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Nunca Más: The Evolution of Memory Narratives in Post-Dictatorship Argentina and Uruguay

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Abstract

This work is a comparative analysis between the memory-making processes that followed the late 20th century dictatorships in Argentina and Uruguay. While Argentina did extensive work to memorialize and prosecute the violence that occurred, Uruguay maintained the impunity of their military regime and had lackluster efforts to condemn it in their national narrative. The existence of opportunities to politically profit from stories of oppression shaped how and whether these stories were told. This research is based on a close reading of the *Nunca Más* reports which detailed the experiences of those targeted by state terrorism as well as visits to “Memory Museums” in both countries. I track the evolution of memory and accountability narratives from the years following the dictatorships to present-day efforts. How did two countries with historical similarities have such different treatments of national memory? What actors were and continue to be key in determining these differences?

Keywords: Memory, South America, Transitional Justice, Dictatorship, Argentina, Uruguay, Museum, Museology, Truth Report

Introduction

Argentina's last military dictatorship took over its government on March 24, 1976 and remained in power until December 10, 1983 (Rock, 1987). Known as the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (National Reorganization Process), a brutal war on subversion against the government characterized its rule. The armed forces "disappeared" civilians.¹ They sent them to illegal detention centers and tortured and murdered them for the mere suspicion of being related to left-wing groups (CONADEP, 1986). Parallel to Argentina's, Uruguay's military dictatorship occurred during almost the same time frame from June 27, 1973 until March 1, 1985 (Lessa, 2013). The repression in Uruguay focused on mass incarceration in prisons designed for psychological torture (Loveman, 1998). Uruguay became known for having the largest number of prisoners in the world in relation to its population (SERPAJ-Uruguay, 1989). Both countries, along with other South American dictatorships, participated in a multinational system of oppression that assisted each country with persecuting their own citizens.

Transitional justice constitutes measures, both judicial and non-judicial, to deal with the aftermath of widespread human rights violations (International Center for Transitional Justice, 2011). The strength of transitional justice processes can predict the standing of memory processes in these countries. Argentina carried out in 1985 the emblematic *Juicio a las Juntas* (Trial of the Juntas) which prosecuted the members of the military juntas that presided during the dictatorship (Lessa, 2013). This trial set a precedent in Latin America and received much international praise. It turned Argentina into a model for transitional justice in the global stage. Transitional justice processes continued until the presidency of Carlos Menem in 1989 and until Néstor Kirchner's administration reopened trials in 2003. Uruguay instead maintained under law

¹ The use of "disappeared" as a verb here is analogous to the Spanish use of *desaparecer* in reference to the oppressive technique used in South American dictatorships of disposing of people without any legal or physical traces of them.

15.848 the impunity of their military regime and had lackluster efforts to condemn it in their official national narrative.

Political scientist Barbara Geddes (1999) outlines the different paths to democratization of authoritarian regimes. Opposition from society and exogenous shocks help determine the dictatorships' ending. The crises "cast doubt of the military's competence" both within society and among fellow officers. This was the case with Argentina's dictatorship, as it ended after economic downfall and the disastrous loss of the Malvinas War (Lessa, 2013). In times of crises, the military may lean towards protecting itself as an institution rather than continue as a government. The democratic governments that follow may even choose to grant them better transitional conditions to prevent subsequent military uprisings. The Uruguayan military initiated transition negotiations almost four years before democracy's return. Although the full contents of the 1984 *Pacto del Club Naval* (Naval Club Pact) are unknown, the fact is that the administration that followed secured impunity for the military's crimes.

The Truth Reports

The end of the Cold War era coincided with the transition into democracy of several repressive regimes (Hayner, 2013). Truth commissions emerged as one of the ways for nations to bring reconciliation and justice to societies torn by the violence of the past. These commissions aimed to "discover, clarify, and formally acknowledge past abuses" (Hayner, 2013, p. 20) Argentina's *Comisión Nacional por la Desaparición de Personas* (National Commission on the Disappearance of People; CONADEP) in 1983 was the first widely known truth commission, although the term would not come around until the 1990s. "Truth commissions" came into use after Chile and El Salvador's commissions in 1990 and 1992. Truth reports mark the conclusion of a truth commission's work. Final reports encompass information on the methodology and

scale of human rights violations. They are the nation's proposed resolution to the uncertainty of past events, countering silence and denial. When truth reports originate from the national government, their importance lies not only in the evidence they uncover but in their status as a public and official recognition of what happened.

Argentine president Raúl Alfonsín created the *Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas* (National Commission on the Disappearance of People; CONADEP) on December 15, 1983 (Arditti, 2002). Its original purpose was not to result in prosecutions but to find out the fate of Argentina's Disappeared, although the evidence they gathered later served as evidence during the *Juicio a las Juntas* (CONADEP, 1986). CONADEP's final report *Nunca más* came out in November 1984. It became a global bestseller. While the final report had 490 pages, they had collected around 50,000 pages of evidence and testimonies. *Nunca más* focused on government-led disappearances and recorded 8960 people still missing at the time of writing, plus another 600 before the coup d'état. Sociologist Emilio Crenzel (2008) described its narrative as proposing that state violence arose from a need to face the guerrillas. The report established a difference between other state responses to subversion and the disappearances by highlighting their systematic and illegal nature. The prologue spoke of a methodology of terror planned by the high commands. They did not see "excesses" but a system working as it had been conceived.

Nunca más depicted Argentina as tormented by both the extreme right and the extreme left (CONADEP, 1986). The commission took several strategies to "depoliticize" the subject matter and avoid being associated with either side. It described cases meticulously and contained direct transcription of testimonies but neglected to explore the historical roots of violence (Crenzel, 2008). The existence of clandestine detention centers and the persecution of leftists under the democratic government of Isabel Perón had a mention only in the prologue. Guerrilla

violence was the chosen origin of state violence, not the uncannily similar system of persecution that preceded it.

Nunca Más also depoliticized its subjects by focusing on those without leftist associations. Its prologue explains Argentine society's overall lack of response to the disappearances during the dictatorship stating they believed that anyone, as innocent as they were, could become a target (CONADEP, 1986). They emphasized how victims of state terrorism could have alarmingly little relationship to even mainstream politics and still become a target. The report represented Argentine society as a collective of potential victims, ignoring the mainstream society's apathy towards the oppression of leftists regardless of guerrilla activity (Crenzel, 2008). The truth report's format aided in combating this apathy.

Nunca más relied mostly on transcriptions of victims' testimonies. While this was due to the absence of other forms of evidence, the way the report presented information from testimonies was markedly different from what would later be seen in Uruguay's report. Instead of summarizing the actions of the military dictatorship, they created a space for victims to share their experience with the reader without secondary interpretations. The main effect of these testimonies was not the transmission the facts of imprisonment. Instead of a data-focused recollection of events, testimonies focused on the human experience. Their format implied the importance of centering the voices of those who lived through the dictatorship. They chose not to redact graphic or subjective details. CONADEP did not shorten or exclude subjective interpretations from testimonies. This portrayal had a much more emotional effect on the reader than a more epistemological presentation would have.

Human rights organization *Servicio Paz y Justicia-Uruguay* (Service Peace and Justice-Uruguay; SERPAJ) stepped in to write Uruguay's truth report when the national government

neglected to. The organization published *Uruguay nunca más* in 1989 (SERPAJ-Uruguay, 1989). They named it after CONADEP's report (Madelón Aguerre and Efraín Olivera, personal interview, January 2020). The group referred to it as the only South American report of its kind to be produced by a non-governmental group. Their *Nunca más* became one of the first ways for Uruguayans to find out what happened during the dictatorship. It was a best seller but received no response from the military or the national government (Lessa, 2013). Although they named the report after CONADEP's, they took a different strategy to find the truth of the oppression. Where CONADEP centered testimony, SERPAJ took an investigative approach and gave the reader historical documents and data to explain the extent and origins of oppression in Uruguay.

SERPAJ's account of human rights violations was not limited to the dictatorship-era. Their story began with the abuses civil governments committed from 1966 until 1972 (SERPAJ-Uruguay, 1986). *Uruguay nunca más* contained an exhaustive report of the legal events that chipped away at the country's democracy. It chronicled and did close readings on several decrees by the executive and the responses from other powers. The decrees told the story of the establishment of military justice for civilians in Uruguay. It argued that the military did not suddenly take over but that the civil governments that preceded it enabled it. When describing incarceration, *Uruguay nunca más* provided the reader with a wealth of data. It described the changing volume of detentions throughout the dictatorship, Other figures introduced in the note the number of detentions per person, the length of detention, the place where they occurred, and which sectors of the armed forces carried them out. There were very few pieces of testimony in comparison. The transcriptions present were shorter than those in CONADEP's *Nunca más* and used to illustrate strategies described in the report. The testimonies were not the central part of the story the data collection and legal documents told.

Memory Museums: The Present of Memory Narratives

Memory museums are those which engage with national trauma “large enough to shake the foundation of a cohesive national identity” (Weiser, 2017, p. 163). Dictatorship memory museums became commonplace in Latin America in the 2000s. This phenomenon embodies the continuation of national and regional processes to address collective trauma. Argentina’s first dictatorship memory museum opened in Rosario, Santa Fe in 1998 (RESLAC, accessed April 24, 2020). *Museo Sitio de Memoria ESMA* opened in 2015 during the Cristina Fernández de Kirchner administration, becoming the most prominent memorial by the national government. Uruguay’s *Centro Cultural Museo de la Memoria* opened in 2006 with funding from the *Departamento de Cultura* of the Montevideo city government.

The museums this chapter analyzes came about in the 2000s, 9 years apart. The idea of Uruguay’s *Museo de la Memoria* originated in 1996 after the country had not seen transitional justice advances in years and following the declarations of Adolfo Scilingo, which prompted human rights activists to revitalize their movement (Elbio Ferrario, personal interview, January 2020). The Argentine government under Néstor Kirchner ordered in March 2004 the eviction of the armed forces from the ESMA former clandestine detention center (*Museo Sitio Esma*, accessed April 24, 2020). The museum would not open until after his death, during his wife’s administration. Since dictatorship trials restarted in 2006, Argentina’s memory museum came at a point where it could celebrate the advances in justice and accountability. Although these museums began at different points during each country’s transitional justice arc, they both chronicle the dictatorships while emphasizing those oppressed by state violence. Chapter four compares the ways in which they tell these stories. The museums differ in their formats and choice of artifacts. They focus on particular aspects of their subjects’ stories. Each museum has

their own vision on what the past and future of human rights looks like and how to best raise awareness about what happened. The analysis of these choices within their political contexts can explain how two museums with parallel topics came to express them so differently.

French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs describes collective memory as the shared memory of groups that exists outside of the individual (Weiser, 2017). National museums are the physical and public representation of this memory, a monument to the national experience. This national experience is a set of given common values and memories. The visitors' recognition of and participation in these items reaffirm their importance to establishing a sense of national identity. Museums are a "material demonstration of a national rhetoric that is voluntary, aesthetic, and polyphonic, and that can have a strong motivational effect on civic life" (Weiser, 2017, p. 19). Dictatorship memory museums deal with a trauma that must somehow become integrated into the national narrative. This narrative arises from the sum of individual testimonies that illustrate and represent the museum's view of collective dictatorship memory. The political context where museums originate shapes which voices participate in this story and their portrayals. What strategies do these museums take in order to advocate for human rights while maintaining a sense of national unity? What role do memory and testimony play in the determination of a historical truth? Where does the audience fit into museums' narratives?

Testimony in dictatorship memory museums has the political and social role that author Diego Tatián (2009) assigned to *memoria* of ascertaining the facts of what happened when faced with a culture of denial. The displays that show testimonies without taking away the witness's qualifications and demonstrations of pain have a wider reach than the nearby collection of documents proving the same events. By provoking an emotional response, the audience becomes more accepting of the narrative presented (Weiser, 2017). While the research and artifacts that go

into an exhibit grant it credibility as a transmitter of a historical truth, testimony's purpose is to arouse the audience's empathy and convince them that this story needs a space to be told. Its function is not epistemological.

Dictatorship memory museums memorialize the victims of oppression (Weiser, 2017). Their experiences are at the center of the museums' contents. The events covered can present a threat to national identity. The rupture comes from the difficulty people have in identifying with the imagined community of the nation when part of it has committed crimes against humanity. Trauma hinders the individual's ability to relate with a clashing collective. Because of their purpose, memory museums must identify with the victims of past trauma. Their voices are the ones museums believe need a platform after the oppression. They showcase their experience with the detail necessary to move viewers into becoming their "rescuers." Visitors reconcile with the past by taking an active role against what happened. Argentina's *Museo Sitio de Memoria ESMA* constructs this supportive visitor by celebrating the activism and leftist ideas of Disappeared. Since the target audience are most likely militants of the leftist administration that sponsored the museum, they can easily identify with the Disappeared's political mobilization. To be a victim or rescuer, a "persecutor" must be recognized. The nation faces this common enemy, restoring its unity by separating itself from it. Memory museums single out these outsiders and identifies the visitor as their antithesis. Reconciliation into the national narrative can occur once the enemy is barred from holding the national identity.

The public memory that museums display "is activated by present concerns, issues, or anxieties" (Weiser, 2017, p. 168). The museum has an opportunity to transmit to its audience the actions necessary to address these concerns. Memory museums often have the message that "healing cannot proceed by covering up the trauma of its victims or the responsibility of its

perpetrators” (Weiser, 2017, p. 164). These museums seek to uncover and showcase the “truth.” Through showing this truth, they hope to help the nation process what occurred and assure that it will never happen again. Memory’s role is shaping the future to not look like the past. Memory museums encourage visitors to become active participants in carrying out this vision. To this end, the narrative of dictatorship memory museums does not shun unity but may not showcase it as a primary objective to recognize the need for ongoing resolution. There needs to be a recognition of tensions and responsibilities that “can never be fully resolved” (Weiser, 2017, p. 176). An active practice of memory continuously acknowledges the work that needs to be done to prevent these abuses from ever occurring again.

Uruguay’s *Centro Cultural Museo de la Memoria* (Cultural Center Museum of Memory; MUME) opened in December 10, 2007 (“Museo de la Memoria,” accessed January 13, 2020). The concept for the museum arose during the 1996 first *Marcha del Silencio* organized by *Madres y Familiares* (Elbio Ferrario, personal interview, January 2020). The contemporary declarations by Argentine naval officer Adolfo Scilingo that recognized death flights served to revive the Uruguayan human rights movement after years of silence. The new yearly march served as a setting for HROs to come together in planning MUME. These HROs provided MUME with its content and a museological direction. They brought the project to the Montevideo city government in 2006 and have received funding from the Montevideo Department of Culture ever since. The decree that established the museum stated its academic autonomy from the government.

Although its focus is on promoting the memory of Uruguay’s military dictatorship, its scope has gone conceptually beyond that since its proposal:

The Cultural Center Museum of Memory will promote in a participatory way peace, human rights, and the memory of the popular fights for liberty, democracy, and social justice. These concepts are conceived as dynamic socio-historical constructions and in permanent development. (Centro Cultural Museo de la Memoria, 2006)

In practice, this meant MUME did not limit itself geographically with its human rights exhibits. On a visit in January 2020, the gardens of its *casa quinta* featured several photographic series documenting state oppression throughout the Americas. They depicted exhumed bodies in Guatemala's Quiché department, disappearances in Colombia's Antioquia, and the brutal conditions of Central American immigration to the United States. MUME saw memory as the "present identity of a people which reconstructs its fights and conquests, its debts, its absences and presences" (Centro Cultural Museo de la Memoria, 2006). Through these side exhibits, it sought to explore the memory of collective trauma as a concept not limited to the Uruguayan experience.

Museum Director and participant of the first *Marcha del Silencio* Elbio Ferrario cited critical museology as the MUME's framework. MUME's team made a conscious effort not to create a "museum of horror or pain" as Ferrario considered ESMA to be. He remarked the Argentine museum's excessive gruesome specifics and its redundant references to the Kirchner government. MUME's narrative focused instead on popular resistance and resilience. The ones to tell this story were the dictatorship's survivors. Ferrario himself was imprisoned under the dictatorship. SERPAJ and several of its members, proscribed during the regime, form part of the *Asociación Amigos del Museo de la Memoria* (Association Friends of the Museum of Memory). All of MUME's artifacts except from a clandestine detention center door were donations from

survivors or their families. Their objects, testimony, and active participation within MUME's community made the museum a first-person account of their experiences.

The first museum room has the theme of the dictatorship's establishment. Wall text relates the dictatorship's beginning with death squads that began operations in 1970. They tortured and killed members of the *Movimiento de Liberación Nacional* and invaded the *Partido Comunista* (Communist Party) headquarters. Per MUME, the dictatorship begins with the violence the democratic governments enabled the military to commit. This room has a special focus on student persecutions. Documents exhibited include a student union declaration against the killing of Ibero Gutiérrez. Several other pamphlets by the *Federación de Estudiantes Universitarios del Uruguay* (Federation of University Students of Uruguay) seek to incite an uprising against paramilitary groups. They call for resistance while handwritten notes say not to engage in dialogue but to arm for the fight. On a showcase next to these notes are wire *Miguelitos* that student activists used to puncture tires from "the repression." Newspapers of the time describe the finding of bodies of students killed by death squads. The following wall text tells about the official start of the dictatorship in June 1973.

The museum makes an emphasis on artifacts made by survivors during their imprisonment. MUME places most of them in the central room. Rather than transmitting the prison experience, these objects show their creative ability within the brutal environment and scarce resources. The viewer cannot see through them the suffering inflicted by state terrorism but the spirit of the resistance against it. One of the more political items is a transcription of *Historia del Partido Comunista Vietnamita* (History of the Vietnamese Communist Party) done on cigarette rolling paper. Most them are less clearly revolutionary however, and include carvings in soap and wood, engravings on tile, and hand drawn card decks. Prominently featured

is a collection of illustrated letters by teacher Didasko Pérez to his daughters. These humanize the imprisoned, highlighting their human relationships and creativity. The viewer does not focus on the atrocities they suffered but on the people they were. The museum generates empathy not from showcasing their pain but their human experience.

While imprisonment is not exposed as thoroughly, MUME does point out it was the Uruguayan dictatorship's characteristic strategy. It remarks on the large percentage of imprisoned and mentions that torture was a routine practice. However, it does not give graphic details on torture methods. In front of the wall text are several prison uniforms hung from the ceiling. Everyday items from the prison operations include a balance to weigh medicine and a list of prices from the canteen. The focus remains on how the prisoners went through their lives within imprisonment rather than on the violence they experienced. Next to them is a brief section about the exiled and the different efforts they took to raise support abroad for Uruguay. MUME credits the exiled with bringing about international condemnation for the military regime.

The Uruguayan Disappeared appear first as photos in protest signs pasted along the entrance to their museum section. There are descriptions of the archeological work that took place to find them with accompanying pictures. The room also has pieces of lime and concrete that covered Disappeareds' bodies. Wall text goes into detail about exhumation operations, with dates, technical details, and explanations of archeology as a discipline. MUME chooses to center past and current efforts to find their bodies, leaving out much detail about the Disappeareds' lives and political ideals which would be a crucial part of Argentina's exhibitions. MUME does not elaborate on individual narratives but conveys instead evidence for the existence and methodology of disappearances.

MUME's historical narrative extends beyond the dictatorship, chronicling its institutional roots and present-day legacy. After going through the negotiations that led to democracy there is a collection of posters from the *Partido Comunista*. These promote the *voto verde* (green vote) that hoped to take back the law that granted impunity to the military. The posters listed numbers of Disappeared and dead from the dictatorship under a large picture of a missing child. Another poster denounces the proscription of political parties and media censorship. The museum continues to look at the dictatorship's aftermath through a collection of photographs in the inner patio. These are of formerly appropriated children who currently engage in human rights activism. Profiles under their pictures tell the stories of their kidnappings and the restitution of their identity.

While its focus is on the fight against the oppression that occurred during Uruguay's dictatorship, MUME's theme is human rights at large. The museum presents this as part of a larger history of US involvement in Latin American governments and includes other instances of state terrorism in the region. It chronicles a continuing history of human rights rather than presenting the military's actions as horrifying, one-time past events. The museum deals with their origins and aftermath. It begins with its origins in democratic governments and continues with today's restituted children. They mainly establish this historical truth through documents and provide a narrative well supplemented by evidence in the exhibit. The photographs and personal artifacts included accomplish the functions earlier ascribed to personal testimony. These transmit the stories of the oppressed without emphasizing their pain but their resilience and personal lives. They incite empathy not through approaching the audience to the horror but to the value of victims as people.

MUME assumes a responsibility to continue these conversations to help sort out the military regime's legacy in Uruguay. They deliberately choose not to "propagate the horror" of state terrorism. They do not center testimonies of trauma because the museum's proposed history is not one of oppression but of resistance and mobilization. This is the memory they propose to bring about social change. Their vision for the museum says it "positions the fight to build a better society, with social justice, democracy, freedom, and solidarity" ("Museo de La Memoria," accessed January 13, 2020). MUME's vision echoes the continued efforts by human rights activists that maintained the calls for justice and accountability in Uruguay. They transmit to their audience the values they deem necessary to continue this fight.

Argentine president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner inaugurated the *Museo Sitio de Memoria ESMA* (Museum Site of Memory ESMA; ESMA) in May 19, 2015 ("Kit de Prensa," accessed February 5, 2020). The chosen site for this memory museum was the former *Casino de Oficiales* (Officers Casino) of the *Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada* (School of Mechanics of the Navy; ESMA). This space had functioned as a clandestine detention center during the dictatorship. The army detained, tortured, and killed around 5,000 people at ESMA. The ESMA complex comprised 35 buildings over 17 acres that the army had occupied since 1928. The museum's script is based on testimonies from the 1985 *Juicio a las Juntas* and on the trials that restarted under Néstor Kirchner. The national *Ministerio de Justicia y Derechos Humanos* (Ministry of Justice and Human Rights) administers it, a difference from MUME's academic independence from the government that funds it. While the *Nunca Más* focused on the targeting of people who did not engage in political mobilization, the press materials for the ESMA museum recognize the political affiliations of the imprisoned. They first named "political and social militants" when describing the victims. ESMA reflected the Kirchner's government

narrative around the military dictatorship and its victims. It celebrated the victims' political activities explicitly in a space sponsored by both Kirchner administrations.

A team of museologists, architects, historians, journalists, and designers worked together to define ESMA's content and presentation. They consulted survivors, human rights organizations, and memory academics. Their stated focus was to preserve the historical building's structure. To this end, they chose to display most of their exhibits in glass panels that would expose the wall behind them and not permanently alter it. The entrance to the museum's exhibits highlights its large team. A glass panel reaching almost as high as the ceiling lists numerous names, including survivors whose testimonies are featured, human rights organizations, several government departments, and specialist teams. The first name listed, and the one with the largest typeface is that of president Fernández de Kirchner. This is unsurprising considering a plaque near the museum's entrance thanking her late husband and former president for the site's recovery:

At 2 years from your departure you will always be present in this space,
where you apologized for the crimes committed from the State and because
you gave it back to the Argentine people. THANK YOU NÉSTOR! (Museo
Sitio de Memoria ESMA, 2020)

Human rights organizations composed by relatives of the Disappeared signed this plaque. The memory processes the Kirchner set in motion had their literal mark on them. ESMA credited them with the museum's existence prominently and proudly.

Accessing the museum requires walking through much of ESMA's premises. Several of the former school's other buildings were granted to individual human rights organizations.

Amongst those present are *Abuelas*, *Madres*, the Mercosur's Institute of Public Policy on Human

Rights, and UNESCO's International Center for the Promotion of Human Rights. The outside features posters with information about the dictatorship. Several have information on the court cases that came from the abuses perpetrated at ESMA. One highlights the importance of testimony, calling them crucial in providing proof for judicial proceedings. The fronts of several buildings have standalone pictures of some Disappeared. More posters talk about ESMA's history before and during the dictatorship as an Army building, reporting its functioning and each building's former use.

Closer to the memory museum's building there is a large walkway with several double-sided signs. These provide a closer look to the lives of given Disappeared. Every single person featured in these had some sort of political militancy experience. These experiences are a central part of the text accompanying their pictures. Luis Delpech's poster talks about him joining *Montoneros* with "absolute conviction in the revolutionary practice" (Museo Sitio de Memoria ESMA, 2020). Luis Saúl Kiper's militancy in the *Partido Comunista* and the ERP was in the same paragraph as his entrance into medical school. They portray their militancy as an achievement. It is written in along with personal details such as which beaches they went to as children or how they met their significant others. We learn both about Enrique Berroeta's love for milanesa and about his extensive left-wing mobilization. Their framing of militancy is undoubtedly positive.

The memory museum's entrance is encased in glass. The large structure is covered with pictures of Disappeared's faces. They are the first sight that visitors get of the former clandestine detention center. ESMA recognizes how foreign influences helped establish South American dictatorships. The introduction of the museum's first section explains how the American *Plan Cóndor* led to political persecution in Latin America. It also mentions how military members

would attend their School of the Americas to learn about “anti-Marxist” strategies, such as torture and surveillance of civilian groups. The exhibit also highlights France’s contributions to counterrevolutionary doctrines. It showcases the pages of an agreement that show how France will provide officers to Argentina for “technical assistance and preparation” (Museo Sitio de Memoria ESMA, 2020). While ESMA recognizes that this phenomenon affected the South Cone, it spends very little time in exploring events outside of Argentina. Stories of transnational collaboration between dictatorships are barely present here.

The main exhibit is in the attic, where the army kept the detained. ESMA preserves much of the original state of this area, providing wooden walkways to avoid touching the floor. Given the site’s status as a former clandestine detention center, ESMA can and strives to transmit as much as possible about the living conditions of its prisoners. The detail they share is extensive. Projections on the spaces where detained used to sleep show footage of testimonies given at dictatorship court cases. In front of them, a cutout in the walkway shows the small size of the *cuchas* (doghouses) they kept prisoners in. On the other side, a drawing shows a point of view perspective of the *cucha*. Numerous texts on walls describe torture and oppression tactics. The pain of the imprisoned and their defenselessness is a main topic for the attic.

The rooms in the center of the attic include glass panels with dozens of disappearance descriptions. These are from women (and often their partners) who were pregnant at the time. Each case notes whether the child was expropriated or not and whether their identities were restituted afterwards. More information details the structure for stealing children and the lack of medical attention for pregnant women who stayed in these rooms. In front, a room with decaying blinds and chipped paint only has three-dimensional writing, *¿Cómo es posible que en este lugar nacieran chicos?* (how is it possible that children were born in this place?). The room plays an

audio on repeat of Sara Solarz de Osatinsky's testimony on witnessing childbirth at ESMA. The last room contains more testimonies on the loss and recovery of children and a list of names of doctors present during births.

The last area in the attic consists mostly of reproductions of dictatorship-era newspaper and magazine articles. The museum gives these indications:

The following material exhibited are documents from the period which show different political and press operations, national and international, carried out by members of the Navy: Concealing kidnappings and crimes.

Boosting political and repressive action abroad. Pushing propaganda against international denouncements and the political usage of the 1978 World Cup.

Newspapers featured include the traditional *Clarín* and *La Nación*. Headlines use vocabulary that echoes the regime's, informing about the death or capture of "extremists" and "terrorists."

Articles describe the kidnapping of *montonero* Marcelo Kurlat as "taking down a seditious ringleader." The Argentine printing of an interview the military forced Thelma Jara de Cabezas to give to a foreign human rights inspection commission calls her "the mother of a dead subversive." Another set of articles show how the dictatorship tried to ascribe the kidnapping of two French nuns to *Montoneros*. These nuns had been involved with *Madres* and were in fact disappeared by the government.

ESMA constitutes a new narrative for the national government when it comes to the Disappeared. While the *Nunca más* stepped away from the politics of the victims in order to focus on the legal and ethical issues of the military's oppressive mechanism, the 2015 museum celebrates militants. Their depiction of victims is positive and centers their political mobilization. ESMA also devotes much time to the negative way contemporary media portrayed them, a detail

not present in CONADEP's report. The museum decidedly condemns their portrayal, referring to it as a propaganda operation. ESMA memorializes the victims regardless of their political activity where the *Nunca más* may not have.

It is important to note the strong presence of the Kirchner administration in this memory museum. The names of Cristina and Néstor Kirchner take center stage in several sections. Her name is the first to sign the museum's credits, and his is in a plaque dedicated to him by the most important human rights organizations in Argentina. The personalization of the takeover of the ESMA complex and the museum opening indicate the political advantage of these actions. Argentina's political arena shapes the museum's narratives. Kirchner's need to legitimize his presidency initiated his tenure as a champion of human rights. These narratives and their exhibition are markedly different from the ones in Uruguay's memory museum. Unlike MUME, ESMA chooses to exclude the institutional origins the dictatorship found in Isabel Perón's government. This museum does not refer to a larger human rights history as Uruguay's did. ESMA begins with the regime's oppression and finishes with the transitional justice processes of the 1980s and 2000s. It condemns what happened and celebrates the Kirchner government's advances in prosecutions and memorialization.

ESMA's use of testimony exposes the trauma of the Disappeared's experience. ESMA gives the Disappeared a platform like *Nunca más* did, making them a victim for the audience to side with and establishing a clear antagonist in the military junta. Their purpose for instilling these visions of horror into national memory is the assertion that state terrorism occurred and this response to guerrilla violence was disproportionate. By translating the individual experience into collective memory, ESMA combats the apathy that plagued Argentina in the past. This museum also contains a message in favor of mobilization but one that is specific to the ideals of Kirchner

supporters. All the Disappeared militants featured had a level of association to the Peronist movement the Kirchners belong to. While MUME's vision is a general one in support of the popular fight for social justice and democracy, ESMA's version is decidedly and explicitly Peronist and Kirchnerist. This politization of ESMA's narrative is part of what makes the Argentine context a favorable one for transitional justice and memory processes.

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