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Truth Commissions and Collective Memory in Latin America

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ABSTRACT

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Truth Commissions and Collective Memory in Latin America

Faculty Mentor: Christopher Muste

Human rights violations have an enormous effect on future generations and have the potential to divide or unite society in their wake. My research examines how a national, collective memory is formed after human rights abuse occurs, and how the work of a truth commission contributes to this process. My hypothesis is that when a truth commission is instated after an experience of human rights abuse, a nation will be better able to reconcile conflicted memories and experiences and to create a unified, collective memory of that human rights experience. More specifically, my hypothesis is that, in order to be effective in collective memory facilitation, a truth commission should have strong investigative and reporting powers, make detailed recommendations for future action, and have a broad mandate. I used a case study approach of Latin American countries—Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, and Guatemala. These countries vary in their respective truth commission mandate, the commission’s investigative and reporting powers, and recommendations made by the commission. In order to gain a detailed understanding of the collective memory situation in each nation, I examined different elements of memory, including memorials, monuments, museums, and days of commemoration. I examined the number, location, and timing of memorials and monuments, and their relationship to the recommendations and timing of the truth commission. I also noted the presence of a museum or day of commemoration to honor the human rights abuse. This research provides a foundation for examining the consequences of human rights violations and links the separate lines of research that exist on truth commissions and on collective memory. An understanding of the impact of truth commissions on memory will help nations in the future to determine the most effective ways to heal from human rights abuse.
Truth Commissions and Collective Memory in Latin America

Introduction

Many nations endure a period of grave human rights abuse. Segments of the population are completely marginalized and the inherent human rights of many individuals are denied. Once the appalling experience is over, the national community is faced with the dilemma of how to heal from the trauma of the event. Is it better to forget about what happened, move on, and bury the abuse in the past? Or should a nation honor that past and think about it collectively in hopes of reintegrating members of society, reconciling social and political divisions, remembering those that died and disappeared, and ensuring that the nation will never experience such horrors again?

My research explores the connections between human rights and memory and the themes of truth, justice, and reconciliation. I examine the formation of a national, collective memory after an experience of human rights abuse occurs in a nation, and particularly how the work of a truth commission contributes to this process. Truth commissions may be a way to form a collective memory because they expand awareness of the individual memories and experiences. From there, the national community may begin to piece together a shared memory and understanding of the human rights abuse that took place. I am curious about the ways in which truth commissions contribute to the national discussion and understanding of human rights abuse that occurred. To better understand this issue I will examine the question: how does a truth commission influence the creation of collective memory in a nation that has experienced grave human rights abuse? More specifically, what aspects of truth commissions are most useful in aiding the creation of collective memory?

The current state of literature on these topics is plentiful yet there is a missing link between truth commissions and memory. Many scholars have investigated truth commissions and their broad impacts. There is also interesting scholarly work on collective memory. This often takes the form of theoretical ideas about memory and memory formation. With this research, I provide a link to bridge the gap between truth commissions and the creation of collective memory of human rights abuse. There is more research on this gap in regards to Chile and Argentina. The scholarship on Guatemala and El Salvador is less thorough, and therefore the examination of these cases provides an
additional glimpse into the role of truth commissions in collective memory. This is a challenging subject due to the ambiguity of collective memory. Many factors influence the creation of memory and it is challenging to isolate truth commission characteristics specifically. There are, however, a variety of substantive conclusions that I have come to based on this research, which will be elaborated further in the conclusion.

My primary hypothesis is that the presence of a truth commission will lead to the creation of a stronger collective memory if the truth commission has a broad mandate, makes significant recommendations, and has robust investigative/reporting powers. A mandate is the legal framework that “authorizes the actions of the commission within certain parameters” (International Center for Transitional Justice, 2015). When a truth commission is instated after an experience of gross human rights abuse, a nation will be better able to reconcile conflicted memories and experiences and create a more unified, collective memory of that human rights experience. A second hypothesis is that it is important to have a collective account of the atrocities that took place in order for a nation to heal and become united after human rights abuse occurs. In order to examine the gap and connections between truth and memory, I measure memory through memorials, days of commemoration, and museums. Memorials are an excellent way to do this because they represent a solid form of the memorialization of the collective memory. In some nations, such as Guatemala, it is clear that several collective memories are present and this was determined by the memorial situation within the nation.

Variables/Measures/Methods

The independent variable in this study is the truth commission. A truth commission is a temporary body that focuses on past events, is officially authorized by the state or international community, investigates patterns of events that occurred over a certain time period, gathers information through direct engagement with the affected population, and finishes with a final written report (Unspeakable Truths, 2011, 11-12). I will examine truth commissions that exhibit different characteristics. The characteristics in question are the mandate of the truth commission (the abuses it will be investigating), the recommendations that the truth commission makes, and the truth commission’s power of investigation and reporting on abuses. I found a lot of excellent information on truth
commissions from the United States Institute of Peace’s website and Priscilla B. Hayner’s work. The United States Institute of Peace offers many details and descriptions of the background of each truth commission, the commission’s mandates and powers, and final recommendations. Hayner was the co-founder of the International Center for Transitional Justice and has served as an assistant to truth commissions in many nations. Her writing offers a detailed portrait of each country’s truth commission as well as useful tables that compare the truth commissions. Information from those tables can be found in Figure 1 (below on page 8).

The dependent variable in this study is collective memory. I define collective memory as the meaning that a group, in this case the nation in question, gives to an experience. Collective memory is a shared communication about the meaning of a past experience. In order to be a collective memory, the general memory must be widely agreed upon but the specifics may vary since different individuals had different roles in the human rights abuse period. A nation is a large group of people that is united by a common history, language, or culture. This diversity likely means that the collective memory will be composed of a variety of memories with general common links between them.

I measured collective memory mainly through the memorials and monuments that were constructed in honor of the period of human rights abuse. These symbolic representations provide a way to cement the narrative in space and time and determine the situation of public memory in the nation. I specifically examined the placement and prominence of memorials and the content of the memorials for signs of a collective memory. The timing was also important in that all of the monuments and memorials studied were memorialized after the truth commission took place. Additionally, I examined museums and days of commemoration of the events that took place. This included noting whether or not a museum and day of commemoration exist and the general characteristics of the museum.

Memorials serve as one of the best ways to measure collective memory for several reasons. As Julian Bonder argues, “Memorials should help us consider trauma and rethink and reactitalize the past. They should encourage critical consciousness, committed memory-work, and the possibility of engaging with the world through
transformative practices” (2014, 62). Additionally, memorial space plays a critical role in the collective memory process. This space has an involved, active role “in how people write, read, debate, and perform collective memory” (Dwyer and Alderman, 2014, 176). Human rights violations take place within space and time and preserving the memories of these events must include recognition of the spaces in which they took place. Memorials are negotiated public spaces. This does not ensure that there is total agreement on the experience they are portraying, but it means that they have undergone a level of collective agreement in order to be created. Finally, as Macarena Gomez-Barris argues, “In nations in transition, narratives about the past play an important role in the identity of the new nation. Memorials and commemoration are ways for such narratives to be anchored in time and space” (2014, 28).

**Background on Human Rights Abuse in Latin America**

Throughout the second half of the 20th century, Latin American citizens experienced a wide array of devastating human rights abuses at the hands of their governments, military leaders, and armed militias. Individuals that challenged military rule were seen as “enemies of the state, to be physically eliminated or politically and socially isolated or silenced by imprisonment, torture, enforced disappearances, or exile” (De Brito, Enriquez, Aguilar, 2001, 119). Scholars Margaret Popkin and Naomi Roht-Arriaza, cite two main circumstances under which truth commissions formed in Latin America. The first circumstance is a military dictatorship. In a time of military rule, any individual opposing the national leaders was killed, tortured, or simply disappeared. That was the situation in Argentina and Chile. These immense human rights abuses push people to demand that their government investigates the time period and does something about the horrors that took place. Another main circumstance, as was the case in Guatemala and El Salvador, is a negotiated end to a civil war, typically a war growing out of political and economic strife. These wars involved the above atrocities, accompanied by massacres by the government of civilians. Following the atrocities of the war, citizens demand investigation into the crimes. Often, military domination continued after the civil war ended. In this context, truth commissions became “the centerpiece of its (government’s) efforts to confront the past” due to the “secrecy and deniability” of the
human rights violations involved (Popkin and Roht-Arriaza, 1995, 81). The truth was desperately needed on a personal and historic level because many bodies of the disappeared were never found and due to the enormity of the atrocities. Families of the disappeared and victims of human rights abuse had no direct form of closure after the traumatic experiences. A truth commission report provided one aspect of the creation of a truth and memory of the atrocities.

**Cases and Case Selection**

These cases were chosen for their variation on the independent variable of truth commissions. I compared the truth commissions of Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Each of those countries went through a period of massive, state-sponsored human rights violations in the 1960s-90s and instated a truth commission after the period of abuse. They are interesting to study because the processes and mandates of each country’s commission were different. This variation in the independent variable of truth commissions allows for more systematic examination of the relationship between truth commissions and memory because the commissions exhibited different characteristics that may have differing effects on memory. The different truth commission characteristics are highlighted in the table below. My analysis will go nation by nation and proceed with a brief examination of the human rights abuse of the nation, the components of the truth commission of the nation, and the state of memory within that nation. I will make individual connections between the truth commission and memory in that nation in particular and talk about broad conclusions at the end of the presentation. This case-by-case examination illuminates the overall role of the truth commission in the memory process of each nation and will provide an understanding of potential links between memory and truth commissions that would not necessarily be clear without a case-by-case approach.
Figure 1. Characteristics of the Truth Commissions (Source: Priscilla B. Hayner and United States Institute of Peace)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Mandate</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
<th>Investigative &amp; Reporting Powers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>Disappearances</td>
<td>Economic assistance to families of disappeared, social security/jobs for relatives of disappeared, prosecutions, follow-up investigations on disappeared, judicial reform, human rights education</td>
<td>Limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1984)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>Disappearances, torture leading to death, executions by gov’t, kidnappings by private citizens for political reasons</td>
<td>Creation of National Corporation for Reparations and Reconciliation to aid victims, human rights legislation, legal/financial/medical/administrative/symbolic aid for victims and families, creation of human rights ombudsman office, prosecutions</td>
<td>Limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1991)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>Massacres by army, assassinations by death squads, extrajudicial executions by agents of state, disappearances, torture by government forces, killings and kidnappings by armed opposition</td>
<td>Dismissal of guilty civil service officers/public servants, judicial/legal/security/institutional reform, reparations for victims (monetary-memorial with name of every victim, and symbolic), creation of forum to oversee implementation of recommendations</td>
<td>Some investigative power, very strong reporting power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>Massacres &amp; arbitrary killings by gov’t, disappearances/kidnappings, violence, forced displacement and military resettlement, forced recruitment by guerillas</td>
<td>Creation of monuments, dedication of parks/buildings, reclamation of Mayan sites, financial help for exhumations, structural reforms to military/judiciary, creation of culture of mutual respect, strengthening of democracy, creation of “National Day of Dignity of the Victims/preserve victims’ memory</td>
<td>Limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1999)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Argentina

Argentinian citizens experienced a period of intense human rights abuse during the 1970s and 1980s. In March 1976, military officials took the nation by force in a coup. A leftist guerilla movement rose up in response and a seven-year period of armed struggle between the military dictatorship and its opponents ensued. During this period there was “systemic yet secret, disappearance, torture, and death of thousands of individuals suspected by the government of supporting the left-wing agenda” (United States Institute of Peace). Estimates predict that about 30,000 Argentinians died or disappeared throughout the “Dirty War” (Argentina Dirty War, 2015).

In response to these horrors, the National Commission on the Disappeared was created. The truth commission had a very limited mandate that only dealt with disappearances. The commission was unable to investigate confirmed killings, temporary disappearances, forced exile, or violence by the armed opposition. The commission’s work ended with very general recommendations for future action. These included the creation of a reparations program for the family of the disappeared, continued prosecutions, follow up investigations related to the disappeared, judicial reform, and human rights education. The commission was limited by very weak investigative and reporting power (Unspeakable Truths, 2011).

There are a variety of memory actions taking place throughout Argentina. Some of the first were on the part of the military, which eliminated the remains of the disappeared that had been killed. The truth commission understood this and therefore examined cemetery records, mass graves, and conducted forensic studies (Robben, 2005). After the final commission report was published, more symbolic memory spaces were created. Several national memorials exist along with many grassroots spaces.

These included the Parque de la Memoria (Memory Park), which resembles the Vietnam War Memorial and is depicted below in Figure 2. The park is the national memorial to the disappeared. The memorial honors the victims of state terrorism and human rights abuse. The site is important because “its proximity to the river marks where thousands of the disappeared met their end through the infamous death flights,” and it is near the university that many of the victims were associated with, along with its
proximity to the torture headquarters. An essential element of the park is its “unfinished” quality, which tells visitors “this memory is still in the making, still raw.” The memorial is also symbolic of a “wasteland” with a sense of a loss of identity and defeat, “conceived as a gash in a barren landscape” (Tandeciarz, 2007, 153-4). The space allows the visitor to bear witness to the disappearances, note the importance of past traumas, and recognize the immense loss that took place. The space is interesting because it demonstrates that Argentina is still divided and traumatized and that there is opposition to different constructions of memory. Many questions were raised about the portrayal of the names of the disappeared in the memorial, such as, “How many people have disappeared under state terror? Most human rights organizations claim thirty thousand, but only around thirteen thousand disappearances have been confirmed by the Undersecretary of Human Rights” (Robben, 2005, 151). There is also the question of the commemoration of the individuals killed by guerilla groups, as the names of those dead or disappeared at the hands of the guerillas are not necessarily included in the memorial.

Figure 2. Parque de la Memoria, Buenos Aires, Argentina, Source: Muy Buenos Aires

There are also several former clandestine detention centers that are now spaces of public memory throughout Argentina. These spaces were noted by human rights groups and converted to memorial spaces with the help of local and national government work in the country. Club Atletico, El Olimpa, the Police Intelligence Department, and the Brigade of Resistance Investigations, among other sites, have been reclaimed (Lessa, 2013). Club Atletico was a former detention center and is now an informal, grassroots
memorial. Grassroots initiatives have transformed the space into a place of memory and homage to the victims held there. Paintings and sculptures have been constructed at the site and ongoing archaeological work is taking place (Tandeciarz, 2007). Automotores Orletti was a workshop turned detention center and is now a memorial site and memory space. After a legislative campaign by a human rights group, the city of Buenos Aires took ownership of the space and now visitors can experience the stories and get a sense for the state-sponsored terrorism that took place (Automotores Orletti).

The Pasaje Santa Catalina memorial is also an interesting grassroots memory effort. Every Thursday Pasaje Santa Catalina is filled with photos of people who disappeared or were killed in the Cordoba province. There are school visits to the site and the memory space is totally public. This confronts the problem of the collective use of individual memories (through the photos) that do not necessarily acknowledge subversive behavior on the part of victims (Catela, 2015). This memory space in Cordoba is important and demonstrates that the collective memory is not totally concrete and resolved in Argentina.

Another extremely significant space of memory in Argentina is the EMSA Human Rights Museum. Formerly the naval mechanics school of Argentina, as well as the largest clandestine torture site in the nation, the space has been reclaimed as a memory museum. This is important because “it establishes the state’s responsibility for crimes against humanity and removes the military from the symbolic center of the nation, deterretorializing its power” (Tandeciarz, 2007, 163). The museum is reminiscent of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., presenting the visitor with a realistic replication of the torture chambers that many victims inhabited.

There is also a national holiday, known as the Day of Remembrance for Truth and Justice, in recognition of the atrocities that began on March 24. A decision by the Buenos Aires city council determined to remember the military coup that began on that day in 1976 (Robben, 2005). Today, the date is “incorporated into the school calendar, requiring primary and secondary schools to organize commemorative ceremonies” with the use of educational materials offered by the government (Catela, 2015, 11).

The Dirty War still marks society and memory negotiations are ongoing. Despite recurrent memory efforts, “continual resurgence of traumatic memories from the dirty
war indicates that Argentine society has not yet come to terms with its past.” Those involved with memory construction, however, are “motivated by the determination that Argentine society should not forget the horrors” because that would signify an erasure of the “remains of many disappeared from Argentine society” (Robben, 2005, 152). As memory work develops it will be fascinating to examine the course of Argentine society. The Dirty War is still contested in national memory but there are signs of collective memory action taking place since the truth commission and the release of the “Nunca Mas” report.

Chile

Major human rights abuses began in Chile after Augusto Pinochet seized power in a coup on September 11, 1973. The dictatorship endured until 1989, and during that period Pinochet repressed many opposition groups through disappearance, torture, and death. The National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, also known as the Rettig Commission, was set up in 1990. A second truth commission was created in Chile in 2003 to investigate other abuses, such as torture, that the first commission was unable to investigate. I will only be examining the impact of the Rettig Commission, however, as it was the primary commission and the first one instated after the dictatorship.

The Rettig Commission’s mandate was limited, and involved documenting human rights violations that took place during the Pinochet regime. The mandate only allowed the commission to investigate disappearances, torture leading to death, executions, undue force causing death, deaths in wildfires after coup, and killings by the armed opposition. The mandate was missing torture not resulting in death, issues of illegal detention, and forced exile (Unspeakable Truths, 2011, 265). The commission made important, specific, detailed recommendations, including the creation of a National Corporation for Reparations and Reconciliation, involving symbolic measures and legal, financial, medical, and administrative aid. Additionally, recommendations included the establishment of human rights legislation, the creation of a human rights ombudsman’s office, and greater civilian power in the Chilean judicial system. The commission had limited investigative and reporting powers and possessed no subpoena power or ability to name suspects (Unspeakable Truths, 2011).
The truth commission had a direct impact on the memory work that is taking place in Chile. As Anita Ferrara argues, the truth provided by the Rettig Report “reversed the official history that considered the military coup as the salvation of the country and that denied the extent and magnitude of the crimes committed.” Opinions may still be “divided on the causes and consequences of the military regime, and on the legitimacy of the coup, (however) Chilean society is aware of the atrocities committed during the dictatorship” (2014, 192). The truth commission opened up the possibility of memorial creation to remember the atrocities committed during the Pinochet years.

Since the implementation of the truth commission, there has been fascinating, important memory work taking place in Chile. The memory process is ongoing and, through the work of the Human Rights Programme of the Ministry of the Interior, “a range of memorials continue to be built and maintained, with the aim of keeping the historical memory of the nation alive.” These symbolic efforts are “founded on the recommendations of the Chilean TRC and its follow-up body the National Corporation” (Ferrara, 2014, 193).

The major national memorial is the Memorial Wall and Sculpture Garden, which is situated in the General Cemetery in Santiago, and was implemented within several years of the truth commission’s report. This is depicted below in Figure 3 and was a direct state response to the recommendations of the Rettig Commission, which advocated symbolic reparations for the victims of the authoritarian period (U.S. Institute of Peace). This “imposing and visually commemorative space to those killed during the authoritarian period” is made up of a wall with the names of victims, sculptures, and quiet places for reflection (Bilbija, 2005, 105). The cemetery is an important “national symbolic space that today conveys much of the country’s coming-to-terms with this violent and deeply-conflicted period” (Wilde, 2008, 165).
There are a variety of other important memorial spaces in Chile. A key area of memorialization includes “sites where atrocities were committed (that) have been declared national monuments” (Ferrara, 2014, 195). These include the National Stadium in Santiago and Londres 38, which were former torture and detention centers. They have now been reclaimed and constructed into spaces of memory that the public can view (Ferrara, 2014). This provides an important outlet for instructing the public on the events of the authoritarian period.

The Villa Grimaldi Park for Peace is a significant memorial site in terms of the work that went into its creation. Estimates hold that 5,000 “political prisoners of the military dictatorship” came through the site during its time as a torture and detention center (Klep, 2012, 262). A central component of the park is a big “X” which “marks the earth as if to say: ‘Here people were tortured’,,” as well as “never again” (Klep, 2012, 263). In the center is a fountain, shown in Figure 2 of Appendix B. This water cleans the area “of suffering and sorrow, symbolizing a catharsis” and stones now mark the former detention cells. The main narrative of the Rettig Report was contested, yet the peace park represents an important example of the symbolic reparations called for by the report (Klep, 2012).

Figure 3. Memorial to the Disappeared, General Cemetery of Santiago, Chile, Source: War Resisters’ International
The Memorial of Paine is another interesting example of ongoing memory work. This memorial was created in the community of Paine, which experienced “the selective arrest and subsequent execution or disappearance of 70 local men.” It is composed of “one thousand wooden posts of various heights” which “suggests the diverse nature of the area’s landscape and people.” There are 70 posts that are absent out of the 1000 total spaces in the memorial. Relatives of the dead and disappeared have crafted, in the empty places, “personal mosaics as part of a project of collective memory.” Another fascinating aspect of the memorial is its depiction of “the complex tension between no memory and re-constructed memory in the second and third generations of victims, who have grown up in a disfigured social landscape fatally marked by loss, silence, lack, fear, and guilt” (Traverso and Azua 403). The construction of the memorial represents the work of several generations of Paine citizens who together created a space to keep the memory of their lost loved ones alive.

An additional memory space is the Museum of Memory and Human Rights. The foundation and principles of the museum are based off of the truth commission report, which demonstrates the profound influence that the truth commission had on society. This is an important space of memory because it provides “its permanent exhibition both as physical master narrative of the dictatorship (as opposed to the textual ones of the commissions) and as a powerful new actor in the memory landscape of Santiago” (Klep, 2012, 265-6). The Memory Museum keeps the experience of the human rights abuse alive in the Chilean consciousness.

Chile is a mixed and fascinating memory situation. There has been a vast array of ongoing memory work throughout the nation. The implementation of a second truth commission in 2003 demonstrates the nation’s commitment to truth and reconciliation. Though fissures still exist within society, the truth commission influenced the memorialization of Chilean memory through the creation of public spaces such as the Vila Grimaldi Park for Peace.
El Salvador

Citizens of El Salvador experienced a period of major unrest beginning in the 1970s. Public support increased for leftist movements, and, simultaneously, members of the military exerted repression over the public. By the 1980s, political groups and leftist guerillas banded together to create the FMLN. Civil war raged in El Salvador form 1980-1992 between the U.S.-backed Salvadoran military and the FMLN. During this time over 75,000 civilians died and thousands more disappeared. The war ended with U.N.-brokered peace agreements and the creation of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador in 1992 (U.S. Institute of Peace).

The Commission on the Truth for El Salvador included almost all of the components that I predicted would lead to a successful truth commission in the collective memory process. The commission had a broad mandate, which included massacres by armed forces, extrajudicial executions by agents of the state, assassinations by death squads, disappearances, torture by government officials, and killings and kidnappings by the armed opposition. The only significant component that was not included in the mandate was a solid investigation into the composition of death squads and the international involvement in the war (Unspeakable Truths, 2011). Additionally, the commission made specific, legally binding recommendations. Among these recommendations was a call for the dismissal of guilty army officers and civil servants, judicial and legal reform, security and institutional reform, and reparations for victims, in both memorial and monetary form. The commission did not recommend prosecutions because the body viewed the Salvadoran government as too weak to effectively carry out prosecutions. Finally, the commission possessed some investigative powers and very strong reporting powers. The final report named individuals allegedly responsible for human rights abuse, which is a very significant claim (Unspeakable Truths and U.S. Institute of Peace).

There is a variety of interesting memory work taking place in El Salvador. The Historical Memory Committee was created after the truth commission’s recommendations and is in charge of preserving the memory of the civil war. An example of their work is the Memorial Chapel in Aracatao, which holds exhumed bodies from a nearby massacre. The chapel is a space to remember and heal, and contains a garden with
flowers to symbolize “life and joy” because, as activist Rosa Rivera y Rivera argues, “‘We cannot remain only in the past. We must educate our children’ for the sake of the future, ‘so that it never, never happens again’” (Hansen, 2014, 16).

The Monument to Memory and Truth in Parque Cuscatlán is a national memorial wall with the names of those killed in the civil war and is depicted below in Figure 4. The commemoration is incomplete because the wall has about 30,000 names and many believe that over 75,000 died. This therefore provides an incomplete picture of the memory situation but offers an important tribute to many victims of the civil war (Monument to Truth and Memory, 2015). The wall was also a direct recommendation of the truth commission report. There is also the El Mozote “monument to the victims” that commemorates the El Mozote massacre that took place in a community in El Salvador (Medina and Binford, 2014). The Museum of the Word and Image is a historical memory and culture museum in El Salvador. It is dedicated to collecting and preserving the memory of civil war and, interestingly, incorporates memories across the political spectrum (Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen, 2015). There is also a Historical Memory Museum in Arcatao, representing another important commemoration of collective memory. There does not seem to be a national day of commemoration of the event.

Figure 4. Monument to Memory and Truth, San Salvador, Source: Eric Mohl
El Salvador has a mixed memory situation. The truth commission had positive characteristics and has led to the creation of the Monument to Memory and Truth as well as the institution of the Historical Memory Committee. Impunity may still be too dominant in the nation to allow for a complete collective memory creation. However, important symbolic memory work is going on to commemorate the victims of the human rights abuse.

Guatemala

Guatemalans experienced a devastating civil war between a leftist insurrection and the military government that lasted 36 years, from 1960 until 1996. The civilian population was directly targeted by the military, in an effort to rid the guerillas of any form of popular support. It was in this war that the tactic of forced disappearances became a prevalent tool of oppression throughout Latin America. The military also conducted a scorched earth campaign, in which significant segments of the indigenous population were killed, raped, or tortured, while their villages were destroyed. It is estimated that at least 70,000 people were killed or disappeared during the one-year scorched earth campaign. Overall, over 200,000 Guatemalans were killed or forcibly disappeared in the civil war. The truth commission following the civil war determined that 83% of these victims were indigenous Mayans, which constitutes genocide, and that government forces carried out 93% of the human rights abuses (Center for Justice and Accountability, 2015).

The Commission for Historical Clarification had a very broad mandate. They were charged with investigating massacres by the government and the armed opposition, disappearances and kidnappings, violence by landowners and businesspersons with the support of state forces, forced displacement and militarized resettlement by state, and forced recruitment by guerillas. This exhaustive list was not missing anything significant from the human rights abuse. The commission issued general, important recommendations. These included the creation of monuments, dedication of public parks and buildings to the memory of the event, reclamation of Mayan sites, financial assistance for exhumations, structural reforms in the military and judiciary, creation of a culture of mutual respect, strengthening of democracy, and the creation of a National Day
of Dignity of the Victims to preserve the memory of the victims. As noble as these recommendations are, unfortunately many of them have not been implemented. The commission had limited investigative and reporting power, which gave them no power to name names of perpetrators or call for prosecutions (U.S. Institute of Peace). Also notable about the commission is its emphasis on truth, justice, forgiveness, and reparation as the means to peace and national healing. The commission report noted, “it is the responsibility of the Guatemalan State to design and promote a reparations policy for victims and their relatives” which will provide dignity for the victims (Rothenberg, 2012, 196). Additionally, the commission called for measures to strengthen democracy in Guatemala. These include “administration of justice,” fulfillment of peace accord commitments, “national reconciliation law,” “right to habeas data,” conflict resolution, and legal integration between the judicial system and other methods of conflict resolution (Rothenberg, 2012, 204-206).

Despite the presence of the truth commission, there is not a significant formal memorial commemoration in Guatemala. The most hopeful step in this direction came in 2003 when the National Reparations Program was enacted through the Peace Secretary office in a presidential decree. The National Reparations Program is charged with giving monetary reparations to victims of the war, paying for lost housing and land, support memory acts, and aiding in cultural reparations. Because of disagreement within the officials of the National Reparations Program, there has been little progress. One such disagreement was over “whether to include genocide as a violation for which reparations would be provided.” Funding has gone to land distribution, the construction of houses, and other economic reimbursements to victims of the war, however, thousands in Guatemala still await government aid. There has been a failure to work with citizens in a “sensitive manner” and many see the state as unable to “substantively address the social divisions that marked the conflict” (Rothenberg, 2012, 218-9).

No central public memorial has been created to honor the massive number of deaths and disappearances. Any existing monuments are hard to find and many locals are afraid to talk about the past with visitors. The military has created memorials and commemorations honoring soldiers, which are “located prominently in public spaces and portray the army as the ‘guardians’ of the area.” The military still controls the landscape,
making it difficult for the creation of a post-conflict collective memory. There is also still an environment of fear and “ethnic oppression,” which is extremely challenging to move on from (Clouser, 2009, 17-19). There has been the memorialization of victims in mass graves and the military has created memorials to honor dead soldiers. There are a variety of small government erected monuments, but in many cases these honor the military as a savior of the nation from a leftist takeover. There is an ongoing struggle over collective memory between the Catholic Church and the military/government. Most memorials are grassroots and the Church is creating memorials to honor the victims while the military constructs memorials to honor the soldiers. La Casa de la Memoria is a Mayan history museum that emphasizes the civil war and its aftermath. There is also the National Day of Dignity for the Victims of Violence, which commemorates the victims of the civil war on February 25. This was an important recommendation of the truth commission and was declared official by the Guatemalan Congress in 2000 (Rothenberg, 2012, 218).

A key part of the Guatemalan memory situation is impunity and distrust in the justice system. This is the most lasting legacy of the civil war for many Guatemalans and a significant hurdle in the collective memory process. As Scholar Daniel Rothenberg argues, “Despite the widespread nature of atrocities and the fact that thousands of individuals at all levels of authority… committed severe human rights violations, only a handful of legal cases have been processed in the Guatemalan courts” (2012, 220). Though impunity may be lessening, it is still a challenge for the nation in its healing process.

Conclusions

The link between truth and memory is a fascinating field of study. Based on my research, it seems that establishing the truth about the past is a necessary step in the healing process of a nation. A truth and reconciliation commission is one part of the diverse components necessary for a nation to move on in the aftermath of human rights violations. Other important components include strengthening national institutions, creating and sustaining trust in the government, memorializing the experience, and honoring to the victims of abuse. Understanding the truth about the horrors that took place allows the society to acknowledge what happened, understand the enormity of the
experience, and work to move on and set a precedent of “never again.” As Priscilla B. Hayner argues, “In many conflicts, the demand to end impunity, to recognize the suffering of victims, and to write a fair history of a battered past demands that the global truth be fairly established” (“Fifteen Truth Commissions,” 2014, 655). Truth and reconciliation commissions offer a solid starting point in the collective memory and healing process.

Additionally, it is clear that truth commissions are an effective part of the healing process for these post-abuse societies. Popkin and Roht-Arriaza argue that truth commissions are an “increasingly common tool for examining prior periods of widespread human rights violations when state institutions have failed to respond to such abuses.” In the countries I studied, state officials perpetrated the human rights abuse, making it difficult to achieve justice and reconciliation without a body like a truth commission. In cases such as these, “the greatest achievement of these commissions has been the official presentation of an authoritative history, which counters the former regime’s account” (Popkin and Roht-Arriaza, 1995, 113). Truth commissions provide a space for victims to share their story and have their human dignity confirmed and upheld. Truth commissions also begin to set a precedent of future action that is based on a respect for human rights. In each nation I examined, the truth commission influenced some aspect of memory work. In Chile and El Salvador that was a future memorial that had been recommended by the truth commission. In Guatemala, the truth commission recommended a day of commemoration for the victims of the violence, which was enacted by the national legislature. Argentina’s truth commission did not explicitly recommend the creation of memorials but national memorials were constructed following the truth commission report. Though hurdles to collective memory still exist in each of these nations, there have been key memory processes taking place, facilitated by the truth commission proceedings.

There are several concrete examples of truth commissions influencing the memory process in a nation after human rights abuse. A key instance took place in the aftermath of the civil war in El Salvador. The truth commission recommended the creation of a memorial wall to remember the thousands of innocent lives that were lost during the civil war. This memorial was created under the name of “Monument to Truth
and Memory.” The names on the wall can also be viewed online, making it a very public and important memorial commemoration (“Monument to Truth and Memory,” 2015). A similar process took place in Chile in the form of the Memorial to the Disappeared. The Rettig Commission’s final report “recommended both monetary and symbolic reparations, including a monument that was to mention all victims on both sides individually, and a public park in memory to all the victims,” which became the Memorial to the Disappeared (Klep, 2012, 261).

Guatemala seems to have the most conflicted state of memory of the four cases in question. There is an interesting mix of strongly nationalist, pro-military memorials along with memorials to the victims of the civil war in Catholic churches throughout the nation. A reason for this may be the limited power of the truth commission. The national context is also very important to consider because there is a continuous sense of impunity and helplessness among many Guatemalans. These factors all contribute to the fragmented collective memory that exists.

El Salvador is an interesting case because some good memory work has been ongoing but there is no day of commemoration. El Salvador’s truth commission had what I perceived to be the ideal situation, which is to say that it possessed strong investigative and reporting powers, made significant recommendations, and had an inclusive mandate. It is hard to say, however, whether those components were essential for memory creation. They certainly aided the process in El Salvador yet they were not essential truth commission components in nations like Argentina and Chile. These mixed results may be due to the lack of a strong judicial system, consistent democratic leadership, and institutional legitimacy within El Salvador.

The breadth of the truth commission mandate does not seem to be as influential as I predicted. Argentina and Chile have had strong collective memory work taking place and had a very limited mandate and power. In Guatemala, a very broad mandate seemed promising but there is a conflicted memory to this day. With all of these factors, however, it is difficult to determine the extent to which they influenced collective memory because there is such a wide array of other variables that play into the memory process. These include the level of democratization in the nation, which officials are in power directly
after the human rights abuse, and public reception of the experience and willingness to participate in memory construction, among other factors.

In terms of recommendations, specific and legally binding recommendations seemed to make an important difference. When these were a component of the truth commission, memorialization of memory was often prevalent. This was the case in both Chile and El Salvador. El Salvador also had legally binding recommendations, which are a strong asset for a truth commission because they ensure that memory efforts will continue to take place after the truth commission deadline. Recommendations have a low likelihood of being effective, however, when a nation has weak institutions and impunity persists, as is the case in Guatemala. These systemic challenges prevent memory work because impunity makes it difficult to bring perpetrators to justice.

Reporting power is an important strength of a truth commission. This is evident in El Salvador because the public was able to examine the involvement of military forces and others in the war, and that knowledge may have helped them to move on from the experience. This power may also have been significant in leading to the construction of memorials and the existence of the Historical Memory Committee. This power does not seem to be an essential component of truth commissions, however. The truth commissions of both Chile and Argentina were relatively weak and that did not inhibit the power of the creation of collective memory that held the periods of dictatorship and abuse accountable.

The struggle for memory is alive in each of these nations to this day. The events are historically recent and still vivid in the eyes of many individuals. In all of these nations there is a coexistence of memory, violence, and trauma as “past acts of human degradation have evoked their indomitable intrusion on individuals and society alike” (Robben, 2005, 122). Many factors influence the creation of collective memory in each nation but it is clear that truth commissions have an influence, to varying extents. If I were to continue this research I would examine other aspects of truth commissions, such as who created the commission, which individuals served on the commission staff, and how long the commission lasted. In all nations, the release of the truth commission report was a big moment and widely recognized by many individuals. The commission findings
were reflected in memorialization of the event in most nations. As Popkin and Roht-Arriaza argue,

Far more than a truth commission will be necessary to heal the wounds and create the conditions for a just society. Nor will legal measures alone be able to accomplish these goals. A change in culture, in expectations and in institutions are all required. But with all their limitations, these kinds of measures can play a crucial role in helping to foster a climate in which other necessary changes may take place.” (116)

Truth commissions contribute to the collective memory process in varying degrees in different nations. Katrien Klep sums it up nicely, arguing, “In short, the production of collective memory is a process that takes place on multiple levels through time. A truth commission emerges in and is part of these processes” (2012, 261). Truth commissions are an effective part of collective memory construction to the extent that they allow many voices to be heard in the truth process and get a variety of memories out in the open. Once every voice is heard and recognized, it becomes possible to reconcile those diverse experiences and create a more unified understanding of what the nation went through. Without an effective truth commission, those in power, who may not have shared in the diverse experiences of the national community, will seek to define memory or downplay the memory of the event. Argentina, Chile, Guatemala, and El Salvador are still in the process of memorializing and coping with past human rights abuses. During this challenging, emotional process, a truth commission shines light on the darkness and facilitates collective understandings of the atrocities that took place.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Argentina

Figure 1. Sculpture at Parque de la Memoria, Source: The Argentina Independent

Figure 2. Automotores Orletti, clandestine torture center turned memorial space, Buenos Aires, Source: The Tico Times
Figure 3. Pasaje Santa Catalina Memorial, Cordoba, Argentina, Source: South American Postcard

Figure 4. ESMA, Buenos Aires, former military school/clandestine torture center headquarters, Source: Southern Cone Travel
Appendix B: Chile

Figure 1. Villa Grimaldi Peace Park, Santiago, former clandestine concentration camp, Source: Anthony Navarrete

Figure 2. Villa Grimaldi Peace Park, Santiago, former entrance for torture victims that is now a fountain of peace/hope, Source: Tripomatic
Figure 3. Memorial Paine, Paine, Chile, Source: Public History Commons

Figure 4. National Stadium memorial, Santiago, Chile, Source: Yahoo Sports

Figure 5. Museum of Memory and Human Rights, Santiago, Chile, Source: El Quinto Poder
Appendix C: El Salvador

Figure 1. Monument to Memory and Truth, depiction of Archbishop Oscar Romero, San Salvador, Source: Eric Mohl

Figure 2. El Mozote Memorial, El Mozote, Source: Trip Advisor
Figure 3. El Mozote Memorial, “El Mozote Never Again,” Source: Carlo Roselli

Figure 4. Museum of the Word and Image, San Salvador, Source: Wanderant
Appendix D: Guatemala

Figure 1. Metropolitan Cathedral, Guatemala City, Source: Martijin Munneke

Figure 2. La Casa de la Memoria, Guatemala City, museum advocating thought on civil war, Source: Johan Ordonez
Works Cited


