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Top-down and Bottom-up: Struggles over Collective Memory in Argentina during the Kirchner Administrations (2003-2015)

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Top-down and Bottom-up: Struggles over Collective Memory in Argentina during the Kirchner Administrations (2003-2015)



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“The memory of the dictatorship,
in the strongest sense of the word,
requires another language” -

(Avelar, 1999: 64)

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Introduction

It is September 2019, when I visit the *Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada* (ESMA) for the first time. My professor recommends me to go there, to ‘feel’ what happened during the dictatorship. Not yet knowing what he means, I stand on the big street of *Avenida del Libertador* in Buenos Aires being surprised by the fact that one of the main clandestine detention centers is located in the midst of an urban district. Walking through the former *Casino de Oficiales*, I start to understand what he means by ‘feeling what happened’. The former detention center is still in its original condition. Paint is peeling off the walls and even the maternity rooms designated for pregnant women to give birth while being abducted are in their old state. It is impossible to imagine that during the dictatorship, 5,000 people were abducted and brought to ESMA, to eventually be murdered in the notorious death flights.

From 1976 to 1983, Argentina suffered one of its greatest state repressions. During the dictatorship, thousands were abducted and disappeared. The ‘Dirty War’ was not without consequences; it left its marks on both social and political life. Both politics and society are influenced by the repressive past, the struggle over the disappeared and the construction of collective memory. Collective memory, according to Halbwachs (1992), is a way to define how society shapes and affects individual memories. It determines how we think, perceive, and remember events that were profoundly determined by social groups around us.

In the years after the dictatorship, several political actors have tried to create a narrative surrounding the violent past to influence collective memory and ensure national reconciliation. Ensuating the dictatorship, Raúl Alfonsín was democratically elected in October 1983. He ordered the ‘trials of the juntas’ and in December 1983 he set up the *Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas* (CONADEP). The truth commission declared that during the dictatorship 340 clandestine detention centers were constructed, and thousands disappeared. Simultaneously, the former military juntas set up amnesty laws to avoid criminal prosecution for the human rights violations they had committed in the hope of letting society forget what happened. Yet, it was also Alfonsín who was eventually responsible for two laws that allowed the juntas to go free. His successors Carlos Menem (1989-1999) and Fernando de la Rúa (1999-2001) further institutionalized impunity.

On the other hand, collective organizations that appeared of victim organizations or relatives of the disappeared, in research addressed as Human Rights Organizations (HROs), resisted the created narratives that influenced collective memory by the political actors. They

advocated truth and justice and wanted to know where their disappeared family members are. By presenting themselves in public, through marches and *escraches*, the HROs created an additional narrative about the dictatorship that highly contested that of the political actors. These contentious memories of both political actors and HROs caused tensions in society and harmed the idea of national identity and reconciliation. It was only in 2003 when, for the first time since the dictatorship, the collective memories created by both the HROs and political actors converged. Néstor Kirchner declared the amnesty laws to be invalid, ensured co-optation of HROs, transformed ESMA into a memorial site and started a search for recuperation and justice. However, the human rights policies of the Kirchners caused another wave of contentious memories that still predominated Argentine society today.

It is exactly this complexity of the collective and contentious memories surrounding the dictatorship that triggered me when I stepped outside ESMA in 2019, motivating me to return in 2022 and do this study. Scholars have sought to identify the different narratives created by both political and societal actors, resulting in many strands of literature about collective memory in Argentina. However, the current state of scholarship seems to lack a broader framework that not only juxtaposes the different narratives of the dictatorship during the Kirchner Administrations, but also observes how they converge and contest at the same time. In view of these considerations, it is important to set out current observations on collective and above all, contentious memories in Argentina. Based on a thorough literature study, this research seeks to argue that both governmental and societal memories were highly converged and contested at the same time during the Kirchner administrations by answering the following question: *To what extent did both societal and political collective memories of the conflictive past converge and contest during the Kirchner Administrations in Argentina?*

In moving towards an answer, this research is divided into three chapters. The first chapter concentrates on a theoretical exploration of four concepts that play a key role in identifying different ideas surrounding collective memory. These key concepts like collective and contentious memory, politics of memory, and *lieux de mémoire* are all intertwined and form an important part of understanding the convergence and contestation of collective memories in Argentina. Analyzing the literature on these concepts from a 'birds eyes view' allows understanding a broader context of these concepts that can then be applied to the Argentine case. The second chapter contextualizes collective and contentious memories in social and political contexts before the Kirchner Administrations. It describes the human rights violations committed during the dictatorship and describes how political actors like

Alfonsín, Menem, and De La Rúa adjust their political agenda surrounding collective memory. The third chapter analyses collective memory policies during the Kirchner Administrations. Based on an analysis of their official human rights agenda, the co-optation of HROs, and the transformation of ESMA into a lieu de mémoire, it investigates how different narratives of the past converged and contested during the Administrations. Finally, the conclusion provides an answer to the main question of struggles over collective memory in Argentina.

Chapter 1

Collective and Contentious Memory after a conflictive past

This chapter will provide a theoretical framework for a better understanding of the tensions at play while analyzing the construction of collective memory in Argentina. The first section sets out the main characteristics of the academic discussion on collective memory and how these memories can be contentious. The contentiousness of collective memory will be elaborated on in the second and third sections of this chapter. Contentious memories cannot be analyzed without elaborating on the way collective memory is politically created *vis à vis* how it is created and felt by society. The second section of this chapter will therefore analyze the politics of memory. Politics of memory describe the way in which political actors and institutions try to shape collective memory. The third section of this chapter will set out the main characteristics of collective memory constructed by society, in which the current academic debate on the influence of society on collective memory will be presented.

1.1 Collective and Contentious Memories

1.1.1 Collective Memory

The study of collective memory occupies a central position in the academic field of memory studies. Memory studies is a multidisciplinary effort that bridges areas from social sciences and humanities to disciplines like neuroscience and philosophy (Zubrzycki & Wozny, 2020). As collective memory is widely used in different academic fields, providing a single definition to the term is challenging. As reported by Wertsch and Roediger, the scholarship of collective memory is “plagued by the fact that it has almost as many definitions as investigators writing about it” (2007: 318).

Different scholars in various academic disciplines have stressed the distinctiveness of collective memory building upon the work of Halbwachs (Brundage, 2009). The French sociologist introduced the concept of *mémoire collective* to understand the way in which people think, perceive, and remember events that were profoundly determined by social groups that surround them (Garagozov, 2015). That is to say, how social arrangements in a society affect and shape individual memories. Halbwachs identifies two corollaries within this basic definition of collective memory. First, collective memory can be produced because of certain ‘ideas’ which are given by a social group. Secondly, collective memory should not be understood as individual remembering, but as “remembering by individuals who are

themselves, members of a particular group” (Garagozov, 2009: 1). In other words, all remembering is dependent on ‘ideas’ given by social classes surrounding an individual (Halbwachs, 1992). According to the definition by Halbwachs, social groups redefine their experiences collectively. Within this uncomplicated definition, collective memory is studied as a memory that is extended or shared by individuals (Garagozov, 2009).

In contrast, sociologist Olick (1999) inverts the approach given by Halbwachs. Olick assumes that individuals play a central role in collective memory. He labels this approach as ‘collected memory’. Only individuals will remember certain public commemorations and symbols. Instead of situating collective memory in society, this approach traces collective memory back to individual experiences and positions collective memory as the collection of individual experiences (Olick, 1999).

Contrary to the abovementioned approaches to collective memory, other scholars in the field define collective memory based on conversation and debate. Pennebaker and Banasik (1997) argue that collective memories represent the ongoing discussion, struggles and conversations of the past that are influenced by members of a cultural community. In his book, *In Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009), Rothberg states that collective memory does not emerge from certain societies and practices, but rather emerges through multiple engagements and reinforces through attributions and borrowings. It is the multidirectional character that makes collective memory such a fascinating aspect of modernity (Rothberg, 2009).

Collective memory is thus a dynamic concept that is expressed and reformulated in both collective and individual practices. Within the formation of a collective memory discourse, tensions are imprinted in each case.

1.1.2 Contentious Memories

Collective memory is a site for debate and contention that reveals the intertwined memories that are constructed by both politics and society (King, 2018). After a violent past, memory becomes a field of contestation, forgetting and imagining (King, 2018). Generating collective memory involves contrasting attempts to preserve or spread the memory of the past (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999). On both the individual and national level, collective memory encompasses a reconciliation process in which it can either contribute to the process or be the stimulus for more violence (Wielenga, 2013). Besides that, collective memories often take on a life of their own. Although a certain narrative or memory has been constructed, different individual

memories, which together again reform into ‘new’ collective memories, contrast the first constructed memories (Wielenga, 2013). It thus describes a dynamic process that takes place somewhere between the official (shaped) memory and the individual memory (Wielenga, 2013).

Pakier and Str ath (2010) agree with this aspect of collective memory. They argue that collective memories are always developed within a certain political context. Within this political context, a dominant narrative emerges, and other narratives will become less visible. However, the dominant narrative will be rejected by some actors which leads to the development of alternative narratives (Pakier & Str ath, 2010).

Equally, Hunt (2010) argues that constructed alternative narratives can result in conflict and war. He provides a clear example of how some narratives and memories are encouraged to be the dominant ones, but eventually end as contentious memories. Hunt explored the contentiousness of the collective memory after the Second World War. After the war, there was an official policy that did not allow veterans to talk about the war crimes they committed but simply forget them (Hunt, 2010). These memories proved impossible to forget and surfaced ubiquitously years later (Hunt, 2010). This example of contentious memories applies to the case of Argentina. While Argentines were forced by political actors to simply ‘forget what happened’, social groups publicly entered the stage to protest this idea. As this ‘top-down’ memory is formed by the state or politics, certain other ‘bottom-up’ memories are suppressed. As a result, these memories surface violently at a later stage and a struggle for memory ensues. Hence, collective memories after a violent past are not conflictual re-experiences of a violent past, but contradictory, heterogeneous and contested memories of different groups (Robben, 2005).

Building upon these academic indications, this theoretical framework will now progress by focusing on how collective memories are created by both politics and civil society.

1.2 Politics of Memory

1.2.1 Shaping of Collective Memory by Political Actors

The end of violent conflicts places collective memory in the centre of both societal and political debates (Dujisin, 2020). Both the politics and society must deal with the narratives and memories conceived in the past. Shaping collective memory by political actors and institutions is called the ‘Politics of Memory’ (Zubrzycki & Wozny, 2020). The politics of

memory are therefore an important political, cultural, and social issue that must be elaborated on in this study.

Building from the definition given by Halbwachs (1992), collective memory can almost always be considered ‘political’ and thus as politics of memory to some extent (Zubrzycki & Wozny, 2020). Politics of memory finds its history in the German *Geschichtspolitik*, which outlines the ways in which German’s reckoned with their violent Nazi past (Zubrzycki & Wozny, 2020). Although *Geschichtspolitik* and the politics of memory have a lot in common, they also differ significantly. While *Geschichtspolitik* focuses more on reparations, formal apologies and memorialization, the politics of memory concerns debates about how the past should be remembered, disseminated, silenced, or forgotten (Zubrzycki & Wozny, 2020). Politics of memory involve historical policies that recognize the difference between true and correct histories and false or falsified ones; politics of memory specify how the past should be narrated; and politics of memory legally regulate memories of the past via memory laws (Zubrzycki & Wozny, 2020).

Contrasting to Halbwachs, Dujisin (2020) identifies that collective memory is not always manipulated by political actors, but rather a way to deploy political identities. That is to say, politics of memories function as a resource in political struggles that occur after a violent past. This does not mean that the collective memories shaped by political actors are necessarily true or false, but it does create awareness of the complex past (Dujisin, 2020). Assman (2006) acknowledges this statement: the politics of memory help to create an institutionalized, explicit, and homogenous ‘top-down’ memory. Therefore, politics of memory are a mediated memory that resides in symbols and practices that are inserted into the minds and hearts of individuals (Assman, 2006: 215). In contrast, Verovšek (2016) argues that politics of memory should not only be understood as an instrument of politics to mobilize remembrance, but more from a perspective that focuses “on the communicative pathways that mediate interactions between the informal public sphere of opinion-formation (such as public opinion and broader social movements) and the formal institutions of legal will-formation” (Verovšek, 2016: 531). The communicative approach of politics of memory focuses on the contested narratives of the conflictive past by political actors within the state, and how these narratives are constructed, influenced, and eventually contested with memories and narratives of society at large. In this regards, politics of memory is not centered around interpretations, memories and narratives presented in the formal political institutions as well as about the processes in which these ideas, memories and narratives are fulfilled (Verovšek, 2016). Hence, politics of memory should focus on the interplay between the formal and informal

public domain (Verovšek, 2016).

Analyzing collective memory singularly from the formal political institutions, it should be noticed that states and nation-builders utilize collective memory in generating a unified national identity and reconciliation (Zubrzycki & Wozny, 2020). The next section of this chapter will therefore analyze how collective memory is used to shape national identity and reconciliation.

1.2.2 Political Memory in Shaping National Identity and Reconciliation

The study of collective memory, and especially the study of the politics of memory occupies a prominent role in the scholarship on national identity and reconciliation building (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999; Zubrzycki & Wozny, 2020). Given the importance of politics of memory within the formation of national identity, it is argued that collective memories occupy a central position in accepting the violent past (Zalaquett, 1991). After the fall of a dictatorship, the national identity of a nation is lost, and political leaders have the obligation to reinsure the feeling of a nation (Zalaquett, 1991). Hence, the feeling of unity in a nation, which is highly encouraged by political actors, depends on shared and collective memory (Zalaquett, 1991). Collective memory therefore advances the formation of social coherence and is seen as a benchmark for the construction of group memories within a nation (Jelin, 2003). Politicians, intellectuals, and public professionals see the importance of rebuilding a national identity through the creation of a collective memory (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999). Creating this collective memory starts by addressing the legacy and norms that each society should have. It confronts societies to consider their historical past and identity. This last part is a painful point for societies but necessary for political leaders to address to create solidarity and national identity (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999). Emerging from a dictatorship back to democracy requires political actors to address the problem of recurrent authoritarianism towards society to create a collective memory which in turn influences the formation and feeling of national identity and reconciliation.

Hence, the narratives of the violent past can be organized to provide partisan aims. Political actors can construct the nation's identity, build hegemony, help to strengthen the political interest, or influence the ways in which the society understands the world around them, but also understands and sees the state (Romano & Raiford, 2006). The next section of this research will analyze how these memories of a 'nation' are constructed, contained, and contested in both physical and intellectual sites of memory.

1.2.3 Les Lieux de Mémoire

Studying collective and contentious memories in Argentina during the Kirchner Administrations, it is impossible to overstate the influence of *les lieux de mémoire*, a multi-part memory project formulated by Nora in 1984. In a series of volumes, Nora created a methodology for studying collective memory in French culture. Although Nora's initial work only focused on France, the approach has been proven applicable as a model to use in other cultures as well (Weedon & Jordan, 2011). *Les lieux de mémoire* translates to 'places' of memory and covers both intellectual and physical places in which the memories of a nation or society are converged and contested (Weedon & Jordan, 2011).

Nora provides a definition of *les lieux de mémoire* by explaining it as "any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community" (Nora & Kritzman, 1996: xvii). Central to the argument of Nora, is the idea that he sees the *lieu* as compensation for profound loss (Nora & Kritzman, 1996). Sites of memory are realms where collective memory crystallizes rather than *milieux de mémoire* (real environments of memory) (Weedon & Jordan, 2011).

Other scholars provide similar definitions to the approach invented by Nora. Azaryahu & Foote (2008) focus on the use of *lieux de mémoire* as a 'narrative medium'. According to them, commemorative landscapes are used as 'spatial narratives'. DeLaure (2011) and Gallagher (1999) agree with this argument. As stated by them, monuments, memorials, and museums should be recognized as sites in which arguments of harmony and reconciliation dominate struggle and conflict. Nora agrees with the idea of a site of memory being a narrative medium as he argues these sites to be concerned with narratives of the past (Nora & Kritzman, 1996).

The distinction between history and memory is also an important point in the explanation of Nora's *lieux de mémoire*. He makes a sharp distinction between history and memory. While history is a reconstruction of the past, memories are open to discussion and constantly evolving (Weedon & Jordan, 2011). This distinction is useful once collective memory is recognized to be constituted by various cultural practices that are still in the process of change (Weedon & Jordan, 2011).

Political actors play an important role in the formation of *lieux de mémoire*. Because of the extensive history of a nation, political actors wish to remind society of the events in the

violent past. They construct, shape, and seek realms of memory to collectively remember the past in lieu. The next section of this research will focus on the construction of collective memory by societal actors.

1.3 Collective Memory and Action Created by Society

1.3.1 The Construction of Collective Memory by Social Agents

As already mentioned in the first section of his chapter, Halbwachs (1982) identifies collective memory to be based on a cohesive body of people in which an individual has its own memory but take part in a totality of memories common to the group. Each group differs in how and when it remembers their losses.

Following democratization after an authoritarian or totalitarian regime, both political actors and society must find their way to ascertain and confront the past (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999). There is a huge difference in the way in which political actors address collective memory versus how the societal actors do. According to Roniger and Sznajder (1999), different societal actors were caught between contrasting versions of the past and between constraints of political contingency and normative expectations. The memories of social groups might influence members of a group to engage in cooperative action which causes a complementation of collective memory and collective action (Harris, 2002). Collective memories influence members of a group to engage in cooperative action (Harris, 2002). As in the case of Argentina, HROs collectively act based on their shared memory. This is not surprising when considering the first section of this chapter. Collective memory reflects the ideas and memories of a certain social group. Collective memory often shapes shared identity within society which reinforces group solidarity and cooperation. This then leads to collective action based on the collective memory shaped in an earlier stage (Harris, 2002).

Harris (2002) analyzes collective action and collective memory through the idea of 'micro mobilization'. That is to say, the face-to-face interactions in a social setting from which grievances, collective identities and opportunities are interpreted transform into collective action (Harris, 2002). In doing so, Harris provides an example of how collective memory can shape collective action. Analyzing collective actions held in the 1960s by Afro-Americans in the United States, it appears that the participants in these actions more often came from families in which memories and history of early on were shared (Harris, 2002). Collective memory, in this case, shapes social identity and solidarity which leads to collective

action (Harris, 2002).

In the case of Argentina, social groups, like HROs, with a shared collective memory resist impunity. A quest for justice plays an important role in the collective actions that these HROs conduct. The next section of this chapter will therefore analyze the quest for justice and the role it plays within collective memory.

1.3.2 Resistance in the Demand for Justice

After a violent past, both politics and society are often encountered in polarization, collective organizations and the creation of collective memory seem to be crucial to fight for social justice in these times (Villalón, 2007). Especially in Latin American countries, grassroots resistance to former military and political abuses has grown and gathered in public places to frame and secure their demands beyond the national borders (Villalón, 2007).

According to Afflitto and Jesilow (2007), re-democratization after dictatorships gives societies with a shared memory hope to end impunity and quest for justice. Collective memory ensures them to demand prosecution of human rights violators and demolish the process of national reconciliation (Robben, 2005). This demand for truth and justice often takes the form of resistance. Defining what resistance is, is often far from clear. To understand collective memory struggles involving social groups, HROs, and commemorative practices several assumptions should be elaborated. First, the micro mobilization, as explained in the last section of this chapter, are said to be ‘genuine’ memory and therefore resistance. And second, because it demands justice, memory itself is already seen as ‘oppositional’ and therefore resistance (Druliolle, 2013).

In conclusion, collective action that is conducted by groups who have a shared memory often takes upon a resisting form. The demand for justice and the fight against impunity are two major persuasive ideas for these groups to oppose the politics of memory and the violent past. Especially in post-dictatorship societies, like Argentina, these groups together resist impunity and fight for truth and justice.

Chapter 2

Contentious Memories During and After the Dirty War (1976-2003)

2.1 Human Rights Violations During the Dirty War

To understand to what extent the collective memories of society and politics converged and contested during the Kirchner Administrations, it is important to consider why and how these contested in the decades before the Kirchner Administrations. In the first section, an overview of the main characteristics of the dictatorship will be set out. Second, the contentious memories during the return to democracy will be presented in which different politics of memory following the dictatorship are outlined. The third section of this chapter will set out the official governmental memory-agenda of a new wave of pragmatic governments.

2.1.1 Repression under the Dictatorship

Political violence and pressure have not been an exception in the history of Argentina. A forty-year prevailing intermittent pattern of civilian and military rule was the result of strong Peronist populist frameworks on the one hand, and conservative and authoritarian opposition on the other (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999). Political chaos was at its height in 1974 when former president Juan Domingo Perón passed away and his wife Isabel Martínez de Perón assumed the presidency (Robben, 2005). Due to pressure on the juntas because of large street protests organized by guerillas, another *coup d'état* was committed in 1976 (Robben, 2005). The juntas defined their period of rule, in which they adopted a new model of social organization, as the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (National Reorganization Process, *el Proceso*) which was labeled 'Dirty War' by society (Lubarsky, 1997). El Proceso was based on political demobilization carried out through repression of subversives and 'internal enemies' (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999). Following the ideas of the juntas, subversives placed themselves outside of law and society and made a healthy and successful development of the country impossible. In the first place, the military juntas made substantial changes to the constitution, suppressed civil and political liberties, and imposed censorship on media (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999; Van Drunen, 2010). Their aim was therefore to reorganize the Argentine society, liberalize the economy and create a virtuous order in respect of "Christian, modern, and western values" (Van Drunen, 2010: 15). To realize this, the 'enemies of the nation' had to be prosecuted, abducted, and assassinated (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999: 17). The

security forces were requested to efficiently pursue total victory against leftist guerillas and their supporters (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999). This resulted in violent repression of targeted sectors, individuals, its associates, and sympathizers (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999). General Ibérico Saint-Jean, Governor of Buenos Aires, declared, “First we kill the subversives; then we kill their collaborators; then ... their sympathizers; then those who remain indifferent; and finally we kill the timid” (Simpson & Bennet, 1985: 66). Thus, not only individuals who were involved in certain sectors were targeted, but also individuals who were only indirectly associated with leftist networks.

2.1.2 Eliminating the Enemies of the Nation

The strategies of the military and police became increasingly brutal (Heinz & Frühling, 2021). Thousands were abducted in presence of their relatives, tortured, and eventually murdered while other thousands were held as political prisoners under extremely inhumane conditions (Brysk, 1993; Roniger & Sznajder, 1999). A central element of the repressive regime was the practice of disappearances. ‘Enemies of the nation’ were abducted by the so-called *grupos de tareas*, a group of armed military and policemen without a uniform driving in cars without license plate (Van Drunen, 2010). Once the victims were abducted, they disappeared and were taken to a detention center. When they arrived at the detention center, they were hooded, and underwent physical and psychological torture (Van Drunen, 2010). Sedated captives were dropped from planes over open water on the so-called “death flights” or were executed and cremated in ovens of cemeteries or buried as *Nomen Nescio* (Robben, 2018; Van Drunen, 2010). Another horrific fate was carried out to women who were pregnant while they “disappeared”, they were forced to give birth in the detention centers, and afterwards were murdered. Their babies were given to couples connected to the military to be re-educated under the Argentine values that the military aimed for (Van Drunen, 2010). Almost 300 cases of babies that were taken away from their mothers have officially been denounced, but estimation runs up to 500 cases (Van Drunen, 2010: 17).

The juntas developed a highly strategic and coherent system to make a massive number of people disappear. Of these *desaparecidos*, more than 68% of the victims were between the ages of 16 and 30 of which nearly a third were women of which 3 percent were pregnant (Heinz & Frühling, 2021; Roniger & Sznajder, 1999). Table 1 illustrates the distribution of occupations among the 8,960 ‘reported cases’ by the truth commission CONADEP. However, HROs claim 30,000 people to be disappeared which resulted in a wave

of contentious memories (Robben, 2005).

Table 1: Occupational Distribution of the Disappeared (percentages)

Blue-collar workers	30.2
Students	21.0
White-collar workers	17.9
Professionals	10.7
Teachers	5.7
Self-employed and others	5.0
Housewives	3.8
Military conscripts and members of the security forces	2.5
Journalists	1.6
Actors, performers etc.	1.3
Nuns, priests, etc.	0.3

Source: Heinz & Frühling, 2021: 650

A limited number of 2,793 people survived (Van Drunen, 2010: 18). Among these people, some escaped, some were released under controlled liberty and others were given the opportunity to join an exile community in the United States, Europe, and other Latin American countries (Van Drunen, 2010).

2.1.3. The Doctrine of National Security

Although Argentina and its decentralized pattern of repression and human rights violations were an exception compared to similar military dictatorships at the time, the military leaders based their ideas on the Doctrine of National Security (*Doctrina de Seguridad Nacional*, DSN) (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999; Van Drunen, 2010). The DSN posited a link between the concepts of state and nation and the role the army has towards both (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999). The juntas identified themselves as the “guardians of the nation’s values and traditions” (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999: 18). According to the juntas’ view, they would convey the nation’s spirit through state’s apparatus (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999: 18). According to the DSN, traditions, and values of a nation are embedded organically within Western civilization, defense of private property, and opposition to Marxists and Communist ideas (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999). If necessary, the military would thus exterminate the threat to the national values and traditions. In doing so, they followed the ideological vision they incorporated from the French military in Algeria, from sessions in anti-Communist visions, and other anti-

guerrilla warfare training sessions they attended by Latin American officers (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999; van Drunen, 2010). The DSN provided the military with a justification to stop progressive social and political change movements and to enforce their adaptation on the national security state (Pion-Berlin, 1989). It was thus “a guideline for eliminating the enemies of the nation; the terms used were organicist and projected a medicalized discourse that demanded the ‘extirpation of ill issues’ from the national body” (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999: 37). The DSN gave the military the idea to subordinate the most basic human rights to national aims whenever necessary (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999).

After the DSN was used as a guideline to their own *el Proceso* and as a nationalist ‘dream of grandeur’ during the Malvinas-Falklands war, the military regime fell apart (Carmody, 2018). During the Malvinas-Falklands war, the military lost both its legitimacy and professional power. The dream of a united Argentina based on the organicist view of the DSN, put into practice in the Dirty War, was bankrupt.

2.2 The Return to Democracy

2.2.1 Argentina under Alfonsín

After Argentina lost the Malvinas-Falklands war, the transition to democracy occurred (Robben, 2018). This period was the start of the debate within the society about how to cope with the memories of the violent past (Van Drunen, 2010). In June 1982, a transitional military government took over being aware that the Argentines had to acknowledge their conflictive past and its victims (Robben, 2018). The religious authorities organized national reconciliation masses to restore peace in the country. The policy to announce amnesty for juntas who committed human rights violations failed due to a lack of political support, but pro-military groups continued to call for reconciliation and asked for a *ley del olvido* (law of oblivion) to be drafted (Robben, 2018; Van Drunen, 2010). This suggested that people should not only forget their losses but that they should also “admit to their share of responsibility in the political violence, instead of holding others legally accountable, because then Argentina would be poisoned by hatred and revenge” (Robben, 2018: 204).

HROs and foreign governments reacted with disbelief and anger (Robben, 2018: 206). The decision to pronounce the disappeared to be dead and just except that they were gone was unacceptable. The military’s final document gave amnesty to the troops and the human rights violations they committed (Robben, 2005). People gathered in protests, but the transitional

military government went ahead with the 'Law of National Pacification' (Robben, 2018). This law went entirely against HROs sense of justice and became a big issue during the upcoming elections. In October 1983, free and general elections were held for the first time since the dictatorship (Robben, 2018).

Radical Civic Union Party candidate Raúl Ricardo Alfonsín overwhelmingly won the elections (Carmody, 2018). During the elections, he already expressed his opposition to any of the compromises that would leave the human rights violations unpunished. From his first day in office, he began to set up a series of channels that translated the demands of civil society groups that opposed the dictatorship (Carmody, 2018).

First, Alfonsín created a truth commission to clarify the depth of the human rights violations and the fate of the disappeared (Carmody, 2018). Second, he issued two decrees that resulted in the arrests and prosecution of members of both the juntas and guerillas (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999). Never in Latin American history, a civil government ordered the armed forces to prosecute former juntas (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999: 58). Next to the trials of the juntas, he also ordered trials of seven leaders of the guerilla movement *Montoneros*, who were active just before the dictatorship (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999). Alfonsín proposed to distinguish three categories of direct perpetrators of which only those who solely pursued orders would not face prosecution. "Those who planned the repression and issued the corresponding orders; those who, prompted by cruelty, perversion, or greed, acted beyond their orders; and those who carried out orders strictly to the letter" (Alfonsín, 1983: 148). The third channel set up by Alfonsín was a special governmental body created to deal with human rights affairs. This body established mechanisms to deal with the material compensation for the victims of the repression (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999).

While setting up these three channels, Alfonsín found himself between two opposing sides. On the one hand, a rebelling military pressured him with the threat of rebellion and on the other hand, the HROs stated the military to be responsible and thus need to be prosecuted respectively (Van Drunen, 2010). Hence, Alfonsín's ideas of truth and justice were not retributive but focused on the protection of justice in the future (Van Drunen, 2010).

2.2.2 Truth Commission CONADEP

As noted above, the truth commission was one of the first channels Alfonsín established. The Comisión Nacional Sobre Desaparición de Personas (National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, CONADEP) was a governmental committee to investigate the fate

and whereabouts of desaparecidos (Van Drunen, 2010). CONADEP had the right to hear stories from victims and transmit these to the judiciary. They had the right to receive voluntary testimonies and documentation from citizens. However, the commission did not have the right to obligate witnesses to testify and therefore were depended on statements of a small group of voluntary testimonies (Mignone, Estlund & Issacharaoff, 1984).

CONADEP comprised some of Argentina's most prominent human rights activists and journalists and was led by the writer Ernesto Sábato. In the beginning, some HROs were suspicious of the commission, but eventually, they decided to collaborate with CONADEP (Van Drunen, 2010). In September 1984, the report was presented by CONADEP to the government. The report entitled *Nunca Más* (Never Again), contained 50.000 pages of documents, with a confidential appendix that mentioned the names of 1,351 military members (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999). It concluded 8,961 cases of desaparecidos and concluded that the military operated in 340 clandestine detention centers (Heinz & Frühling, 2021). It became available for everyone in the country and 110,000 copies were sold within a month (Robben, 2018: 65). Argentine citizens were shocked when they learned about the atrocities during the Dirty War (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999).

The work of CONADEP became a benchmark of truth but also triggered demonstrations by HROs as they refused to see the presented numbers of disappeared as final (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999; Van Drunen, 2010). Especially on of the most prominent HROs, the Madres y Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, continued to demand the creation of another commission that would have wider powers of inspection and could apply the full laws on the former juntas (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999).

2.2.3 Contentious Memory after the Dictatorship

CONADEP was the governments' first attempt to reconstruct truth and justice in Argentina. It was an important aspect of creating collective memory in the country as it broke the silence, and the Argentine citizens became familiar with the forced disappearances and tortures (Robben, 2018). *Nunca Más* caused a shockwave of horror throughout the country and influenced both individual and collective memories (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999).

More and more criticism was voiced by the HROs about the way CONADEP portrayed the *desaparecidos*. CONADEP mentioned that "many of them are dead and that their bodies have been scattered or destroyed as part of a planned policy of making them disappear" (CONADEP, 1986: 233). The conclusion of CONADEP was devastating and

unacceptable for many searching relatives (Robben, 2018). The HROs felt abandoned by the government. The presumption of the death harmed the trust in the Argentine state (Robben, 2018).

Furthermore, *Nunca Más* was pictured in the media as voicing Alfonsín's *teoría de los dos demonios* (two-demons theory) (Robben, 2018). While Alfonsín found himself between two opposing sites, he used this theory to create a collective memory within society (García, 2005). Alfonsín rejected the term 'Dirty War' and constructed an interpretation stating that both the military and guerilla insurgents had been demons and were both responsible for the state repression (Robben, 2018). Alfonsín's theory failed to emphasize the dictatorship being asymmetrical, and the military's response disproportional (Robben, 2018). Argentina found itself in the clash of two conflicting memories: on the one hand, society identified itself with the notion of thinking there must have been a justification for the repression, and on the other hand, the HROs encouraged the narrative of the victim by questing judicial prosecutions and accusations (Jelin, 2003).

Memories became more contentious when Alfonsín stated that if the council of the juntas was not able to carry out the trails of the juntas, a civilian court could do it (Robben, 2018; Van Drunen, 2010). On 22 April 1985, the trials of the juntas started. Nine leaders of the juntas were prosecuted, including military leader Jorge Rafael Videla. The prosecution claimed the leaders of the juntas to be "the authors of a systematic and criminal plan to eliminate the opposition" (Van Drunen, 2010: 67). The juntas defended their actions by stating that the war against the 'internal enemies' was a response to a serious threat; that the crimes committed were taken out on legal duty; that Argentina was in a state of war, so the repression was not bound by rules (Van Drunen, 2010).

The discourse of the military added another layer to the already clashing collective memory in society (Robben, 2018). The dynamics of denials, revelations, and various social memories of the state, the military, survivors, and members of HROs resulted in Argentina being at the center of three conflicting discourses that were constantly modified by new revelations. These revelations developed in opposing discursive frameworks and opposed each other.

2.3 Menem and Beyond

2.3.1 Impunity and Economic Reforms under the Presidency of Menem

Eventually, five junta commanders were prosecuted in 1985 (Robben, 2018). Growing dissatisfaction in military ranks and the desire of Alfonsín to reunite the Argentine society led the Congress to implement *la Ley de Punto Final* (the full stop law) which imposed a two-month statute of limitations on new accusations (Robben, 2018). HROs pushed back and filed over 300 cases before the law applied (Carmody, 2018). The military continued to resist and there was a fear of a new coup d'état (Carmody, 2018). The military assured Alfonsín that this would not happen if Alfonsín would stop the trials. Alfonsín in response assured the military that he would submit new legislation to Congress (Robben, 2018).

In June 1987, *La Ley de Obediencia Debida* (the Due Obedience Law) was proposed by the government (Robben, 2018). The amnesty law caused most charges against juntas to be declared groundless because they had carried out orders by higher ranks (Carmody, 2018; Robben, 2018). This law caused distrust in Alfonsín by the HROs as they accused him of betrayal of his electoral promise of truth and justice (Robben, 2018). The two laws caused the military to enlarge the government's two-demons theory. Generals wrote in conservative newspapers that Argentina was in a state of war against a guerilla insurgency. These efforts generated a sense of determination among HROs to publicly proclaim their collective memories (Robben, 2018).

In July 1989, Carlos Saúl Menem assumed the presidency. The two laws set up by Alfonsín continued under his presidency (Carmody, 2018). He further institutionalized impunity by installing two presidential pardons that freed high-ranking officers prosecuted for human rights violations (Van Drunen, 2010). Menem stressed the need for the pardons as necessary “‘to heal the wounds of the past’, to generate ‘national reconciliation’ and ‘pacify the country’” (Van Drunen, 2010: 85). Pacification and reconciliation played a key role in Menem’s narrative about the recent past. He described the quest for truth and justice by HROs as ‘expressions of revenge’ and ‘resentment’ (Van Drunen, 2010: 85). The pardons provoked protests from HROs as they undermined the judiciary as well as caused disillusionment within the groups. They feared that their created narrative and collective memory of the dictatorship would slowly diminish (Robben, 2018).

During Menem’s government, the politics of memory developed into a narrative of oblivion because pardons and the laws let society to forget about the past. The history of

Argentina was vague and empty. They were not able to create a future based on their past (Van Drunen, 2010). Only submission to governmental power was seen by society as a solution to move forward. Menem responded to the narrative of oblivion by creating a new narrative of national reconciliation that influences the collective memory of society and let them move forward (Van Drunen, 2010). While Menem implemented his ideas of national reconciliation in society, he was working on economic reforms that highly impacted society. He lowered tariffs, cut state spending, privatized large companies, and equated the Argentine Peso with the U.S. dollar (Smith, 1991). Argentina was characterized by fragmentation and marginalization that caused social exclusion. The group of 'new poor' that used to belong to the middle class now became part of the already large group of poor. This situation caused the emergence of new ways of social protest such as the *Piqueteros*, who protested the neoliberal policies of the government through roadblocks (Robben, 2018). But also created distrust in the government and resistance of the politics of memory.

The distrust in the 'shaped' narrative by Menem further increased when, a former member of the navy, Adolfo Scilingo, confessed the human rights violations he committed during the dictatorship in 1994 (Robben, 2018). The confessions broke the silence created by the government, and society was shocked. During the confessions, he explained how the human rights violations were committed and how repression was organized within the navy's secret detention centers. Menem rejected the confessions of Scilingo and the navy saw Scilingo as a traitor because he had broken the silence. This action by Scilingo created a new narrative: the narrative of the perpetrator. Other former soldiers supported Scilingo's actions and publicly started to talk about the behavior of the military during the dictatorship. These confessions opened the eyes of society and gave HROs a reason to continue their quest for truth and justice (Van Drunen, 2010). This new narrative created a debate about *desaparecidos* that brought the past right back into society (Van Drunen, 2010). These developments created two fields of tensions that have been symbolic of struggles of the past: forgetting vis-à-vis remembering, and reconciliation vis-à-vis punishment (Van Drunen, 2010).

The HROs argued memory and justice to be necessary conditions for democracy, while the government argued that prosecution would diminish national reconciliation and collective memory would keep Argentina to be trapped in the past (Van Drunen, 2010). This resulted to be a pervasive source of tensions within the debate regarding contentious memory in Argentina, as can be seen throughout the rest of this study.

2.3.2 The Social and Economic Crisis under De la Rúa

The demoralization resulting from these tensions that emphasized different sides of the narrative caused the resignation of collective memory from public space. In addition, the political context had changed. New problems distracted society from the struggle against impunity. These new problems had to do with the effects of the neoliberal economic model executed by Menem (Robben, 2018).

In December 1999, Fernando De la Rúa took office (LADB, 1999). De la Rúa took over an Argentina that was suffering acute economic hardship (LADB, 1999). During his presidency, De la Rúa pursued a policy in favor of the military by signing a decree which made the extradition of former human rights violators impossible (Abregú, 2000).

The state of mobilization starting with the *Piqueteros* continued under the presidency of De la Rúa. He declared a 'state of siege' after 27 people were killed in lootings and other serious disturbances (Craanen, 2017; Van Drunen, 2010). Argentines responded with protests throughout the whole country, also known as *caceralozos*. These protests were highly repressed and led De la Rúa resign in December 2001, after he left Casa Rosada by helicopter (Craanen, 2017). The following weeks were characterized by the coming and going of several presidents and led to the emergence of social and political organizations that merged under the slogan *¡Que se vayan todos!* One of the biggest forms of protests that emerged during these weeks were the *asambleas barriales* (Dinerstein, 2003). This form of protest became one of the most important forms of collective organization in 2002 (Svampa, 2005; Van Drunen, 2010). The *asambleas barriales*, through their presence in the streets, also attracted the attention of HROs and other memory committees. They decided to assemble and stimulate the interest in the past and the collective memories of the past. "The high levels of mobilization and sensibility made it easier for the commissions working on memory to introduce their subject in the neighborhoods" (Van Drunen, 2010: 133).

Alfonsín, Menem and De la Rúa used the politics of memory to implement a homogeneous top-down memory to create a dominant memory that ensures national reconciliation within society. In doing so, Argentina's society faced itself between three clashing memories that were constructed at the same time.

Chapter 3

The Collective Memory Discourse of the Kirchners

After an era of economic and social crisis, state-societal relations were under pressure. Chapter two of this study sought to analyze the framing of collective memory by former Argentine presidents and their relations to HROs and society. This chapter will build upon the conceptual framework of collective and contentious memory and shows a break with the past ideology on memory. It seeks to analyze how the Kirchner Administrations dealt with the contentious memories of the past and how this influenced collective memory in society. In other words, how the Kirchners ‘co-opted’ HROs to advance their political position and transformed public places to spaces of memory. This chapter will first analyze the function of collective memory in their official governmental agenda. Second, it will set out their relationship with the HROs focusing on co-optation. Last, it will seek to analyze the role of lieux de mémoire and its importance within the relationship between the Kirchners and society.

3.1 Memory Policies under the Kirchner Government

3.1.1 The Function of Memory in the Kirchner Administrations

Much of the collective memory put into place through politics of memory by former presidents centered on the two-demons theory. This dominant narrative changed when Néstor Kirchner assumed the presidency in 2003. Together with his wife Cristina Fernández de Kirchner they initiated a ‘new way of thinking’ about the Dirty War and framed the violations as ‘political genocide’ (Bietti, 2014). Genocide in this sense was not racially or ethnically motivated, but extremely political and devastating to society (Bietti, 2014). The narrative of a political genocide, as developed by the Kirchners, accused the military of eliminating those who fought for a better society (Arnosó-Martínez, Arnosó-Martínez & Pérez-Sales, 2012: 260).

The Kirchners presented themselves as a new kind of politicians, developing a discourse of a rupture with the past and an act of “re-foundation of the Argentine democracy” (Goery, 2016: 22). During Néstor Kirchner’s inauguration speech, he stated not wanting to make a pact with the past but being determined to build a new country in solidarity (Goery,

2016). The Kirchners gained popular support by developing a discourse surrounding the concept of radical change, stating that only a man with conviction would be able to bring these changes for which the Argentines longed and declared rupture with the past about to happen (Goeury, 2016). This line of ‘a rupture with the past’ shows a parallel with the discourse of Alfonsín. They both presented a desire for truth and justice in society. However, they both developed their own narratives and discourses of the past. Alfonsín’s narrative surrounding the two-demons theory opposes that of the Kirchner Administrations. The Kirchners were the first presidents to reject this theory and focused on the image of young idealist fighters of the 1970s instead of presenting the guerillas as evil forces that brought chaos to the Argentina society (Goeury, 2016). “Kirchner presented himself as a representative of this generation and this spirit, someone who would take the political project of the desaparecidos all the way to the government” (Carmody, 2018: 184). At a gathering of the United Nations in New York, he declared all Argentines to be the sons and daughters of the Madres y Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (Maguire, 2017).

In doing so, the Kirchners created a political identity for themselves and their state project (Carmody, 2018). By claiming this identity, they created a relationship between the social groups and the government, which had until recently been opposed by the HROs (Carmody, 2018). By placing themselves in the middle as an individual who belonged to both the idealist generation and to the state, they neutralized the constructed relationship between society and the state (Carmody, 2018). Consequently, the Kirchners engaged with the collective memories that had been constructed in the decades after the dictatorship. Through a policy of ‘Memory, Truth, and Justice’, they aimed to construct not only a national tradition, but “a political culture that valued the rule of law, and democracy and above all, was a stable democratic state” (Carmody, 2018: 191). The Kirchners used the resolute recovery of memory to create a sense of nationhood (Maguire, 2017). They transformed individual memories into active collective memory and demonstrated how “memory and the work of mourning have been redefined as political and forward-looking” (Druliolle, 2011: 17). Their official political agenda, in which human rights played a significant role, can be considered a ‘masterstroke’ that allowed them to construct alliances with the left and argue the governmental agenda to deepen democracy (Baud, 2013).

3.1.2 The Official Memory Agenda of the Kirchners

From his first day in office, Néstor Kirchner turned the continuing impunity into one of the main policy stances of his political agenda (Baud, 2013). Stressing the importance of 'Memory, Truth, and Justice', the Kirchners launched a series of initiatives to officialize the newly shaped collective memory.

On the 24th of March, which has been implemented as *el Día de la Memoria por la Verdad y la Justicia*, Néstor Kirchner commemorated the victims of the dictatorship at one of the most infamous detention centers of the dictatorship, the Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA) (Druliolle, 2011). During the commemoration, he asked the Head of Army to remove the portraits of former military leaders Jorge Videla and Reynaldo Bignone (Bietti, 2011; Van Drunen, 2010). Considering these generals to be pardoned by Menem, it is obvious that the political positions of the Kirchners ruptured with the reconciliation policies implemented by other governments in the decades after the dictatorship (Bietti, 2011). On the same day, he decided to convert ESMA into a site of memory. Following the concept of *lieux de mémoire*, this decision is important in creating collective memory. Transforming the former clandestine detention center into a 'space' of memory fixes the predominance of one memory over competing narratives of the past (Goeury, 2016). Instantly after, Néstor Kirchner apologized on behalf of the state to all the victims of the dictatorship for remaining silent for two decades after the dictatorship (Goeury, 2016). He spoke about the end of an era of impunity and the start of a new decade based on memory and justice. Succeeding, the Supreme Court declared Punto Final and Obediencia Debida laws unconstitutional on Kirchner's request (Druliolle, 2011). The trials resumed in 2006, which led to 500 people being sentenced and around 115 trials being concluded (Bietti, 2011; Lessa & Levey, 2015). In 2006, the Kirchner government reissued the CONADEP report along with a new prologue, published under the supervision of the Human Rights Secretariat (Carmody, 2018; Goeury, 2016). Finally, the Kirchners transformed the 24th of March into an official bank holiday (Carmody, 2018).

These initiatives implemented by the Kirchners during their first years as president show that they felt a responsibility to ensure that this period in Argentina's history was shaped into a national collective memory. They broke with the past and the long-enduring impunity and creating a nation that stands for truth, justice, and memory.

3.2 HROs vis-à-vis the Kirchners

3.2.1 Co-optation of the HROs

The Kirchners used their created a narrative surrounding the dictatorship to let society join their political project (Baud, 2013). The ‘new way of thinking’ about the human rights violations ensured a shift in the relationship between social groups, like the HROs, and the state. This was most evident when the Madres y Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo became dedicated supporters of the Kirchner’s political human rights agenda (Baud, 2013). Next to letting the HROs being party of their ‘political family’, they also managed to co-opt parts of the *Piquetero* movement, which was established during the social and economic crisis under Fernando de la Rúa (Baud, 2013). Co-optation of social groups or “being absorbed by powerful elites without gaining new advantages”, has a long-standing history in Argentina (Holdo, 2019: 1). These groups have always been of importance in the political development of Argentina, especially in the tradition of Peronism. Peronism emphasized affinity between social groups and the state (Baud, 2013). The Kirchners emphasized this idea and wanted the long-enduring tradition of contentious memories in society to align. The reconciliation between the two groups was no longer something that opposed the state, but rather something that would save the state (Carmody, 2018). Besides that, co-optation of HROs in politics was a way to create state legitimacy. By co-optation, the Kirchners “sought to defuse their protests, channel new victims into the program, and derive some political legitimacy from their support” (Humphrey & Valverde, 2008: 99).

One of the first initiatives of the Kirchners to include the HROs in their political agenda was to establish the ‘Ministry of Justice Program Against Impunity’. This program was established to politically manage the new victim groups’ demands for greater accountability of judiciary and policy (Humphrey & Valverde, 2008). The ‘old’ victim groups, such as the Madres, were now regarded as politically safe, but the ‘new’ victim groups were seen as politically destabilizing (Humphrey & Valverde, 2008). The relationship between the HROs and the government took an even more physical form when they recruited many of the prominent figures of the ‘new’ victim groups and appointed them to salaried positions connected to the state (Carmody, 2018). Their role was mainly to provide public contact points through their personal network and to serve as identifiable go-betweens (Carmody, 2018; Humphrey & Valverde, 2008). The government welcomed the Madres to the Casa Rosada and invited other HROs to take part in commemorations (Bietti, 2011). The Program Against Impunity can be seen as a form of state circulation to illustrate its presence

and compassion for the victims. But can also be seen as a response to state legitimacy by co-optation of high-profile victims (Humphrey & Valverde, 2008).

The Kirchners focused especially on co-optation of two main HROs: las Madres y Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo and H.I.J.O.S (Hijos e Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio) (Maguire, 2017). The public performances of the Madres y Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo had sought to address the innocence of the desaparecidos (Maguire, 2017). Entering the public space through weekly marches, they crossed the line from private mourning to public politics (Maguire, 2017). They voiced their individual grievances and demanded justice on the national stage. While the Madres and Abuelas expressed their grieving process in political discourses, H.I.J.O.S represented a disclosure of escraches to shame ex-military repressors and create awareness of the violent past (Maguire, 2017). The Kirchners reacted to public campaigns by inviting the organizations to be part of their political agenda. They invited Madres and H.I.J.O.S to act as prosecutors in the trials of ex-military and supported them in their demand for national recognition (Maguire, 2017).

The human rights agendas of the Kirchners and the co-optation of HROs, resulted in enhanced cooperation between the state and society. It contributed to a new narrative about the dictatorship and influenced collective memory in society.

3.2.2 Shift Within the HROs

As can be seen in the previous sections, the relationship with the state has been one of the most central dilemmas for HROs. While some HROs decided to work together with the government and show willingness to establish an institutionalized connection with the government, other HROs are unwilling to work together with the state (Bonner, 2007). It caused profound fragmentation for some organizations as they were struggling with how to react to the new political environment (Van Drunen, 2010). This fragmentation was further emphasized when some members of the HROs decided to not unconditionally support the government, but only willing to work with them on specific projects (Bonner, 2007). Conflicts within the movements now became public and old ideological differences re-emerged. The organizations that chose dialogue were now facing dilemmas about whether they could maintain a critical judgment while cooperating with the government (Van Drunen, 2010). Progressive governments, like the Kirchners, that “adopted the language of movements’ and ‘claimed to defend identical objectives” (Zibechi, 2005: 14) challenged the organizations to reposition themselves on the issue (Van Drunen, 2010). Other HROs, in

contrast, saw the collaboration with the government as an opportunity to advance their agenda on truth, justice, and memory and were willing to work together (Bonner, 2007; Van Drunen, 2010). This opportunity, however, did again confront them with the struggles regarding avoiding confrontation while at the same time maintaining critical independence (Van Drunen, 2010).

The Kirchners' approach to 'identify' themselves with the victims and present themselves as the 'presidents of human rights' resulted in rejection by some of the HROs. It created a division in ideologies within the HROs and often caused a split in the organizations. The presence of HROs in both the public space and politics caused visibility in society. The contesting ideologies of that circulated within these groups caused contentious memories about the past in society (Humphrey & Valverde, 2008)

Next to the struggles on how to position themselves towards the state, there was another important element that caused tensions within the relationship between the state and the HROs. The human rights violations were aging at the beginning of the 2000s. The second generation of survivors who were not directly affected by the state repression brought to light a new idea of collective memory and mourning (Sosa, 2011). The Kirchners presented the ideological idea of a 'family' and identified themselves with the victims (Baud, 2013). By addressing his opening speech to his 'brothers and sisters' and by co-opting of the Mothers, Grandmother, and Hijos-related organizations, the Kirchners presented the democratic state as the 'head' of the victims (Druliolle, 2011). Through the second generation of human rights defenders, an alternative framework emerged that did not fully fit into the original idea of resistance that the Kirchners always emphasized. This new framework in its turn created new conflicts between the state and the organizations (Sosa, 2011). When a new framework is created, this also implies that there will occur a breakout of the design of authority that controlled the older framework (Sosa, 2011).

The Kirchners attempted to create unity and collective memory within Argentina through their official agenda on 'Memory, Truth and Justice'. However, due to factors such as the new generations within HROs and different ideologies on how to cooperate with the state, this collective memory implemented by the Kirchners caused the formation of a contentious memory in society. The duality of the Kirchnerist discourse that included the tensions and the ambiguities between continuity and rupture with the HROs, became a thread for the political environment.

3.2.3 Reactive Memory under ‘Memoria Completa’

The ruptures and the disagreements between the state and some of the HROs were not only felt within the existing structure between the two actors, but also in the rest of the country. Following the tensions already at play within society, a new surge in organizations emerged under the slogan *Memoria Completa* (Complete Memory) (Salvi, 2011; Salvi, 2018). Because the Kirchners were so focused on creating a single narrative and a collective memory emphasizing truth and justice for the victims, *Memoria Completa* sought to acquire visibility in the public sphere. They fought for “memory, truth and the reconciliation of Argentines and against the humiliation, punishment and persecution of the fundamental institutions of the Fatherland” (Salvi, 2011: 45). They presented themselves in society as a group that revives the military memory and expressed their gratitude to the military who fought terrorism (Ranalletti, 2010).

Through their political activity, the organizations intended to open a new social space by transcending the boundaries of highly military institutions. They positioned themselves as new actors in the debate and creation of collective memory (Salvi, 2011; Salvi, 2018). Additionally, they questioned the legitimacy of the HROs and put forward ideas of national reconciliation. Through the appropriation of different controversial forms such as symbols, escraches, graffiti in spaces associated with the dictatorship, these groups established a narrative of the violent past that can be adopted by society (Palmisciano, 2021). They did not deny the existence of desaparecidos, but rather equated the effect of the two-demons theory implemented by Alfonsín (Salvi, 2018). Along these lines, they constructed a ‘reactive memory’ to the HROs and the state that mirrors and challenges the existing collective memory in Argentina (Salvi, 2011).

The organizations refused to accept the collective memory created by the HROs and the Kirchners and emphasized that the human rights violations occurred because of an ‘internal war’ against subversion in the 1970s (Salvi, 2011). They created a memory that focused on the suffering for the military who were forced to participate in the violence and minimized the violations that occurred during the dictatorship (Salvi, 2011). They implemented a narrative that the juntas did not murder to save the fatherland, but sacrificed themselves (Portelli, 2003). By reforming pre-existing meanings and representations of truth, justice, desaparecidos and killings, they obscured the actual events of the dictatorship. This

reactive memory caused another wave of collective memory in society, that was facing all these narrative frameworks that competed with other memories.

3.3 Museo Espacio Memoria y Derechos Humanos

3.3.1 From Clandestine Detention Center to Human Rights Museum

As described in the previous sections, Argentina experienced an explosion of contentious memories during the Kirchner Administrations. Another explicit example of this is when HROs and the Kirchners called for the building of memorials at places where human rights violations occurred. Military and Complete Memory Organizations restrained these ideas. The various ideas and struggles regarding the transformation of these places that were emblematic of state terrorism into lieux de mémoire were reflected the most in the transformation of the former clandestine detention center ESMA into a place for memory. The struggles over the ESMA have been a source of contentious memories that point to a conflicting national recognition of what to remember and what to forget (Parsons, 2011).

Among the centers for torture and extermination, the ESMA was the most infamous. The complex functioned as the largest of the 340 clandestine detention centers throughout the country (Kaiser, 2020). It is estimated that 5,000 people were abducted and brought to ESMA, of whom only hundreds survived (Feld, 2017). During the return to democracy, ESMA remained an icon of violence and trauma. It is located the middle of the urban district Nuñez, reminding visitors and passers-by of the human rights violations that occurred there during the Dirty War (Feld, 2017; Kaiser, 2020). The memory of the ESMA represents the stories of the desaparecidos, but despite its symbolic value, the site continued to serve as a military school and was in the hands of the Navy till 2004 (Feld, 2017).

The 40-acre site with 35 buildings was abandoned by the Navy in 2004 and left in a ruined state (Sosa, 2014). When trials were reopened in 2006, ESMA gained the status of a ‘mega lawsuit’ where a lot of evidence could be found (Sosa, 2014). Based on investigations in the ESMA, 19 former militaries were convicted of mistreating and killing people (Sosa, 2014). After a complete evacuation of the site in 2007, *El Ente*, a judicial institution that was allowed to decide the fate of ESMA, was created (Sosa, 2014). In 2007, the military headquarters, Casino de Oficiales, was transformed into lieu de mémoire and opened to the public. The building was reconsidered and remodeled in the following years and 2015, it officially reopened under the name Museo Sitio de Memoria ex-ESMA (Kaiser, 2020).

The reconstruction and transformation of ESMA into a memorial site did not happen overnight. A brief history is needed to understand how different actors from both inside and outside the government fought a battle over the fate of ESMA. In the late 1990s, Menem signed a decree to move the military school to another district in Buenos Aires. Many high-ranking military officials opposed the relocation of 'their' military school and refused a transformation of ESMA into a museum or archive of national memory. In 2001, Menem's decree was declared illegal, and the 'Never Again Memory Institute' was established (Parsons, 2011). This institute submitted a proposal to change ESMA into official lieu de mémoire (Parsons, 2011). This proposal was reinforced with 'Law 961' which caused the 'Space for Memory Institute' to protect these places of memory. On 24 March 2004, Néstor Kirchner signed an agreement that guaranteed ESMA to become a realm for memories (Parsons, 2011; UNESCO, 2017). Following the agreement in 2004, a fierce debate between HROs, former military, city authorities, and the Kirchner government began. They could not come to an agreement on how to transform the former military school into a memorial site (Sosa, 2014). The Kirchner Administrations invited different sectors of civil society to suggest how to re-occupy the site (Sosa, 2014). Within these suggestions, three main positions could be identified. First, there was a 'museal proposal' that argued for the 'pedagogical functions' of the space. Next to that, there was a proposal that argued for the site to be an 'unalterable heritage'. Last, there was the idea of transforming the site into a 'performative space' where political activists and artists could enter (Sosa, 2014).

These suggestions were each highly influenced by the contentious narratives and memories at play in society at the time. It was clear that a pure reclamation of the site was impossible, and that the contesting memories were subject to complex negotiations (Parsons, 2011).

3.3.2 Contrasting Ideas and Memories surrounding la ESMA

As can be noted in the last section, it has been a multi-year struggle for HROs and the Kirchners to eventually transform ESMA into a place of memory and to push forward their collective memories of the dictatorship. The process of the reformation of the ESMA from a symbol of violence to a public site that demonstrates the memory of state repression and human rights, embodies Argentina's struggle to acknowledge the past.

Although official decisions have determined the fate of ESMA, the actors involved in the process could not agree on the memorialization process that should be implemented

(Parsons, 2011; Sosa, 2014). Three opposing groups, that are participating in conflicting negotiations about the remembrance of the conflictive past, have defined the transformation of this opposing memory work. The Kirchner Government and the HROs were partly agreeing on the fate of the site. They wanted to transform the ESMA into a museum or active performative place (Parsons, 2011). The military strongly opposed this idea wishing to destroy as much of the ESMA as possible (Parsons, 2011). The struggle over the fate of the complex reflects the idea that creating a memorial museum from a former detention center, was not an idea conceived by the society's 'unanimous consensus' (Parsons, 2011: 84).

In 2007, when it was officially announced that the ESMA would be transformed into a memorial museum, the military was still denying the atrocities of the Dirty War (Parsons, 2011). They wanted to move forward and strike the collective memories of the past from the memories of the nation (Parsons, 2011). As the 34-buildings located at the ESMA still reminded the military of the past that they attempted to forget, they wanted to destroy the buildings hoping to erase the memory of others. This approach corresponds to their tactics used during the dictatorship when they made the dead bodies disappear and redirected the blame for the bodies floating to the surface elsewhere (Parsons, 2011). After they lost the Malvinas-Falklands war they destroyed documents, evidence, and bodies of the crimes (Wilson, 2016). Destroying the ESMA buildings seems to be an extension of their tactics to erase evidence to demoralize memory of the experience (Parsons, 2011).

The Kirchner government, on the other hand, advocated for a proliferation of ESMA to increase the likelihood of national solidarity (Carmony, 2018). It gave a physical form to the continuous memories that in turn forced the issue of the past into the present (Carmony, 2018). They occupied a central position in the projects to preserve the memory of the conflictive past by converting the ESMA into a site of memory (Druliolle, 2011). The Kirchners gave public speeches in which they clarified to be strong supporters of the transformation of ESMA into a memorial museum. This public approach attracted the attention of HROs who shared some of the same views on the transformation of ESMA (Feld, 2017).

The Kirchners together with the HROs thus occupied a strong communal position in the debate surrounding the fate of the ESMA. But on the other hand, they also felt the pressure from military and other high-ranking government officials. The HROs fought for a public site that increases the public knowledge and memories of the crimes committed, establishing a collective memory on them (Parsons, 2011). Next to promoting a collective memory that fit the ideas of the HROs, they also wanted a physical space to manage the

trauma of the past (Parsons, 2011). A lieu de mémoire, allows family members of the disappeared to pay homage. Many family members never gained any clarity about the fate of their disappeared loved ones. By embodying their memory in a museum, they can produce a collective memory about the past and together participate in mourning acts (Parsons, 2011)

Although the views of the government and the HROs regarding the preservation of ESMA almost completely coincided, there were opposing ideas that again show the complex relationship between these actors regarding the politics of memory. On the one hand, the human rights groups were put in a position to express their beliefs about the fate of ESMA, on the other hand, the opening of co-determination on the policy has subsequently caused further splits within HROs because they did again not know how to position themselves with regards to the government (Feld, 2017). These contentious memories of the dictatorship continue to be in constant rearrangement pressured by different narratives and sources of information that are constantly conflicting with each other (Parsons, 2011). Keeping in mind the visibility of the ESMA in the urban space, the struggles over ESMA illustrate the contributions to the contentious memory network that are a danger to national consciousness.

According to the results of the previous sections and the transformation of ESMA, the notion of contentious memories between the past and present, between essence and construction, and between sacred and transformation lay at the heart of all these conflicting ideologies and ideas of the past. The memories of society are highly influence by the ideologies of HROs, military and reactive groups. These different groups continuously influence the collective memory and cause these memories to converge and contest over time and at the same time.

Conclusion

Next year, Argentina will commemorate 40 years of memory since the dictatorship ended. The ghosts of the disappeared still haunt Argentine society today and coming to terms with the past demonstrates to be a complex notion in Argentina. This research demonstrates how collective memories of both politics and society converged and contested during the Kirchner Administrations in Argentina. More importantly, this research aims not only to juxtapose the contentious memories of different actors in the decades after the dictatorship but focuses on how these converge and contest at the same time.

To move toward a framework of understanding how these complex memory relations predominate Argentine society, this research builds upon a multidimensional conceptual framework of memory studies. Collective memories have proven to almost always be contentious at the same time. Shaping collective memory involves contrasting attempts that can either contribute to a process of national identity or be a force for more debate. The construction of collective memory by different groups keeps contending narratives in tension and allows different memories to be expressed and opposed. Through politics of memory, different political actors have tried to contribute to national reconciliation in attempt to create a sovereign Argentina that has come to terms with its past.

Based on a thorough literary study, it can be concluded that the Argentina case shows that, since the end of the military dictatorship, no dominant collective memory has arisen, but that different memories converge and contest at the same time. Ever since the fall of the military regime, a political and societal battle over how to remember the past has occurred. Both the military and the HROs are two actors who alienate each other in the struggle over collective memories. They both try to convince society of their ideal collective memory. While the juntas rest on the theory of the two-demons, which entails that the military were forced to respond to the terrorist crimes that leftist guerillas were committing, the HROs accused the juntas of the human rights violations and brought to light the notions of truth and justice.

Following the transitional period from the dictatorship to democracy, different governmental actors faced struggles on how to deal with the different memories of state repression. Through the decades, both progressive and pragmatic governments have, through the idea of politics of memory, influenced the narrative of the past. Menem and De la Rúa chose to merge with the militaries, while others like Alfonsín and especially the Kirchners chose to implement policies that advocated memory, truth, and justice.

The Kirchners influenced the narrative of the past by emphasizing their policy on human rights. They managed to gain immense popular support by using a radical national theory. Their collective memory-related agenda guaranteed the Kirchners a decade of political power. They dealt with the contentious memories of the past by co-optation of different sectors of HROs to advance their political agenda. The HROs struggled with their adaptation to the new political environment and were afraid that they could not maintain a critical approach towards the government while cooperating with them. Fragmentation within HROs caused again a new wave of collective memories. The Kirchners transformed their political agenda into an official 'Human Rights Agenda' and stressed the importance of the transformation of the former clandestine detention center ESMA into a *lieu de mémoire*. Although the Kirchners aimed to ease tensions in society surrounding collective memory of the past, their radical memory agenda created additional tensions. The public confrontation with society by transforming the visible detention center into a space for memory illustrates the complexity of contentious memory networks that endanger national consciousness. The agenda of the Kirchners gave rise to a new trend of reactive memory under the slogan *Memoria Completa*.

In response to the research question posed, this research concludes that the notion of contentious memories between the present and the past predominates all the conflicting ideologies and ideas of the past. Both the governmental and societal collective memory of the violent past were highly converged and contested during the Kirchner Administrations. Although the government and society shared memories and interpreted the past in the same way, they also contested in multiple ways. Hence, the struggle over memory is due to conflicting social and political forces on how to interpret the past. The Kirchners have tried to resolve this struggle. Although they made a strong contribution to the creation of a homogeneous collective memory, tensions will always be at play.

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