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I Afterlives of the Disappeared: Scholarship on State Terror and the "Desaparecidos"

Vidas posteriores de los desaparecidos: saberes sobre el terror estatal y las desapariciones

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It is difficult to imagine today how much courage Argentinian journalist José Ignacio López had to muster to ask general Rafael R. Videla in December 1979 about a speech of pope John Paul II. What, López asked, did Videla think about the Pope's position on human rights and inquired as to what the general could tell him about the disappeared.[1] What then followed was a remarkable scene: the TV cameras present did not only capture the extraordinary silence which fell on the room, but also the lengthy answer of the de facto president. Growing gradually more agitated while he spoke, Videla finally defined the disappeared individual as an unknown and an unanswered question, or in Spanish, "una incognita". A person who had disappeared had no entity, the general said, and was not there. He or she was "neither dead nor alive", could not receive any special treatment and was simply "missing".[2] In 1979 Videla thus already had pointed out why the disappeared would haunt Argentina after the country's transition to democracy: thousands were missing and yet they were present. Because their fates have not been accounted for, they remain to this very day the most lasting and troublesome legacy of the military dictatorship. Why these individuals went missing, how this affected Argentina's dealing with human rights, which impact these disappearances have had beyond the national context and what they mean to survivors of dictatorships today, are questions which continue to interest and puzzle, among others, historians, journalists, political scientists and sociologists.

One of the most remarkable yet disturbing publications in this context comes from Argentinian journalist Ceferino Reato whose study *Disposición Final* provides an inside view of the military junta and its 'war on subversion'.[3] The book is the result of nine interviews and 20 hours of conversation with Videla who was in prison since

1 Cp. Bravo. Continental, May 17th 2013, "José Ignacio López, el periodista que preguntó a Videla sobre los desaparecidos" (<http://www.continental.com.ar/noticias/sociedad/jose-ignacio-lopez-el-periodista-que-le-pre-gunto -a-videla-sobre-los-desaparecidos/20130517/nota/1900457.aspx>).

2 Argentinian aficionados have uploaded parts of this interview on YouTube. They are impressive to watch.

3 Quotations of this and other studies have been translated from their original by the author.

2010, serving a life sentence. Its eleven chapters trace these conversations which are reflected on by the author in more general terms in the epilogue. Reato adds other material to the interviews, but it is Videla's narration which is privileged in this volume that seems to pick up directly on the famous question that López, had asked thirty-two years ago. Considering himself "in a battle station" (p. 125) he may felt that he had little to lose and that he would not have more opportunities to tell his version of state terror: Videla would die in May 2013.

Reato's book centers on the disappearances, how these were organized, labeled and made part of military thinking. As this volume shows, the disappearances of thousands of men and women were not accidental but the most important measure of repression and by using the military term "disposición final", i.e. final disposition, to specify the treatment the 'enemies' would receive as political prisoners, the Argentinian officers strictly followed protocol and paid tribute to the logic of military organization. Final disposition is a well-established concept of military logistics, meaning that certain equipment will no longer be used and can be disposed of, or as Videla put it: "It does not have a useful life anymore" (p. 54). The military thus made a statement on the 'utility' of their 'enemies', and it is striking that Argentinian officers made sure that whatever they did would fit military concepts and its language. They translated the fate of the individuals kept in secret prisons and centers of torture into the habitual practices of the military. Thus the abbreviation "d. f." which was used to mark off the prisoners who would be murdered was very familiar to the officers.

But this volume sheds as much light on the inner workings of the junta as on Videla's character. He admits that the military had used the disappearances to "hide the deaths of these people" to "make sure that society would not notice" (p. 57) and to avoid "protests within and outside the country" (p. 31), and he makes the disappearances look inevitable. He believes that about 7000 or 8000 died, and calls these victims the "price which had to be paid to win the war on subversion" (p. 41). However, the disappearances, he claims, were also due to a lack of other legal instruments to detain and question individuals (p. 53). This is impossible to believe, and Reato writes as much. But what Videla is most probably is telling us is that when the military had agreed on the "plan" (p. 52), they simply did not know what to do with the 'subversives' within the framework of Argentina's legal system. What the junta was planning to do was illegal in Argentina as much as it would have been in anywhere else, and the military knew it. Yet they had decided at least to pretend that the rule of law still existed. And while Videla admits to "irregularities" (p. 47) such as abductions and illegal adoptions, he nevertheless claims that this did not occur systematically. The revelations which Reato recollects then confirm what human rights activists had suspected long ago, and in this respect may seem less sensational than the subtitle of the book suggests. Still this book is an important contribution to our understanding of the military dictatorship in Argentina in that it highlights the 'logic' of state terror and how disappearances and human rights violations were rationalized by the military. Also, Videla's off-handedness and tone are shocking

and stress how self-righteous he was. While, as Reato points out in his epilogue, it may well be time to readjust the numbers of the disappeared, the fact remains that the junta persecuted and unlawfully killed Argentinian citizens. This remains true independently of Reato's assertion that a more balanced look at the responsibility of guerilla organizations is long overdue (pp. 278-279).

Ultimately, none of this would have been possible without the consent and even support of an important number of Argentinians. Yet, this topic is not at the center of the study of North American historian David M. K. Sheinin *Consent of the Damned*, although the title misleadingly suggests as much. Sheinin tells us very little about what ordinary people in Argentina thought about the dictatorship; quite the contrary, he focuses on the strategies of the Argentinian state and on the "construction and persistence of an Argentine human rights regime after 1976" (p. 5.) until the end of the first democratic presidency in 1989. Thus the author hopes to disappoint our expectation that "democracy is morally good" while "dictatorship is unabashedly evil" (p. 1), and also aims to point out that the question of human rights was used by the dictatorial regime because of the mass disappearances. The democratic government continued in this vein. In this study the politics of memory come into play as well as the notion that the human rights discourses can be used- or abused- by all kinds of actors, and it is the merit of this study that it shows continuities between the two governments which at times are bewildering and disconcerting. Although Sheinin seems to forget that the first democratic government of Argentina was more successful than others of the Cono Sur when dealing with state terror: It may have used the disappeared to serve its own political needs, but it also highlighted questions of political responsibility which were not raised elsewhere.

Sheinin has divided his study into five chapters and one epilogue which make up the three major thematic and argumentative sections of the study. These sections focus on the views which 'ordinary' Argentinians held of the dictatorship, and how the government sought to influence these views via the use of sports and sports heroes such as tennis player Guillermo Vilas. Then follows the second part with the junta's use of the human rights discourse before the third part finally follows the development of the human right's discourse under democracy. Sheinin thus provides a somewhat different history of the dictatorship and its transition to democracy which adds considerably to the greater picture. Especially because before 1970, so Sheinin claims, human rights meant little to most people in Argentina (p. 3). This would change after 1976 due to international criticism to which the junta reacted swiftly: Although Sheinin does not quote it, the junta's slogan "We Argentinians are upright and humane"[4] ironically enough is very telling. The junta furthermore created what Sheinin calls "fantasies of a constitutional coup" (p. 30.), while "various branches of government immedi-

[4] "Los argentinos somos derechos y humanos" is quoted by: Roniger, Luis & Mario Sznajder: *The Legacy of Human Rights Violations in the Southern Cone. Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 182f.

ately set about this exercise in blurring reality" (p. 31) after the coup and made believe that "a national revival" (p. 34) would take place, albeit stressing that this would have been impossible during democracy. These arguments, however, were also deeply rooted in earlier military dictatorships and reacted to the short comings of Peronism which might have deserved more attention here. Nevertheless, how the junta went on to present as a human rights advocate itself in spite of mass disappearances and state terror and used the indigenous people of Argentina to prove that it advanced human rights, is fascinating to read. This represents one of the most insightful parts of this study which also stresses the ambiguities of a military dictatorship that had set out to 'modernize' its indigenous people (pp. 49-57). The dictatorship's diplomacy furthermore proves how resourceful the junta was, drawing when necessary "on a frequently modified and updated" (p. 58) narrative of the Argentinian defense of human rights. Finally, the third and last section underlines the importance of the disappeared, their children and the human rights discourse to the democratic government of president Raúl Alfonsín. This government, Sheinin tells us, "faced the immediate, overwhelming, and persistent pressure to make the disappeared appear" (p. 112). Here the study focuses provocatively on how the democratic government was unable and at times even unwilling to undo what the dictatorship had done and argues that many of "Argentina's positions on human rights after 1983 were neither ineffectual nor marginal. They were public relations exercises" (p. 136). Surprisingly enough, the author does not comment on the importance of the media, especially feature films which received substantial government funding, but instead draws our attention to how, when any why the democratic government used strategies and devices of the dictatorship. This has a somewhat sobering effect on the reader and establishes a long needed counter narrative which in lieu of praising the changes after 1983 stresses the disquieting continuities of the new government with the old; the language used by both being only one of the many resemblances (p. 123). Human rights discourses in themselves, then this study tells us, are neither good nor bad, and it is important to pay attention to who is using them and why.

How human rights and the fate of the disappeared have resonated in civil society and have left the realm of the national state, its juridical and political context is the main point which German political scientist Ulrike Capdepón makes in *Vom Fall Pinochet zu den Verschwundenen des Spanischen Bürgerkrieges*. She insists that forced disappearances and the experience of dictatorship have shaped much of the recent history of the Cono Sur, but have deeply affected the debate on recent Spanish history. This topic has also met with the interest of historians as it touches on questions of how memories of terror and other experiences of violence and loss have influenced debates on other cases.[5] Capdepón convincingly shows that the discussions on the disappeared

[5] See the following study: Elsemann, Nina: *Umkämpfte Erinnerungen. Die Bedeutung lateinamerikanischer Erfahrungen für die spanische Geschichtspolitik nach Franco*. Frankfurt: Campus 2011. This study examines both the discussions in Argentina and Chile.

and on impunity in dictatorial Chile have not only informed, but shaped the Spanish movement. Why and how the disappeared have become important to the debates on the Spanish civil war and how the concept of human rights has been introduced to discuss cases which preceded the crimes against humanity by decades is fascinating to read, once you have mastered the somewhat complicated syntax. The study is divided into three parts which focus on the theory and the methods used, the historic context and the comparison between Chile and Spain. It ends with today's transnationality of historic national experiences when it comes to state terror and includes the role of transitional justice.

The story Capdepón tells us starts in London in 1998 when Augusto Pinochet was put under arrest because of the intervention of Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón. This arrest was "the result of an alliance of national and international human rights activists" (p. 222) and other individuals who had taken action. The powerful new concept of the disappeared with all its cultural baggage and specific semantics was now incorporated into the Spanish past which was discussed in terms pertaining to the cases of the dictatorships of the Cono Sur. Capdepón stresses the role of the mass media (p. 79) and points out how the Spanish law on memory from 2004 was lobbied for using recent developments in Chile (p. 216). Spanish juridical decisions would thus be placed in a context that went beyond the nation and would be interwoven with a particular postcolonial experience in which the European continent and thus the North would be influenced by developments on the American continent, i.e. the South (p. 326). Here Capdepón takes an optimistic stand on the future development of the debates on the Spanish civil war even though the Spanish judge Garzón has been banned from office. Her study is a case in point of how concepts such as human rights travel and how the analysis of European fascism can benefit from the analytical lens of Latin American state terror by incorporating such key concepts as the "desaparecido". Although you may well wonder whether this use of the term is justified in the case of victims who often had been sentenced to death by unlawful courts and buried in mass graves which the local population knew very well about, Capdepón's study makes it very clear that the strategic use of this term made all the difference. It may not have stopped political parties such as the Catalonian ERC from voting against the law of historic memory, but after decades of the "pact of silence" the use of the term 'desaparecido' certainly mobilized the Spanish public and empowered human rights advocates on both sides of the Atlantic.

Sociologist Gabriela Fried Amilivia takes the history of the disappeared to the most recent present in her book *State Terrorism and the Politics of Memory in Latin America.* Her main interest lies in what happens to societies which go through traumatic experiences and how it is passed on from one generation to another. She reminds us that this is above all a story about human loss and suffering and traces her topic in the seven chapters of her detailed study which also examines how memories work within societies as a whole. While most of her findings are relevant to and valid for all of the Cono Sur, her study is based on the experiences of two generations of Uruguayans: Fried's

focus is first, on individuals born in the 1920s and 1950s who experienced military dictatorship directly and second, on the generation consequently labeled the "children of the dictatorship" whose members were born in the 1960s and 1970s. They lived their childhood and adolescence under dictatorial rule are referred to here as "the 1.5 generation", thus stressing the importance of concepts as well as methods developed in the field of Holocaust studies. Their children, born in the 1980s and 1990s in turn receive less attention as they are more removed from the experiences Fried is interested in. Informed by socio-psychological studies on Jewish families living in Israel, oral-history and family sociology, Fried seeks to get as close as possible to the personal experience while she also unfolds a story about justice and impunity which has touched directly on the lives of the individuals she has worked with. This study is the result of field work which was mainly took place in 2000 and 2001, to which further interviews and conversations were added over the years. It is in part indebted to the rise of trauma theory in the field of memory studies which are part of the humanities and the social sciences alike.[6] Transitional human rights politics of denial, impunity and silence bear equally heavy on the individuals and the societies in question, as Fried proves here. She conducted interviews mainly with families, tracing the various stages of the experience of state terror, asking the survivors- she prefers to use this term in lieu of the term victim- for example how people were taken from their homes. She is thus able to show how vividly the disappearances are remembered, stressing that forced disappearances could take place in front of many witnesses and be a loud spectacle which would draw the attention of many (pp. 50-51) who in turn would be disturbed and traumatized by what they had seen and heard. While her third chapter focuses on family's reactions to forced disappearances and lasting damage to a circle of people, the experiences of imprisonment and torture highlight how these left a lasting mark on the minds and the bodies of the survivors (p. 128f.; p. 200 f.). Fried traces some of these stories in painful detail while others are summarized, albeit attempting to make these memories part of a larger history of the long term effects of the disappearances. She dissects their impact on individual lives and societies as a whole because, as she claims in the conclusion of her book, "the past is not past" and goes on in people minds and family histories. As such, the recent experiences of state terrorism in the Cono Sur continue to be a challenge to many scholars who will go on to study the disappeared and their impacts on the societies from which they went missing. The studies under review here remind us, that we are not done yet with the disappeared, neither in a personal nor in a scientific perspective.

[6] Fried published a preliminary version of her findings in 2011: Fried Amilivia, Gabriela: "Private Transmission of Traumatic Memories of the Disappeared in the Context of Transitional Politics of Oblivion in Uruguay (1973-2001): 'Pedagogies of Horror' among Uruguayan Families", in: Lessa, Francesca/Vincent Druliolle (eds.): *The Memory of State Terrorism in the Southern Cone. Argentina, Chile and Uruhuay*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2011, pp. 157-177.

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