



What defines the victims of human rights violations? The case of the Comité Pro Paz and Vicaría de la Solidaridad in Chile (1973-1992)

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When societies face politically motivated forms of violence such as armed conflict, genocides, forced migration or State terrorism, the task of accounting for victims is often possible only at the conclusion of the conflicts and as part of pacification or political transition processes. For this reason, the collective exercise of victim' recognition may be temporarily circumscribed to a certain timespan and it may have to align itself with international human rights conventions. This chapter addresses the question of victim' definition through one society's confrontation of massive human rights violations by a long military dictatorship.

In Chile, the seventeen years of military rule (1973-1990) and the gross human rights violations of thousands of citizens were continually confronted and resisted by some factions of civil society. Under the umbrella of different churches, a number of organizations provided assistance to the victims, produced first-hand information on the atrocities committed and denounced them nationally and internationally as they unfolded. Once the dictatorship was democratically defeated, this way of accounting for victims

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along with its material vestige—the human rights archives—proved key both to the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions and to judicial processes.

Recognizing the importance of these recording and denunciation practices, carried out under a dictatorship, for the management of justice, for reparation and for memory after the recovery of democracy, the chapter traces the provenance of the notions of victims used in the transitional period (1990-2011) by the democratic Chilean State to qualify and provide reparations to the victims of Pinochet dictatorship. We argue that—to a large extent—what defines the victims of human rights violations of the Chilean State is the capacity of these organizations' archives to endorse or authenticate the stories told to the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. We contend that in this case what defines the victims is not the subjective perception of the person affected, nor the Commission mandated by the democratic government to classify the human rights violations perpetrated by the dictatorship, but an *infrastructure of registration*, that is, a layered, complex, and more or less stable arrangement of seemingly neutral relationships, objects, processes, technologies, procedures, knowledge, conventions, compromises, tools, routines and resources of different sorts (Bowker and Star, 2000: 34-35). Such an infrastructural approach has rarely been used in studies of political violence, memory and transitional justice. In the Chilean case, it does, however, sustain discursive conventions that had settled into place for more than 40 years, and along the way, has made them available in the form of a documentary, technical and epistemic collection capable of supporting other tasks, like the classification of victims by the State. Thus, with respect to victim' definition, the chapter proposes a need to turn from the question of *who* defines the victims to the question of *what* defines who the victims are, recognizing the bonds constructed between human experience and practice and material artifacts such as archives.



To accomplish this aim, the chapter follows the case of the major human rights advocacy organizations during this dictatorship: the Vicariate of Solidarity (*Vicaría de la Solidaridad*) and the institution that preceded it, the Committee for Cooperation for Peace in Chile (*Comité de Cooperación para la Paz en Chile*). More than 25 years after the end of the dictatorship, we conducted this research through interviews with former employees and by analyzing public documents of the period and the archive of both organizations, preserved and protected since 1992 by the Foundation and Documentation Center of the Vicariate of Solidarity (*Fundación y Centro de Documentación de la Vicaría de la Solidaridad - FUNVISOL*).³

The chapter begins in the 1990s, describing the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was mandated to classify the victims of “the most serious human rights violations.” We then go back in time to 1973, to follow the emergence of the infrastructure developed to record these violations. This is the moment in which violence unfolds, when there are neither standards nor a vocabulary to represent this terror and its subjects.

³ FUNVISOL houses the primary human rights archive in the country, in terms of volume of cases and documentation and the quality of their classification, preservation and accessibility. The foundation holds the archive of the Vicariate of Solidarity, an organization founded in January 1976 by Pope Paul VI at the request of the Cardinal Archbishop of Santiago, Monsignor Raúl Silva Henríquez, and it continued the work started in October 1973 by the Committee for Cooperation for Peace in Chile (also known as the Pro-Peace Committee), which was forced to close in late 1975 under pressure from the dictatorship. The Pro-Peace Committee and the Vicariate were located in Santiago and most of the cases they served were from the central area of the country. However, both organizations also carried out work in provinces through the Catholic Church networks. The archive covers more than 45,000 cases, adding up to more than 85,000 unique documents. The documentation originated in these two organizations and also in different proceedings and institutions such as the armed forces, national, foreign and international public agencies (embassies, United Nations), the media, private entities or individuals.



Through the analysis of different artifacts that were created and used by these organizations (the reception interview, records, forms and periodic reports) we provide an analogical reconstruction of the notions of victim and of repressive event that were intertwined in these organizations' daily work. The third part of the chapter returns to the transitional period, briefly describing other uses of the FUNVISOL archive beyond that of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to further highlight the role of this infrastructure of registration in the definition of victims. The conclusions reflect on the importance of asking *what* rather than *who* defines who is a victim, arguing that the notion of victim is not merely an affectation or a definition but overall an effect of material and discursive arrangements of knowledge, power and truth operating in situated socio-historical contexts.