the defence lawyers present. They were not offered complete amnesty⁵¹, but in return for their declarations they were given relatively short prison sentences of between five and eight years. This was an important step for the registration of crimes of the conflict. The declarations of perpetrators were recorded, in audio and video, and these generated a set of files that were collected and archived by the State.

The demobilised who had not committed serious human rights violations were allowed to keep their freedom so long as they committed themselves to the reintegration process, one of the conditions of which was that they would 'tell the truth so as to contribute to historical clarification and specific facts'. The *Grupo's* role in relation to the *Acuerdos de Verdad* was to identify the perpetrator's contribution to truth, and the staff of the *Grupo* could ask questions of the declarant in order to identify or challenge that contribution. The group compared the account to other sources, including the victims' recollections, to verify the information. However, as a non-judicial process, this was not a proper investigation of the events nor did they present any conclusions about the veracity of the account as such, because that was not their role, which was limited to checking whether or not the statements

constituted a genuine contribution to truth. If there was, a 'Memorandum of Truth' could be signed between the declarant and the staff. For the declarant, this allowed him or her to continue with the legal process and reintegration.

But the law was flawed, and was not popular with victims and social organisations because it was so focussed on the perpetrators. Victims were not present for the confessions at the public prosecutor's office, but could only gather in adjacent rooms and watch the declarations remotely via a closed-circuit monitor, sending their questions – which were vetted for their 'relevance' – via intermediaries. Andres Suárez, former *Grupo* and *Centro* member recalls: 'they felt that the victims were not really being included. The law was designed for the perpetrator, only [thinking] of the perpetrators' (interview, November 2018). Suárez explains that although the victims gave their accounts to the public prosecutors' office in their thousands, and these were collected for their potential use when the perpetrators spoke, most of these victims' testimonies were never used, since the perpetrators did not present themselves, or the crimes were committed by groups other than those covered by the 2005 law. Moreover, the legal focus, and the subsequent media focus, was all on the perpetrators' accounts. The victims felt side-lined by the law and the whole process. '[The victims] told us that they would be concerned to be in the same room as they would be likely to kill [the perpetrator] but they also felt, as they said to us, "we couldn't even pinch him"' (Suárez interview, 2018). The process was deeply painful for them, but that hurt went unacknowledged. They were obliged to listen to accounts that not infrequently began with self-justifications of the violence meted out, in terms of defending the nation against guerrillas or Communism. And although they were not present when the perpetrators gave their accounts, they were sometimes asked for example, to help the perpetrator remember events, while the perpetrator often remembered nothing that shed any light on what had happened to the relatives of the victims who were listening.

According to Gonzalo Sánchez, the *Acuerdos*, and the Law 975 as a whole, were 'shameful' in relation to the victims: 'there was only the voice of the perpetrators, according to their free will and telling whatever they wanted to tell' (interview, April 2020). Although the *Grupo* tried to incorporate other voices and evidence, the possibilities to do so were limited.

To address the imbalance of the *Acuerdos* and the frustrations and disappointments that came with that aspect of their work, the *Grupo* made their work for the Report, also mandated by the 2005 law, one that would put the victims at its heart and be committed to listening to their stories. As Sánchez puts it, they wanted to develop 'possibilities for questioning the solitary voice of the perpetrator' (interview, April 2020). The series of field-based research projects was their second and their major focus.

The *Grupo* approached their research into violence committed against communities during the conflict through a methodology they termed ‘casos emblemáticos’ (emblematic cases). Via an in-depth focus on specific events in the conflict, they went to territories affected by violence, and spoke to victims and local organisations in order to gather as much information as possible. Through this detailed attention, the *Grupo* hoped to show the broader and deeper dynamics that were invariably at stake. Every emblematic case was built around a larger issue, such as impunity, land dispossession, political exclusion, etc. Through inductive reasoning, Sánchez explains, they tried to speak to the overwhelming number of instances of violence while giving their detailed attention to fewer (interview, April 2020). They decided to start this work with the Trujillo massacre, a difficult and complex case not least because it involved atrocities committed by both the paramilitaries and State actors. State involvement had been confirmed by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the Colombian government had accepted that responsibility. The *Grupo* chose the case in part in order to test how much true autonomy their research would be allowed (Suárez, interview 2018).

The Trujillo massacre was a period of continual violence – mostly targeted murders and forced disappearances – that occurred over several years between 1986 and

1994 (and also continued afterwards) with the most intense period of violence in 1990. Some 245 people lost their lives. The group gathered information from relatives and victims, local community groups as well as international organisations who had followed the events, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Long-term CNMH member Luis Carlos Sánchez recalls: ‘Initially people did not trust the researchers nor the institution because it belonged to the national government. Only with working hard and carefully, and with the aid of key connections in the communities, was trust established, allowing the rich materials of the research to emerge and be collected’ (interview, October 2018). Starting with smaller, more intimate conversations, then gradually conducting workshops in the affected communities, the team worked together over a period of a year or so. The resulting book-length report, *Trujillo: Una tragedia que no cesa*, published in 2008, gave the facts and analysed the dynamics of the massacre, giving ample space to detail the victims’ stories. Here they established their mode of working, which was ‘to build from the very local, so that from the detailed work with the communities, one could raise the voices of these people, so that they became the keys of interpretation of the armed conflict. To empower them ... in the dialogue [about how to build narratives and a memory about the conflict]’ (interview, October 2018).



Photographs by CNMH photographer Jesús Abad Colorado at his exhibition ‘El Testigo’ (The Witness) at the Art Museum of the National University of Colombia, Bogotá, 2018. (Image: Vikki Bell)

Over the following years the *Grupo* undertook several such investigations which documented the conflict, developing shared methodological reflections so that cases could be undertaken with fewer people and in parallel. There were around twenty workers involved in these investigations (ten researchers, each with a research assistant). The team was always careful with the information they requested from people, conscious that their role was to document the memory of the conflict not to act like a judicial enquiry. Gonzalo Sánchez explains: ‘We never asked for information that we thought could be dangerous for the people to give, just because it would be academically interesting. We asked them “what should we say? What should we not say about this?”’ (interview, April 2020). Yet one of the consequences of the reports was that prosecutions were reopened. This happened with the first report, into the Trujillo massacre, as it did with another of the early reports, that into the massacre of Sergovia, where State forces acted with the paramilitaries in a horrific attack on the *Unión Patriótica*, an opposition party founded in 1985. Thus the ‘memory work’ of the investigations, although conceptually separate for the *Grupo* from the explicitly judicial work of the *Acuerdos*, did on occasions put pressure on the judicial system because ‘they showed that the judicial system was negligent’; in short, ‘the reports demanded answers’ (Gonzalo Sánchez interview, April 2020).

Legally, however, the *Grupo* had been mandated by the 2005 law to produce just one report that would detail the origins, formation and rise of illegal armed groups. They decided to fulfil that mandate through the publication of their general report *¡Basta ya! Colombia: Memories of War and Dignity* (2013) that drew upon the almost forty investigations that the group had carried out to date. The Report fulfilled the legal requirement but incorporated much more, reflecting the detailed investigations of the team and producing what remains the most comprehensive document of the contemporary conflict in Colombia. The report is accompanied by maps and graphs to explain the events, as well as an impressive selection of photographs by the *Grupo*’s photographer, Jesús Abad Colorado. As well as a chapter on the formation and rise of the illegal groups, the report discusses the types of violence that the Colombian conflict has suffered, the responses of the changing justice systems, as well as detailing the impacts of the violence on the victims. It ends with a long chapter addressing the memories of the survivors, to show the legacy that such violence leaves in its wake. In addition to the written report, there is a DVD which tells the stories of the Report (the film is also available on youtube). The Report was a mammoth task for the team, who wanted to maintain their commitment to collective working into the writing of the report. Gonzalo Sánchez remembers: ‘[W]e were suffering! Because we knew what we wanted to say, and we had all this knowledge and experience in our heads. ... [But] all the members felt involved and had worked on [all the aspects] ... Everything written in the report had to be an expression of the feelings and points of view of all the people who had participated!’ (Gonzalo Sánchez interview, April 2020).

ii. The work of the *Centro* (2011 onwards)

As discussed above, with the 2011 so-called ‘Victims’ Law’ the *Grupo* became the *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica*. It continued its previous work, receiving the *Acuerdos de Verdad* through a network of several branches across the country (see CNMH, 2014), and continuing its investigations and reports, which became its major focus during this period. The *Grupo* and *Centro* have published over 150 reports to date. To these two previous tasks, the law added two more, both relating to ways to maintain the work of memory into the future: first, the *Centro* was required to establish an archive documenting the serious human rights violations committed during the conflict, to be made available to researchers and to the public, and second, it was asked to establish a national museum of memory in Bogotá, which would be a pedagogic undertaking that would enrich and ‘strengthen collective memory’. We will discuss the archive in the following section of this report.

On the museum, the *Centro*’s initial response was one of surprise. Luis Carlos Sánchez remembers: ‘even for us the idea of making a museum was not comfortable. That is, when we were told that this [work] was going to become a museum, it was like: “A museum? A museum! For real?” Well, we had to work on this, to feel comfortable with the museum as an institution that collects the diversity of memory and the versatility of memory. Understanding, in addition, that it doesn’t matter how we build the museum, memory will always exceed it ... we had to understand the museum as an operator in a process that is much broader than itself’ (interview, 2018). The *Centro* began by organising discussions with local community groups through meetings, artistic workshops and the like, in order to probe what memory means for people, and to develop some discussion and support for what a museum could be. Throughout 2013 there were around thirty such ‘Dialogues on Memory’ meetings, Luis Carlos Sánchez recalls. It was an attempt, as Sánchez’s successor as Director of the Museum project at CNMH, Rafael Eduardo Tamayo, describes it, to reach out to the many communities affected by the conflict and to work with them in order to incorporate modes of expression more appropriate to telling their stories such as through song and collective paintings or performances (interview, 2019).

Luis Carlos Sánchez, former Director of the Museum project, explains that the museum is ‘perhaps the most visible or strongest measure of symbolic reparation that the law of victims brings’ (interview, 2018). And while the very idea of a museum was controversial from the outset, it could be understood, he suggests, as a positive legacy for the *Centro*, which is due to close in 2022 with its archive to be housed from that date within the museum. Insofar as the museum has generated the interest of young researchers who will be pleased to continue the work around memory begun by such key figures as Gonzalo Sánchez and Rodrigo Uprimny, it could be a real achievement (Luis Carlos Sánchez interview, 2018). But it would only be such a legacy if it could act as a ‘visibility platform’ for the victims (Luis Carlos Sánchez, 2018). That is, the

Centro understands the hesitations of those people and organisations who maintain that rather than a museum they would prefer ‘a public policy of memory that really supports the territorial initiatives that are working on [memory]’ (Monica Álvarez, Coordinator of the *Red Nacional de Lugares de Memoria*, interview, November 2018).

Indeed, the victims and the *Red Nacional de Lugares de Memoria* (the National Network of Memory Places) argue that since the conflict has taken place in rural areas and towns, and little has happened in the cities, and particularly in Bogotá – which has been only lightly touched – the museum or museums should be where they make more sense (Monica Álvarez, interview, November 2018). The network would not support ‘a museum over there in Bogotá that does not dialogue with the territories, which is more a way of embellishing Bogotá, than a dialogue with us’ (Monica Álvarez, interview, November 2018). Luis Carlos Sánchez, aware of the importance of this potential problem, explains that since the law states that the museum will be in Bogotá, and its location seems unlikely to change, it is important to use that presence in the capital, where many of the decisions affecting the territories are made, to build a presence and a pressure so that the ‘people in Bogotá have an authority that permanently questions them about what happened in the armed conflict, and that this authority does it with the emphasis on the victims’ voices’ (Luis Carlos Sánchez, 2018).

The *Centro* has also overseen the architecture competition for the museum building (2016), a site for which has been allocated in Bogotá. The winning design, by architects MGP Arquitectura y Urbanismo + Estudio Entresitio (Bogotá/Madrid), incorporates spaces for education, for reflection and for the archive as well as the principal exhibition halls. That said, there have been continual delays. The construction of the building was due to start in July 2020 in order to be ready by the beginning of 2022, but construction is now unlikely to begin before 2022. In the meantime, the museum has developed an active web presence, with a website that presents digital content on chosen aspects of the

work, on particular artists, and short films of gatherings. It also offers information on the museum building, its planned contents and uses (www.museodelamemoria.gov.co).

Moreover, the *Centro* has also designed the main ‘script’ for the permanent galleries of the museum in some detail. Elaborated from ideas gathered by the ‘Dialogues on Memory’, from discussions with existent museums in other countries (including Argentina, Chile, Germany and Peru), the Wilson Centre (www.wilsoncenter.org) and the on-going conversations with community groups and leaders, the script is a conceptual guide organised around three themes: Body, Earth, and Water. The statement, a thoughtful rumination on these themes, is available on the website (www.museodelamemoria.gov.co).

Furthermore, an itinerant exhibition has been developed, called ‘*Voces para transformar a Colombia*’, drawing on the long history of work of the *Grupo* and the CNMH, and has been shown around the country. The exhibition, first shown in Bogotá at the 2018 international book fair, was designed to ‘test out’ the ideas for the permanent museum and to take the ideas to locations outside Bogotá to gain feedback on them (Luis Carlos Sánchez, interview, 2018). The exhibition uses the three ‘axes’ of earth, body and water, using displays with testimonies, photographs, song and objects, to articulate key dynamics. Luis Carlos Sánchez emphasizes how: first, the dynamics of territory shows the sense in which the conflict was about people’s interests in territory, and that the conflict was intentional; secondly, the axes of the body allowed them to speak about both individual and ‘collective’ groups that were victimised, and the importance of the stigmas that the conflict created; and thirdly, the theme of water aims to show the damages of war on the territories and environment in general (interview, 2018). To date, the exhibition has also been shown in Medellín (2018) and in Cali (2019), although this latter exhibition saw tensions around the content emerge with the new directorship of the *Centro*, and it ended early.

A further very important role that the *Centro* adopted, one not specified in the 2011 Act but developed over the course of its implementation, was to aid in how the justice process formulated historical memory and forms of reparation. The special prosecutors of reparation and conflict added to every judicial sentence a paragraph about historical memory. Gonzalo Sánchez explains: ‘So, after every sentence was announced, a memorial or the victims’ biography had to be established as a way of reparation’ (Sánchez interview, May 2020). The *Centro* was required to help support the victims in creating



Luis Carlos Sánchez shows the team the design for the proposed Museum of Memory in Bogotá. (Image: Oriana Bernasconi)

the memorial, monument or bridge as detailed by the judges. However, this role became more a negotiating role since the victims would sometimes express doubt about the value of the symbolic reparation: '[they] began to say: "We don't want a monument, it would be more valuable to have a school for the community and the victims"' (Sánchez interview, April 2020). Because the *Centro* had established trust with the judges, it was able to act as a negotiator, speaking with the judges to help shape what the most appropriate reparation would be in each case. 'The judges understood that they could see us as mediators and listen to the victims' voices through us in order to be able to define what they needed in terms of memory reparation' (Sánchez interview, April 2020).

iii. The work of the *Centro* (2019- present)

Since 2019, the *Centro* has continued to do primary research around the conflict, but in comparison with previous years, it does much less. As mentioned above, the change of government also led to change in the director, as Gonzalo Sánchez decided to step down from the post, and several of the team also left simultaneously or within a year or so of him. According to the new director Dario Acevedo, the *Centro* should facilitate research by researchers around the country and each research project should 'find and tell its own truth' (interview, April 2020). With this purpose in mind, the *Centro* is currently organising a call for applications through the national research body of Colombia, COLCIENCIAS (the first deadline for proposals was in June 2020). The idea is to allow more voices into the debate, including the state, the military, and all non-state groups. Alarmed, civil society organisations have pointed out how this is problematic: first, the 2011 law is very clear that the central focus of the law and the *Centro* should be on the victim and in this sense, this change might be against the law; secondly, powerful voices such as that of the military can overshadow victims' voices and even silence them. Many illustrate this with reference to the cases of the so-called 'false positives' (*falsos positivos*) who were mostly poor young men who the military killed, set up mendaciously as guerrillas, and counted as 'positives', ie. victories in the war against guerrilla groups. To date, little has been done about these cases. The 'out-sourcing' of the research of the *Centro* is an indication that the research work, once so central to building up the trust in their work and purpose, is being minimized.

The Archives and the Use of the Archives

Very much at the heart of the *Centro* is the archive. From the beginning the *Grupo* archived the testimonies it collected and kept copies of information and documents given to the researchers working on the *casos emblemáticos*. The *Acuerdos de Verdad* also yielded its own archive of testimonies from the demobilized paramilitaries. But it was in the 2011 law 1448 that the *Centro's* role as an archive was

acknowledged and its necessity established in law. That law, as mentioned, gave the *Centro* the role of collecting and guaranteeing the preservation of information relating to violations committed during the armed conflict, of making it available to all interested parties, and the related role of disseminating the information through museums, libraries and other State archival spaces. The law acknowledged, furthermore, that other countries had done similarly, with the implication that these international institutions may serve as models for the CNMH. As Margot Guerrero, director of the Archive until 2018 points out, the process of creating the human rights archive was a new experience. There was no history of an archive of this kind in Colombia and for this reason information was sought in international humanitarian law in order to develop guidelines for the new files that were created (interview, November 2018). Thus the experiences of archive building in other countries was important to gather. Indeed, one of the first events was to organize an international conference on human rights archives to which members of Argentina's *Memoria Abierta* visited the *Centro* in order to share their experiences especially in relation to the oral archive, an important issue especially given the predominantly oral cultures of indigenous groups in Colombia (Paula Illa, group interview with archive workers, November, 2018). The other source of expertise was the social leaders in the various communities in the territories, to whom the *Centro* spoke because very often they were already organising their own archives, especially in response and relation to reparation applications. The *Centro* spoke to these communities in order to see what their priorities would be for the *Centro's* archiving activities in relation to their own (Miriam Loaiza, archive worker, group interview, 2018).

It is not always the case that such archives exist as such. Miriam Loaiza describes one example of the *Centro's* work, that began in 2016, which was with the Arhuaco group in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. This group had not believed they had archives of their community, but through careful discussion with researchers from the *Centro* they came to realise that they did in fact have quite extensive archives, including the hand-written documents of their land made during the period of colonization by the Capuchin monks, including sketches of the land and former buildings, as well as those they had created that describe their modes of education and the materials gathered for the reparation requests (Miriam Loaiza, group interview, 2018). The *Centro* discussed these with the leaders and with the help of a research grant were able to collect and 'rescue' this archive, so that it could be preserved in their community capital, Valledupar. The *Centro* is guided here by an ethic of 'accompaniment' and in fact in the case of the Arhuaco the *Centro* did not copy and does not have access to that archive; it is for the community itself. In many other cases, however, the *Centro* has been granted permission to copy the archive and to keep a digital copy of it in the CNMH archive. The archive has become extensive, now holding

approximately 300,000 documents. It continues to be expanded through the *Centro*'s activities, including through continuing research projects, the new *Acuerdos* given under the 2016 Peace Agreement by ex-members of the FARC, and through the registration of objects and experiences that have been shared by communities or through activities associated with the itinerant exhibition *Voces para transformar a Colombia*. All of the materials are copied, stored and retrieved in digital form, with the originals returned to the donors. This is very important for the ethical and political stance of the *Centro*, as the physical items remain within communities, which have their own memory practices and registration needs and processes. Unless the items are to be shown at an exhibition or used in some other physical sense, they exist only virtually at the *Centro*. The *Centro* registers the existence of all archives, those of which it has copies and those for which it does not, as well as of relevant objects (this is called the *Registro Especial de Archivos de Derechos Humanos*), unless the archive owners decline to be so registered. Thus the archive has copies of around two hundred archives, and through the register has details of some 4,000 existent in the country. Meanwhile, research has indicated that there could be as many as 70,000 archives held by individuals and groups, although the label 'archive' may not be the word used locally to refer to the collections, and is not the term used by members of the *Centro* when they are in initial conversations with individuals or communities (group interview, 2018). Miriam Loaiza explained: 'the word archive tends to make people think of paper, no? But when one asks "how did you register that? How did you document it?" they start to talk about photographs, videos, quilts, drawings, maps so that the concept of 'the archive' becomes fuller' (group interview, 2018). As Luis Carlos Sánchez also explained, the *Registro Especial* also includes the registration of relevant objects, which involves 'a small technical description, where they are, how they are being used, and a basic description of the context in which they were produced' so that later they may be considered for exhibitions at the Museum, with the permission of their custodians (interview, 2018).

The digital archive is accessible via the CNMH website, making it widely available. The various archive owners can decide on the level of access (full public access, reserved or private). Only the most sensitive information is usually withheld. The archive workers at CNMH emphasise the benefits of having a virtual archive. It enables communities to preserve their own materials, which is important for building local legal and memory practices, while the digital resource allows researchers exploring the archive to have more time and possibilities to work with the information, making cross references and exploring the collection to inform their analyses (collective interview with archive staff, November 2018). Together with the register of archives, to have one's archive accessible as part of the CNMH's

digital archive offers some protection through its acknowledgement of the archive's existence. In accordance with its historical role and ethos, the *Centro* seeks to strengthen the archives' role locally, giving validation to the archive, as well as offering any organisational or technical help it can to the custodians of the archive.

The learning works both ways, as Laura Guerrero, archivist at the *Centro*, explains, recalling how much she learnt from working with Fabiola Lalinde on her personal archive. Fabiola Lalinde is an important and inspirational figure, whose son Luis Fernando was the first forcibly disappeared person that the Interamerican Court of Human Rights found Colombia guilty of disappearing. Laura Guerrero explains how the process taught her things beyond her training in archival practices, not only how profoundly emotional the work is but also how important the process of creating the archive is. Fabiola Lalinde sometimes found the process very difficult as the documents were so full of sorrow, but she wanted to continue. 'She said "This gives me more reasons to continue the struggle,"' Guerrero remembers, and comments: 'The archive itself doesn't have the power to heal, but one can arrive at the possibility of healing through the process of making the archive, as one mechanism within a much larger psycho-social process' (group interview, 2018).

Apart from researchers and general public interest, the CNMH archive is used for legal purposes. The *Centro* seeks to support both public and private efforts to deliver the legal promise of comprehensive care to victims, the guarantee of human rights, and the application of International Humanitarian Law. In order to assist victims, the CNMH offers input, within their competencies, to those entities in charge of the reparation processes provided by the State, and for the formulation of public policies on the matter (CNMH, 2018). Dates, personal details and facts are requested from lawyers involved in reparation cases, and the archive is able to provide these. This is important also within the current framework of the implementation of the judicial processes of the 2016 peace agreement, as the archive is used by the Commission for the Clarification of the Truth, Coexistence and Non-Recurrence (CEV) and the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) (Appendix 1). In relation to this relationship, Margot Guerrero observes that all the information that arrives at the *Centro* archive, once it is ready for publication, can be passed to the JEP in order to provide information for the cases that this body is dealing with (interview, November 2018). Initially, it was difficult to handle this aspect of the work because they had not always sought the appropriate permission to disseminate it in this way, but as the archive has been grown and processes improved, consent is routinely requested to allow for the publication and such uses of the information.

One example of a case in which the archive was consulted was to investigate the murder of social leader Temístocles Machado in January 2018. The *Centro* had the archive of his community of Buenaventura, a community on the Pacific coast that has suffered much from the conflict, and with whom they had worked two years earlier on a research report. As Dora Betancourt explains, the *Centro* was able to make that archive available to his lawyers; she says ‘for me, it was very rewarding to be able to defend the cause of a leader who had worked his whole life to defend the land, and who was murdered [for it]’ (group interview, 2018).

The archive has also been used for pedagogic purposes, particularly to inform specific memory-building and memorial events. Moreover, as discussed above, the archive is the main source in the creation of the national Museum of Memory informing the museum guide, the contents and the curatorial principles of the permanent galleries. The plan is also that the archive itself will eventually be situated within the Museum of Memory, into which the CNMH will ‘dissolve’ if the plans continue as currently imagined. In terms of other exhibitions, the archive workers recall several instances in which the archives have been used or displayed. For example, items from Fabiola Lalinde’s archive – photographs, documents, objects – were shown at the National University of Colombia at Medellín, alongside artwork made by artist Erika Diettes, who has worked extensively with victims’ relatives (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FkkdzRAj3Tg>). Items donated by members of the community surrounding the horrific murder of the priest Tiberio Fernández in the massacre of Trujillo (Valle), including a book full of the community’s drawings remembering him, were consulted for artistic works such as the play *El Deber de Fenster* (written by Humberto Dorado and Matías Maldonado) (group interview, 2018).

Challenges for the *Centro*

The *Grupo* and the *Centro* have faced several challenges over the years, concerning their ways of working, relations with the government and other groups, and challenges to their autonomy. The most pressing issues for the *Centro* at present arise from the political context which profoundly affects its autonomy and the sustainability of its work. The following key challenges are some of those highlighted by our interviewees.

i. Safety and care of researchers. For the researchers who work in the *Centro*, one of the issues that has had to be faced since its inception was how to carry out the research at all, given the on-going conflict. Although the research strived to be comprehensive, Luis Carlos Sánchez recalls that ‘there were cases we could never work on because there were no safety conditions possible... [it would have meant] exposing ourselves and them [the respondents] to violence’ (interview, 2018). The difficulties of the research were also exacerbated by the fact that the ‘level of distrust in the State was such that they did not want anything

to do with us... the process of building trust was complicated because the war was alive’ (interview, 2018). Sánchez recalls one shocking event that gave them pause:

‘I remember when we were working in La Rochela, on the massacre that was committed in 1989 against a group of judicial investigators who were investigating crimes committed by a paramilitary group from the Middle Magdalena [to summarise briefly] ... It was a group of researchers very similar to us, people who... were 25, 26 years old. We were researchers of 25, 26 years. Many of them, who had also studied in Bogotá, who were worried about the situation that the country was experiencing, who became linked at that time to justice processes and criminal investigations to try to understand what was happening and establish responsibilities, ... they all ended up slaughtered. So that was brutal. Seeing them all, [like] seeing yourself as in a mirror ... And that everything could end like this’ (interview, October 2018).

The group had to work closely to attempt to secure the safety of the researchers in the field, as well as to care psychologically for the group as it worked day after day with incidents of such cruelty and violence. Sometimes researchers have had to pause or leave due to the stresses of such work. Aware of this potential, the team became close-knit and until recently would have a weekly gathering to relax and try to support each other.

ii. Legal Prosecution. One important legal challenge that the *Centro* faced was how to protect the researchers themselves from prosecution. Gonzalo Sánchez recalls an episode that, by bringing the *Centro* to court, strained the relationship between the pursuit of justice and the pursuit of historical memory. After the report into the massacre at La Rochela, which was generally well received, the *Centro* was sued for defamation by one of the politicians named in the report. As with several cases, ‘the degree of involvement that a military or a politician had was so widely acknowledged by all, that to hide that information would have meant to become accomplices in some way’ (Gonzalo Sánchez, interview, April 2020). The *Centro* had felt they had to name him. Through the legal negotiations, it was eventually agreed that the *Centro*’s report would stand as it was, but that the politician would be able to give his own account on their website about which they would not comment. But the experience was troubling, and made the *Centro* realise it could be vulnerable to prosecutions. To protect this from happening, the *Centro* requested that the 2011 ‘Victims’ law’ in which the *Centro* was officially created, would include an article explicitly safeguarding the autonomy of the *Centro* from prosecution (Gonzalo Sánchez, interview, April 2020). This was granted and the guarantee was incorporated into Article 147 of the law.

iii. **Losing Archives.** In relation to the work of registering archives and compiling the virtual archive, one of the challenges has been how to have access to archives that exist around the country. From the beginning, the issue of building trust has been a fundamental issue, and the *Centro* has met with closed doors which they have not always been able to convince owners to open (group interview, 2018). Moreover, some archives have been stolen, lost or damaged in raids or violent events. This causes sorrow for the archivists, who believe in the importance of the archives for the future.

iv. **The future: the museum.** As discussed above, the *Centro* is supposed to ‘dissolve’ into the Museum of Memory in Bogotá in the near future, with the archive to be administered from there. However, the future of the museum remains uncertain, which also is creating profound uncertainty for the *Centro*. More than the delays in the physical building of the museum, there is also a sense that the museum’s focus is under threat. Historically, the CNMH has prided itself on giving voice to the victims of the conflict and the museum was being designed to put their experiences centrally within it. Yet there is a sense that this is starting to be eroded. As mentioned above, the itinerant exhibition *Voces para transformar a Colombia* was closed early in Cali, and in May 2020 the whole exhibition was placed under the ‘protection’ of the JEP (*Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz*) after they received a complaint that the victims’ agreements

with the CNMH – and indeed their rights under the 2011 law – had been contravened, since the exhibition, guides and text were allegedly altered arbitrarily and without consultation (*El Espectador*, June 2020). The implication is that the changes reflected the new directorship’s controversial understanding of the conflict. The CNMH submitted that the exhibition is a pilot that one would expect to be subject to changes. But the JEP has ordered that the guide revert to its original version. During this research, the change of personnel in the role of Director of the Museum, who has changed twice over, suggests there are differences of opinion in relation to the Museum and within the *Centro* itself.

v. **The future: the archive.** As this report has shown, the CNMH has prided itself on its careful processes of building relationships of trust with social groups across Colombia since the days of the *Grupo*. It was, they understood, only because of this trust that the research and the archive has been possible. At present this trust is under threat. Although the archive is a digital resource, so that it is in fact a copy of the original physical archive, and although the archives have now been copied and are also held by the JEP and the Truth Commission, it is significant that some groups have requested their archives ‘back’ from the *Centro*. They are publicly declaring their doubt about the uses to which they fear their archives may be put; they are indicating the vulnerability they feel since the *Centro* has been under its new directorship. Moreover, in June 2020 MAFAPO, the group of Mothers of Soacha and



Museo Casa de la Memoria, Medellín, Colombia. An example of a successful museum of memory that shares the CNMH’s commitment to work closely with the victims and local communities. (Image: Vikki Bell)

Bogotá, whose sons died as a result of the scandalous 'Falsos Positivos' mentioned above, and who have become a support and campaign group, publicly declared that they no longer wish to co-operate with the CNMH (*El Espectador*, 4 June 2020). Having previously given interviews for publications to tell their stories, and for use in the Museum, they have now heard the declarations made by the current director, Dario Avecedo, on his views on the conflict, and feel unable to continue. They state that they do not want to share a museum space where the 'heroism' of the armed forces is celebrated (*El Espectador*, 4 June 2020).

The current Director has indicated, furthermore, that the archive of the *Centro* will now be given to the National Archive of Colombia (*Archivo General de la Nación*), where he believes it should belong (interview, April 2020); this however, has caused some alarm among social organisations, who had previously been told that it would remain separate and be housed in the new Museum. It is currently unclear which will prove to be the case.

- vi. **Expansion of the category of 'the victim'.** In the years of negotiations leading to the 2016 peace agreement, there were several groups who sought to be included within the definition of victims, including members of guerilla and paramilitary groups as well as members of the military. According to Gonzalo Sánchez, the negotiations 'invited or provoked' this process, as they involved a broadening of perspectives. Thus members of the FARC began to ask to be considered part of the victims group, declaring that their uprising was a response to their victimisation, that they were 'holy warriors' (Sánchez, June 2020). When people who were clearly perpetrators are also victims, the central tenet of the work of the CNMH became less clear. The profile of the victims expanded to include more questionable experiences. Landowners who were victims of kidnapping and who then became paramilitaries,

for example, or military personnel who were injured by anti-personnel landmines, cases that show the mobility of identities and the grey zones that emerge in a conflict of this length. So 'there were new actors, that had their own claims and their own victim/aggressor ambiguities' (Sánchez interview, June 2020). These new actors – and political parties who claim to have taken on their cause – have criticised the *Centro* for ignoring these 'other' victims. The new directorship enfolded this into its current discourse that emphasises its mission to provide more 'complete' research. But this emphasis has been difficult especially for the 'first' victims, as these new voices have changed the whole scenario and made the scene of victimhood much more fraught and complex. Indeed, Gonzalo Sánchez worries that the *Centro* is now regarded 'as a place that's been occupied and invaded by the perpetrators' discourse, and that has lost its legitimacy'; it is seen as undergoing a 'crisis of truth' (Sánchez interview, June 2020).

- vii. **Autonomy.** It is also the case that concerns have been raised more generally about the *Centro's* hard-won autonomy from government and other interested parties. If the trust and co-operation of social groups, and their willingness to co-operate, wanes, then the essence of an institution that has responsibility for historical memory is also at risk. For years the CNMH worked to tell complex stories about the conflict in ways that focused its attentions on the experience of the victims without a party-political agenda. Now, according to many, there is an acceptance that the *Centro* is an appendage of government, and there is no desire to retain the autonomy that had made the *Centro* so admired in the international community. At the moment, this is arguably the major challenge for the *Centro*, as the seeming lack of interest in defending the autonomy that was once paramount in the principles of the *Centro*, will diminish its prestige and the weight of its contributions on that wider stage.

Conclusion

Each of the case studies involves a story of a dedicated group of people who have embarked upon, and have continued with, the often difficult and dangerous work of building these archives. Each shows the ability of people to respond to violent situations in ways that are concerned first and foremost with helping those who suffer in the face of such violence. The archives embody a form of resistance that take a systematic, methodical route, sustained over many years. Indeed, these are institutions that are only able to be sustained by the work of the personnel within them, as well as those who interact with them. By aiming to understand what has happened, and to commit to inscribing these facts in forms of documentation that will be preserved henceforth, each archive stands as a demand of sorts, both for remembrance and for legitimate social institutions that will serve to prevent injustices into the future.

Despite some significant differences between the three case-studies, which we will highlight throughout our discussion below, taken together they present the opportunity to offer some important reflections on the process and experience of building an 'archive of violence'. In the Recommendations section that follows, we will offer some specific 'do's and don'ts' derived from our interviews and conversations with those who work in the archives. Here, we suggest there are some important more general reflections that have arisen for us, and that can be grouped into three sets of issues, offered here by way of conclusion.

The emergence of the archive: What is an archive? When is an archive?

First, the three 'archives of violence' allow us to raise some answers to the most basic question 'what is an archive?' that is closely followed by an entwined secondary query: 'when is the archive?'

For FUNVISOL, the *Vicaría's* work produced an archive as a result of its support for the victims and relatives, and the legal and other campaign work that accompanied that support. The archive was to some extent an unintended consequence, although the order and the care that went into producing its orderliness was of course, consciously and meticulously followed once it became clear that this record was going to be fundamental not only to the action they were taking in attempting to pursue justice through the legal system at the time, but also to justice campaigns in the longer term. The archive emerged therefore alongside the work that the organisation was carrying out during the Pinochet dictatorship, and as a trace of it. Today, of the three archives, that of FUNVISOL most closely aligns with a traditional image of an archive, with documents and images filed, and the archive 'closed' in the sense

that only new legal decisions and pertinent newspaper articles are now added.

By contrast the work of *Memoria Abierta* began in earnest after the military junta fell, when the need to dedicate time to organising and co-ordinating the archives of Argentina's several human rights organisations became apparent. This co-ordination did not seek to influence what was in the archives, just to allow users to negotiate and search more easily and systematically. The oral archive, however, is truly a work of memory, that explicitly asks respondents to look back, to produce a record of events after their occurrence. Here, the oral archive – and the mapping of cases in the Topography of Memory project – is produced rather than 'gathered', and is not a trace of work that has been done, like FUNVISOL, but of a work (of oral history, of data analysis and design) that is consciously planned and moreover, is on-going. The audio-visual tapes are produced in order to preserve the richness of individual memories and stories, that is, to deepen our understanding of that experience and our appreciation of the details and impact of what occurred during the last dictatorship. Its temporality therefore contrasts with FUNVISOL insofar as it is a work in the present that looks back in order to allow those in the future to reconsider the period of the last military dictatorship, and to ask their own questions of it.

The third archive of violence, that of the CNMH in Colombia, is different again in so far as it set itself the task to record the violence and to produce an archive, while the violence was – and while it is – still occurring. As a part of efforts to understand why violence took hold in Colombia, its work has been regarded by the State itself as part of the path to peace insofar as it has been enshrined in law (albeit with the proviso that it would become enfolded into the museum in due course). Its archive is not constituted by an 'unintended' record, nor is it a work of memory in the sense of looking back at a period of violence. Collecting together the archives held by groups and communities across Colombia – documents and objects that they sometimes unwittingly preserve 'as' an archive but without so naming them – the CNMH builds an archive of (copies of) 'archives'. Importantly, it adds to these its own productions in the form, mainly, of research reports and books that take a particular focus, be that on 'emblematic cases' or on key aspects of their work, such as methodology.

What an archive is, therefore, in terms of its conditions and the timing of its emergence, when it is gathered or produced, differs between the three cases, and this has had an important influence on what sorts of materials each contains.

Clearly the sorts of materials an archive contains are also influenced by other concerns. First, the 'mission' of the archive, the sense of what is likely to be lost, and hence needs to be preserved. It is also influenced by technology, both the technologies that produced the materials, as well as those utilised by those assembling the archive. New technologies allow different modes of gathering materials as well as allowing the production of different materials that need to be archived. The digitalisation of contents of these archives has also made the potential usage of the archives more widely available into the future, something to which we will return.

The autonomy of the archive. Who owns the archive?

A second issue to which we have returned frequently, has been the question of autonomy. How the archive relates to other organisations and especially to the institutions of the state is important on many different levels. The term 'autonomy' was explicitly used by interviewees at CNMH, since the *Grupo* was taken into the apparatus of the State's attempt to address the past, a direction of travel that was to become untenable for some of its key members. Financially, it sought to remain autonomous from the state, and this enabled a more trusting relationship with the victims' groups with whom it needed to establish a good relationship. Autonomy also meant the ability to conduct research where the group chose, to take decisions about key aspects of what it means to build 'historical memory' and deciding the boundaries of that concept. Recently, this sense of the autonomy of CNMH has been diminishing, and the programme and ethos of the *Centro* has suffered for it. This has threatened its relationship with victims' groups who had previously supported it, since in their eyes its legitimacy is in question, as well as casting a shadow over the future of the project for a memory museum in Bogotá.

For *Memoria Abierta* in Argentina, autonomy refers more closely to the autonomy of civil society and the human rights organisations in particular from State agendas. With the return to democracy, Argentina's human rights organisations were embattled since, beyond and despite the junta trials of 1985, impunity and an attitude of 'turning over a new leaf' were the prevailing attitude. As we have seen, *Memoria Abierta* was established precisely to co-ordinate some of these efforts, those concerned with the archiving of the violent past. What was unanticipated at that time was that there would be a different sort of problem under the later governments of Néstor and then Cristina Kirchner, when the State's attitude was so supportive of memory work that the autonomy of civil society was threatened. As discussed in this report, maintaining a balance and focus on one's line of work has been vitally important for the organisation and its members.

By contrast with both, for FUNVISOL the institutions were set up precisely in explicit separation from Pinochet's dictatorship, but with an attempt to use the legal institutions and processes. When this failed, due

to the latter's lack of autonomy, the Committee for Peace and the *Vicaría* operated autonomously but under the protection of the Catholic church, something which arguably compromises absolute autonomy. Recently, the question of autonomy arises insofar as there is resistance to the idea that the archive should become part of the national archive.

The future of the archive. What is an archive for? Who is it for?

A third set of reflections that it may be useful to flag here are those that centre around the question of the future. What are the issues for the future of these archives? This question is crucial for those steering the direction each of our archives, and it subtends a related question: Who is the archive for?

For none of the three organisations was the making of an archive an end in itself. But nor were its uses tightly delimited. For all three there are questions of justice that animated the work, both formal questions, a conviction that crimes need to be addressed by the State, and also a more sociological idea that this sense of justice needed to be truly felt by the people before the country would be able to achieve peace. An archive of violence may record violence for posterity, but in all three cases this record is also about the profound concern with the affective impact that the archive might have when it is understood as a story shared by many.

Where significant generations of those who were 'directly' affected by the violence are now aging – as in Argentina and Chile – and passing away, there arises the question of who will retain interest in the archives. Who will manage the archives, who will visit, who will support the archive financially? These are questions that both FUNVISOL and *Memoria Abierta* grapple with. In both cases there are the further generations of those affected, many of whom are part of networks and organisations who understand the importance of the archives. Nevertheless, the worries remain. To some extent such concerns also fuel the strategies to encourage participation in their work by secondary school teachers and other educators, and the attention that is being paid to the digitalisation and dissemination processes. The need to show the links between the past and the present, and to join the condemnation of human rights abuses of today, those that concern and mobilise the younger generations, is regarded as crucial to the on-going relevance of archives.

For CNMH, there is a future to some extent mapped out for the archive, as it is destined to become a part of the Memory Museum project in Bogotá as stipulated by law. The concerns here are therefore bound up with the concerns over that project, that is: will the museum go ahead? Will the museum have the support of the victims' groups and maintain the ethos of the initial work carried out by the *Grupo*? Can it, and will it attempt to be, inclusive across the country and across communities? Will the museum be

regarded as independent and trustworthy within and beyond Colombia? Will the State continue to support the archive as a living archive within the museum? In this interim period, before the museum, how can the work of the CNMH respond to the on-going conflict that has seen an increase in massacres as we write, in 2020? Has its independence from the State been too compromised, so that people withdraw their support and respect from it? There is a deep worry that the work of the Centro has been so diluted of late that it is unlikely to return to the times of high productivity, high international respect and high trustworthiness among affected communities.

A note on Covid-19

The fieldwork for this research began in 2018 and was due to continue through to 2021. The advent of Covid-19 meant that we were unable to make some follow-up research trips, but we were lucky insofar as we had already conducted the interviews that we most needed to write up the research, and were able to add a few more important ones via Zoom on-line interviews. We look forward to a time when we will be able to resume our visits and conversations within and between each of these countries.

The pandemic has also had consequences for the institutions we were studying. In Chile, FUNVISOL remains open but cannot welcome visitors, answering queries by email only. Those who absolutely require certificates, and there have been fewer in this period, have to prove their identities by sending ID in advance, and/or the workers check it when they come to collect the papers. Students and their teachers are mostly using the website, with some queries about on-going research projects undertaken by Zoom. It is a sad time for the workers, who miss the activity at the archive, and, since they share the site with a church, have the added sadness of seeing funerals take place with the restricted numbers of mourners allowed to pay their last respects. In Argentina, *Memoria Abierta* has also been forced to close its doors, but it has responded to the situation by increasing its efforts at digitalisation, widening access to its digital archive, adding new materials to its website⁵² and engaging in the creation and circulation of many online discussions and activities. There is a sense that through the use of new platforms and social networks, they have managed to continue to fulfil their mission and may even have reached a wider community of those committed to preserving the memory of the violent past. This digital activism has revealed itself as a fundamental strategy to engage with new generations and audiences, one that is likely to remain part of the future plans of the archive. In Colombia, as mentioned above, the pandemic has not slowed the violence against social leaders, one of the most shocking crimes these days, with twice as many killed in 2020 as in 2019 (reported by ACLED, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, INDEPAZ, and the Front Line Defenders NGO). Other crimes against civilians connected with the internal conflict and the lack of firm commitment or action from the government towards implementing the 2016 peace agreement, also continue to threaten hopes for future peace. In this context the CNMH has been rather quiet, with only a few online events organised around questions such as pedagogies of memorial work. Other institutions, such as the *Centro de Memoria, Paz y Reconciliación* of Bogotá, and the *Museo Casa de la Memoria* in Medellín, have been more active, with several virtual events including discussions, presentations, workshops and film screenings.

Endnotes

- 1 Quotation from *'Dos años de Labor'* [Two Years of Labour], a report of the *Comité de Cooperación para la Paz en Chile*, 1975. Source: FUNVISOL.
- 2 The participants were the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Lutheran, the Evangelical Methodist, the Orthodox, the Pentecostal Churches and the Chilean Hebrew Community.
- 3 As stated in the letter from the heads of the Lutheran, Catholic, Methodist Pentecostal, Methodist, Baptist, Orthodox and Israelite community churches to the priests, evangelical pastors and religious, announcing the formation of the Committee for Peace, October 1973. Appendix 1.2 of *'Dos años de Labor'* [Two Years of Labour]. Committee for Peace, 1975. Source: FUNVISOL.
- 4 *Ibid*, p2.
- 5 Archbishop of Santiago Decree N° 158-73, 9th October, 1973. Source: FUNVISOL.
- 6 *'Dos años de Labor'* [Two Years of Labour]. Committee for Peace, 1975. Source: FUNVISOL.
- 7 Press notice *El Mercurio* newspaper, 5th-10th November, 1973. Source: FUNVISOL.
- 8 This resulted in the constitution, submitted for ratification on September 11th 1980 via a plebiscite which is widely acknowledged not to have made proper checks of the electoral register, and that allowed Pinochet to retain his Presidency for eight more years without challenge. This is the constitution under which the country is still governed, amended 44 times. There was a failed attempt to start a review process under the presidency of the socialist Michelle Bachelet (2014-2018). Recently, in 2019, under the right-wing government of President Sebastián Piñera, massive and extensive social protests throughout the country forced a political agreement between opposition and government parliamentarians to work on the drafting of a new constitution for Chile. A referendum to support this action was won, with 78% agreeing to the drafting of a new constitution, in October 2020.
- 9 The Legal Departments of the Committee for Peace and the *Vicaría* registered 44,413 people detained for political reasons, submitted 8,904 appeals on behalf of more than 21,128 people and were informed of 1,100 cases of disappeared detainees.
- 10 Interview with attorney Jaime Esponda conducted by Oriana Bernasconi, April 8, 2016, for previous research project.
- 11 Press notice *El Mercurio* newspaper, 5th-10th November, 1973. Source: FUNVISOL.
- 12 Letter from Cristián Precht to the Comptroller of the Republic. Source: FUNVISOL document 0197.
- 13 Committee for Peace 1975, 7. Source: FUNVISOL.
- 14 The National Commission on Political Prison and Torture 2004 Report pointed out, years later, that 63% of the people were victimized in the first three months of the dictatorship, a period in which the Committee was being formed and of which it has just a few records.
- 15 Letter to the Archbishop of Santiago Cardinal Silva Henríquez, dated November 11th, 1975. Source: FUNVISOL.
- 16 Interview conducted by Oriana Bernasconi and Manuel Guerrero with *Vicaría* social worker María Luisa Sepúlveda, July 13th, 2015, for previous research project.
- 17 Interview conducted by Oriana Bernasconi and Manuel Guerrero with Ramiro Olivares, former doctor of the *Vicaría*, November 23rd, 2015, for previous research project.
- 18 Press notice, November 22nd, 1992, on the closure of the *Vicaría de la Solidaridad*. Source: FUNVISOL.
- 19 *La Época* Newspaper *'Vicaría de la Solidaridad: Llegó la hora de decir adiós'*, 24th November, 1992.
- 20 <http://www.vicariadelasolidaridad.cl/node/11>
- 21 Data from research project *Proyecto Anillos Tecnologías Políticas de la Memoria* [Political Technologies of Memory Project] (PI: Bernasconi, forthcoming, 2021). Data drawn from the information cards filled out by visitors.
- 22 After which it was based in the offices of FASIC, before finally moving to its own offices in the centre of Santiago.
- 23 For a brief characterization of the documentary collections of human rights in the country, including these digital repositories, see 'Guide to the Archives of Memory and Human Rights in Chile', 2017. Available at: <https://memoriayderechoshumanosuah.org/guia-de-archivos-de-memoria-y-derechos-humanos-en-chile/>
- 24 <http://www.unesco.org/new/es/communication-and-information/memory-of-the-world/register/full-list-of-registered-heritage/registered-heritage-page-4/human-rights-archive-of-chile/>
- 25 Such as: <https://www.lashistoriasquepodemoscontar.cl/>, <https://www.memoriaviva.com/> and <https://www.archivochile.com/> See "Guide of Memory and Human Rights archives in Chile" (2017) available at <https://memoriayderechoshumanosuah.org/guia-de-archivos-de-memoria-y-derechos-humanos-en-chile/>
- 26 These identity photographs from the family album or ID cards were cropped and enlarged to become the placards and denunciation photographs through which the crime of the disappearance was spread to the world.

- ²⁷ Letter from General Pinochet to the Archbishop of Santiago, Monseñor Raúl Silva Henríquez, asking for the organisation's closure. Santiago 11th November, 1975. Accessible at: http://www.cardenalsilva.cl/pdf/47_intercambio.pdf
- ²⁸ See *Lecturas de Psicología y Política. Crisis política y daño psicológico*, a book that brings together the works presented at these conferences, which circulated clandestinely in the 1980s without authors' names. The book was republished in 2017, edited by Elizabeth Lira, this time including the names.
- ²⁹ Preliminary research results of the *Proyecto Anillos Tecnologías Políticas de la Memoria* [Political Technologies of Memory Project], PI: Bernasconi, unpublished.
- ³⁰ Interview conducted by Oriana Bernasconi and Marcela Ruiz with attorney Álvaro Varela, January 18, 2016.
- ³¹ Although in 1985, the leaders of the Military Junta were condemned in an historic trial, and in 1986 and 1987 the 'Full Stop' and 'Due Obedience' – the so-called 'laws of impunity' – put an end to most prosecutions against military personnel accused of violence during the dictatorship (excluding cases of identity forgery and the forced disappearance of minors). In 1990, in the name of a supposed 'national reconciliation', President Carlos Menem (1989-1999) 'forgave' most of the military that had already been condemned. The so-called *indulto* happened in spite of strong resistance on the part of most of Argentine civil society. The 'impunity laws' were repealed by the National Congress in 2003, and definitively voided as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of Justice on 14 June 2005.
- ³² Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, Mothers of Plaza de Mayo—Linea Fundadora, Centre of Legal and Social Studies, Permanent Assembly for Human Rights, Relatives of the Disappeared and Detained for Political Reasons and Service for Peace and Justice.
- ³³ From very early on, the Argentine network of human rights organisations not only started working on Justice and Truth, but also on the work of memory and its transmission. This memory work has always been a militant or activist work with people affectively and directly involved. *Memoria Abierta's* work necessarily drew upon the very early work developed by the network of organisations. Education and the transmission of memory has always been the basis of the archival work.
- ³⁴ *Memoria Abierta's* original aims can be found in the institution's manifesto *Recordar*.
- ³⁵ The first organisations were those formed by relatives of the disappeared, confirming the 'bloodline' network of initial human rights groups, which gave a familial tone to their struggle. Later organisations, such as CELS and APDH, have more professional profiles.
- ³⁶ See the institutional website, <http://memoriaabierta.org.ar/wp/en/inicio/> for their current self-description.
- ³⁷ *Memoria Abierta* is in the process of uploading the complete list of the personal archives held at its headquarters onto the website.
- ³⁸ The programme develops documentary records such as the reconstruction of buildings through drawings, volumetric representations, models and animations. See <http://memoriaabierta.org.ar/wp/en/about-sites/>.
- ³⁹ In 2005 the Supreme Court declared the laws of impunity null so that prosecutions were allowed to begin once again.
- ⁴⁰ In CELS's case, the reopening of the trials was conceived as a major success. 'Even during the dictatorial times, before there were conditions to think about the legal process, the information and documentation was gathered at CELS to assist the trial', argues Marcela Perelman, the institution's director of research.
- ⁴¹ *Memoria Abierta* has also won some national contests, but there have not been many, they note.
- ⁴² Late president Raúl Alfonsín created the CONADEP on 15 December 1983. The research of the investigation commission was documented in the *Nunca Más* (Never Again) report, which was published on 20 September 1984 and led to the trial of the Military Junta. Although CONADEP recorded the forced disappearance of 8,961 people, the number estimated by the human rights organisation reaches 30,000.
- ⁴³ In terms of the experience of transferring physical archives, *Memoria Abierta* addresses one exception: the transference from the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to the General Archive of the Nation in 2010. 'This was a very beneficial experience for Argentina. Everything is placed in order and all the information is now open to consultation' asserts Flores.
- ⁴⁴ A map of the sites of repression as well as the rest of the research developed by the Topographies project can be found here <http://memoriaabierta.org.ar/wp/en/about-sites/>
- ⁴⁵ An English version of the manuscript can be downloaded here: http://memoriaabierta.org.ar/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Testimony_Archive.pdf
- ⁴⁶ The Oral Archive was inspired by two models: the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies (<http://fortunoff.library.yale.edu/>), housed at Yale University Library, which holds more than 4,400 testimonies, and the Steven Spielberg Archive that belongs to the Shoah Foundation and is deposited at the University of Southern California (<https://sfi.usc.edu/>). The latter can now be consulted via *Memoria Abierta's* website.
- ⁴⁷ The book is entitled *Y nadie quería saber* [And nobody wanted to know], and it can be downloaded free from *Memoria Abierta's* website: <http://memoriaabierta.org.ar/wp/en/and-nobody-wanted-to-know/>

- ⁴⁸ For a reflection on *Memoria Abierta*'s use of audio-visual interviews within the wider context of Argentina's ecologies of post-dictatorship truth, see Bell and Di Paolantonio (2018).
- ⁴⁹ Defined as the process of armed groups giving up their arms and reintegrating into civil life.
- ⁵⁰ The victims are defined as individual or collectives who have suffered harm as a result of the internal armed conflict since 1st January 1985.
- ⁵¹ Previous governmental attempts to consider giving amnesty to the paramilitaries had not been received well inside or outside Colombia. With this law, those who had not committed serious crimes were given amnesty but those who had were given these relatively short sentences.
- ⁵² Including material on the history of the human rights struggle and memory work called 'Memories of Memory' (<http://memoriaabierta.org.ar/wp/memorias-de-la-memoria>), a section on the dictatorship in the cinema, (<http://www.memoriaabierta.org.ar/ladictaduraenelcine/>) and a section on how feminism and the memory of the dictatorship came together called 'Rebels (*Insumisas*)' <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLO2MPpHCy1nwggsIsS9ciKskLfc4n4c7t>

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Poster for the exhibition of Jesús Abad Colorado, 'El Testigo' (The Witness) at the Art Museum of the National University of Colombia, Bogotá, 2018. (Image: Vikki Bell)

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Appendix

Institutions set up by the 2016 Peace Agreement in Colombia

As a result of the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC in 2016, a broad system was created in order to achieve the greatest possible satisfaction of the victims' rights, ensure accountability for what happened, guarantee the legal security of those who participate in the System and contribute to guarantee coexistence, reconciliation and non-repetition of the conflict and thus ensure the transition from armed conflict to peace (Laing, 2018). This integral system is called the Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-Repetition (SIVJRNR), and within the system there are three judicial and extrajudicial mechanisms: the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), the Commission for the Clarification of the Truth, Coexistence and Non-Recurrence (CEV), and the Unit to Search for Missing Persons.

The Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) The Special Jurisdiction for Peace is the judicial mechanism that was created to satisfy the right of victims to justice, to offer truth to Colombian society, to protect the rights of victims, to contribute to the achievement of a stable and lasting peace, and to adopt decisions that grant full legal security to those who participated directly or indirectly in the internal armed conflict. Thus, the Jurisdiction will apply to: members of guerrilla groups that signed the peace agreement with the government, once they have laid down their arms; State agents who have committed crimes in the context and by reason of the armed conflict; and, persons who, without forming part of the organisations or armed groups, have participated indirectly (financiers or collaborators) in the armed conflict and have been responsible for the commission of the most serious and representative crimes (JEP, 2018).

The Commission for the Clarification of the Truth, Coexistence and Non-Recurrence (CEV). The commission is one of the temporary and extrajudicial mechanisms of the SIVJRNR. It was created to know the truth of what happened in the context of the armed conflict and contributing to the clarification of the violations and infractions committed during the same and offer a broad explanation of its complexity to the whole society. Although the Commission will work on documentation, it also plans to engage in activities related to reconciliation and to promote coexistence and social cohesion at a local level (Moloney, 2018). The commission must fulfill three purposes established by the peace agreement. First, contribute to the clarification of what happened, and provide a comprehensive explanation of the complexity of the armed conflict, in such a way that a shared understanding in society is promoted. Second, promote and contribute to recognition of the victims as citizens who saw their rights violated and in general the recognition by the whole society of this legacy of

violations and infractions as something that deserves the rejection of all and that should not be and cannot be repeated. Third, promote coexistence in the territories understanding that coexistence does not consist in the simple sharing of the same social and political space, but in the creation of a transformed environment that allows the peaceful resolution of conflicts and the construction of the broadest culture of respect and tolerance in democracy (AIL, 2019).

The Unit for the Search for Missing Persons. The Unit is the other extrajudicial mechanism of humanitarian character belonging to the SIVJRNR. Its objective is to establish what happened to the disappeared persons in the armed conflict context, in order to satisfy the victims' rights to truth and integral reparation. The purpose of the unit is to direct, coordinate and contribute to the implementation of humanitarian actions to search and identify missing persons who are alive, and in cases of death, identify the location and delivery of remains if it is possible. The unit must deliver to the Truth Commission the reports that are produced and establishes a protocol of cooperation and exchange of information with the Commission (Unidad de Búsqueda, 2019).

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Recommendations: The 'Do's and Don'ts' of building an archive

In this section we present a list of recommendations that arise from the research. As mentioned in the introduction, these are presented in the form of a list of 'do's and don'ts', to be succinct and to lend clarity. In the following, we set ourselves the task to imagine how what we have learnt from studying each archive would translate into a list of friendly advice for those embarking on a similar endeavour. We also add a sentence or two of explanation, to give a sense of how and why these suggestions arise. To repeat, these are not direct quotations from the interviews, but they are

derived or inspired by the in-depth conversations we have had with archive workers and ex-workers in each country. Our list is intended to stimulate discussion where there made be a need to consider organising an 'archive of violence.'

We have organized the following by country. Although there is some overlap between some of the recommendations, we felt that amalgamating the list meant that useful context was removed, affecting the meaning and intention behind the suggestions.

1. RECOMMENDATIONS FROM FUNVISOL

(Fundación de Documentación y Archivos de la Vicaría de la Solidaridad), Chile

- **Build networks of trust with victims and families.** Having close supportive relationships with the victims, survivors and their relatives allowed the *Vicaría* not only to become a critical organisation during the dictatorship period but also an important centre of documentation.
- **Prepare your documentation with the legal process in mind, as much as possible.** In the future, your archive might be able to provide evidence in judicial proceedings in cases of crimes against humanity. For the *Vicaría* the realm of the legal seemed an objective terrain on which to challenge the government for the horrors it produced. An on-going study shows that between 1992 and 2018 FUNVISOL received more than 3,200 requests of documentation from judges investigating crimes against humanity both nationally and abroad. They related to more than 6,000 victims.
- **Work to build networks of international solidarity.** In a country surrounded by repression, fear and censorship, where civil and political rights had been suspended, international solidarity was key to support and promote the work of the *Vicaría* in Chile during the Pinochet dictatorship.
- **Be aware of the categorisations and narrative structure produced through your use of information-collecting forms and paperwork.** The information you gather might have further uses than those you imagine at present. The entry form used by the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1991 maintained the same model as the one created by the Committee and the *Vicaría* during the dictatorship.
- **Consider that your archives might prove useful for those requesting reparation for future generations, in particular, the descendants of the victims.** Relatives of the disappeared ask the *Vicaría* to provide them with a certificate to prove their status as victims. This has allowed grandchildren of the disappeared to be exempted from military service, and other relatives to qualify for health care or housing benefits, as stipulated by the reparation laws.
- **Include as much detail about events as possible in your records.** Include all details of the people, dates and places. The details on writs of habeas corpus have been used in legal processes to prove that people beyond the principal victim should also be considered victims of the repression.
- **Your archive might contribute evidence in the quest to create spaces of commemoration and public mourning.** The *Vicaría's* archive has played an important role in the recovery and transformation of former detention, torture and extermination centres into sites of memory and places of commemoration.
- **Bear in mind that a broad and diverse catalogue can enhance the creative uses of your archive.** The *Vicaría's* press and audio-visual archives have been intensely required for productions of series and films about the dictatorship period. This was mainly due to the organisation's diversity of cataloguing formats, which has fostered creative appropriation from unexpected users.
- **Be sure to check who is requesting information.** Failing to do so could endanger yourself and others. Documenting on-going violence involves the extra challenge of securing sensitive information from threats or confiscations. During the dictatorship, the *Vicaría's* staff had to cope with episodes of imprisonment and death. The association's staff learned that a critical part of their job was being able to identify deceptions and false leads.

- **Learn to give a public voice to your archive.** Do work to create your own media productions if possible but also draw upon the official channels when it's necessary. The *Vicaría*'s archive used its own magazine *Solidaridad* to promote the human rights struggle, but also the existent communication media. This also helped the organisation to create its own documents that served as a record of the dictatorship period.
- **Let the potential uses of your archive guide you on how to organise your information.** The certificates provided by the *Vicaría* to all the people who were assisted there became crucial documentation of detention, which were later used by the truth commissions.
- **Do keep regular statistics on the uses of your archive.** They will become crucial data to decide how to use your budget. During many periods, the *Vicaría*'s staff had to focus on attending to the public, diminishing its analysis of its work. Having missed gathering these figures is now one of its main regrets.
- **Try to make your information as public and available as possible.** Never take this for granted. As have many other small organisations in the human rights field, FUNVISOL has been attempting to digitalise its archive. The process is a challenge, given the extent of the archive, and is still on-going.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM *MEMORIA ABIERTA*, ARGENTINA

General considerations

- **Archival work should be considered a collective endeavour of civil society.** It is a risk to leave it in the hands of the state. As an organisation that emerged during 1990s, a period of impunity in which the State attempted to draw a line and 'move on' from the violent past, *Memoria Abierta* took on the responsibility of preserving, looking after and providing access to the archives. They understood the recording of violence and the work to preserve it as tasks belonging to the civil society. Even when the State pledged itself to memory work, as later governments in Argentina did, *Memoria Abierta* advocates it is best to work in partnership rather than transfer the work completely to the State.
- **Always keep your autonomy from official sources of funding.** Civil organisations should avoid dependence on official funding and try to get support from international sources instead. Since international funding bodies currently prefer to provide funds towards specific projects rather than organisations as such, *Memoria Abierta* strongly recommends working on project-based proposals to maximise funding chances.
- **Archival work might be a highly professional practice but bear in mind that it usually emerges out of urgent, militant and affective work.** Although one of *Memoria Abierta*'s main tasks has been to transform their archiving process to meet standards of professional practice, it is proud that its practices draw upon the work undertaken by pioneering and activist institutions that gathered the information at the peak of the dictatorship's practices of terror.
- **Archiving does not necessarily mean ownership.** *Memoria Abierta* has worked to organise material, creating systems and digitalising the information of different archives, whether or not they are the physical depository of their files. In the organisation's view, documents should always be returned to the original institutions that gathered them since they know them best.
- **Consider written, clear rules to guide ethical practice of all.** One of the main difficulties for *Memoria Abierta* has been dealing with tensions and sensitivities among the different archives that make up its different members. Issues concerning day to day strategies of communication, the transfer of knowledge and accessibility have led to endless debate. *Memoria Abierta* has achieved its goals to bring together the archives of civil society, but advise that written agreements to simplify these processes may have helped their work.
- **Define your plan of action considering the political scenario.** Given that lack of resources may be endemic in the field, maintaining a keen interest in the current state of local and international affairs can help guide decisions. Over two decades *Memoria Abierta* learned to refine their plans within a shifting and unpredictable political terrain. In this unstable context, finding the best possible allies in both the private and the public sectors, has been fundamental.

On the oral archive

- **Each interview is a precious opportunity.** Prepare well for it! For *Memoria Abierta* the moment of the interview is a private, intimate, one-to-one encounter, one in which unexpected themes can arise. They would recommend conducting prior research to find out about the interviewees' background and meet them in advance in order to understand their individual style of speaking. This will help the interviewer create the best atmosphere for the interview.
- **Take care to capture the details of the story.** Rather than focussing on the most traumatic moments, *Memoria Abierta* strongly recommends allowing the speaker to talk through their story as a whole in order to grasp the singular trajectory of each interviewee's experience. This has been the main guiding principle and ethical commitment

when putting together the oral archive: Be attentive to details. This allows the many aspects, nuances and subtleties of each case to emerge.

- **Be as flexible as possible.** *Memoria Abierta* prefers to conduct the interviews at their offices but, given that the organisation now occupies a sensitive building located inside a former detention centre, the team is prepared to travel to meet the interviewee elsewhere. A questionnaire might help guide the interview but sometimes it will not be needed. Allow interviews to vary in time but remember they can be an intense and exhausting experience; in most cases it is unfeasible for it to run for more than two hours.
- **Don't edit the transcripts as the richness of your interview will only be revealed later.** *Memoria Abierta* has learned to treat its testimonies as 'primary material'. Unless there are ethical issues involved, it encourages not cutting or editing them. The same testimonies will be able to speak to different, unpredictable things when returned to from different perspectives and times.
- **Provide access to the testimonies immediately and without charge.** *Memoria Abierta* takes pride in being able to provide full access to the testimony as soon as the day after conducting the interview.
- **Always organise your collections to allow researchers to focus on specific issues.** *Memoria Abierta* recommends developing categories to allow researchers to navigate the collections. Each interview requires a thorough summary of the topics touched upon in the interview, with an accompanying list of keywords. This will allow you to create series of interviews that share certain topics or situations.
- **Don't interview someone who doesn't want to speak.** Although having access to directly affected people can be appealing, don't conduct an interview

if you are not convinced about it. Sometimes people may not be ready to talk about certain issues but they don't dare to refuse.

- **Use technology in your favour.** Since small organisations are always struggling with funding, technical aspects tend to be underdeveloped. However, remember technology could help to make the archival work easier. You might be able to create some revolutionary material but if you rely on aging technology your material might soon become obsolete.

On the uses of the archive and dissemination

- **Protecting and disseminating your materials are both crucial tasks.** Find your own balance! For two decades *Memoria Abierta* has worked to generate new expertise and knowledge to support different modes of archiving. It has also shown how archiving and research should accompany each other. However, now the organisation is aware of the need to focus on developing novel and attractive online sources and audiovisual materials in order to reach wider audiences. Lack of dissemination will diminish the power of the archive.
- **Remember your archive deserves proper acknowledgement.** The transmission of memory might go far beyond issues of authorship or copyright and you would like to encourage multiple uses of your archive, making it open and available to wide and diverse audiences. However, *Memoria Abierta* strongly recommends not losing track of the different uses of your archive, including artistic and fictional ones. Keep a copy of the products inspired by your collections, including articles, films, books, as a good initial strategy. The copy can also be digital.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CENTRO NACIONAL DE MEMORIA HISTÓRICA, COLOMBIA

- **Establish your ethos.** The *Centro* put its key values at its core explicitly, to guide its work and create a committed team. These included putting victims' voices first, spending adequate time listening and understanding, and respecting local ownership of the archives.
- **Have your protection from prosecution recognised in law so you may research and report on details of events without fear of prosecution.** The *Centro* has had some of its researchers brought before court, sued by perpetrators of atrocities. A guarantee to prevent this was later incorporated into the 2011 Law.
- **Understand the archive is a process, mutually built.** The *Centro* has worked closely with local communities, and individuals, to gather documents, photographs and objects that could form part of their archive.
- **Always remember that the archive belongs to the community first and foremost.** The *Centro* always began from the principle that the archives that exist in the community belong there. They take copies and leave the physical archive in place.
- **Be prepared for people to be suspicious.** In the midst of the trauma of conflict, people are likely to be suspicious of the enterprise so the *Centro* has always been ready to discuss what an archive 'is'. This has even helped a community to realise that it already has an archive, without knowing it.
- **Consider focusing on emblematic cases that show more widespread dynamics.** If there are an overwhelming number of instances to document.

Know your limitations, in terms of people and resources. You can't cover everything nor tell everyone's story, but you can speak to some central dynamics of the situation.

- **Do employ archivists but remember theirs won't be the only expertise required.** The expertise of archivists is invaluable for saving time in the future. It is indispensable for questions of cataloguing, preservation and future-proofing the files. But other expertise is also required. Social anthropologists, sociologists, historians, psychologists, among others, have all been part of the team and advisory board.
- **Have photographers and artists around.** The photographer of the *Centro* became a crucial part of the team, centrally involved in the research fieldtrips. The photographs have accompanied the research reports. Artists and photographers can also document the process of archive building, and help publicise the findings and reports. They also make use of the archive for further projects.
- **Have respected international support, for funding but also importantly for their advice and your credibility.** The *Centro* insisted at the outset that it should be independent of the state, and arranged funding from outside Colombia. This, and the moral, advisory and academic support of international networks enabled it to gain a reputation of independence within Colombian society and credibility for its research and analysis internationally.
- **Be prepared for your categorisations to alter meaning over time.** The *Centro* found that developments and processes beyond their control brought forth new categorisations of victimhood, for example. They have had to discuss and respond to these debates and their politics.
- **Give up on research if safety is compromised.** The research team considered questions of safety a top priority. Their idea of studying emblematic cases in depth meant they did not need to research all sites of conflict, and they could abandon research if safety was compromised.
- **Always consult communities as widely as possible.** The preparations for the new museum involved widespread workshops, discussions and itinerant exhibitions in locations outside the capital city to discuss and alter the plans for the permanent exhibition.
- **Be both thorough and creative in keeping the legacy of the work alive.** Although the work may be constrained by a legal remit, try to be creative, bringing the work to as many people as possible. The *Centro* report *¡Basta Ya!* included more research and analysis than was required by law. The work towards the museum has incorporated as much of the ethos of the Centre as possible, with workshops to plan its themes held around the country, and several itinerant exhibitions.

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