

# The apolitics of memory: Remembering military service under Pinochet through and alongside transitional justice, truth, and reconciliation

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**Abstract**

Approximately 370,000 young men served as conscripted soldiers during the Pinochet dictatorship. Recruits were at times complicit in, witnesses to, or victims of human rights abuses committed under military rule. Memory of conscription for a long time was hidden behind silence maintained by fear, confusion, shame, anger, alcohol, and drugs. In the mid 2000s, however, ex-conscripts began to gather into groups that functioned first as support networks, and later as advocacy organizations pushing for recognition as victims and for reparations. By 2013, nearly 100,000 former recruits had mobilized. This article historicizes the conscript memory narrative of victimhood that emerged with the ex-conscript movement of the early twenty-first century. It examines the relationship between ex-conscripts' memory of military rule, transitional justice, and the state-led truth and reconciliation process. Chile's "politics of memory" provided catalysts and cues for ex-conscript memory, but neither of the competing shared memory frameworks have been unable to accommodate the former recruits' sense of victimhood. Ex-conscript memory is not bound by a common political identity or interpretation of the 1973 coup or the 17 years of military rule. The "apolitics of memory" have instead ensured that ex-conscripts remember military service under Pinochet not within but rather alongside the country's politicized memoryscape.

**Keywords**

Apolitical memory, Chile, compulsory military service, politics of memory, reconciliation, transitional justice

During the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in Chile (1973–1990), approximately 370,000 young men served as conscripted soldiers.<sup>1</sup> Conscripts came overwhelming from impoverished backgrounds, and were at times complicit in, witnesses to, or victims of human rights abuses committed under military rule. Memory of compulsory military service (CMS) was for a long time

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hidden behind fears, confusion, shame, anger, alcohol, and drugs, with many former recruits keeping their stories even from their own families. In the mid 2000s, however, ex-conscripts began to break decades of silence. They mobilized into groups that functioned first as support networks, and later as advocacy organizations pushing for recognition as victims and reparations. This article historicizes the twenty-first-century shared memory narrative of conscript victimhood that emerged with the ex-conscript movement. It examines its emergence and its interaction with Chile's transitional justice and state-led truth and reconciliation process, revealing how the politics of memory provided catalysts for conscript memory but also imposed limits. These limits ensured the conscript narrative settled alongside, and not within, the country's politicized memoryscape.

In recent decades, the "politics of memory" has become an important framework for understanding how transitional societies throughout Latin America remember political violence. "Memory struggles" across the continent have pitted political interpretations of conflict against one another in contests to install one truth over another, or others. These narratives give meaning to individuals' lived experience. They also exist in a competitive and antagonistic relationship with each other, are mutually exclusive, and include a rejection or rebuttal of other memories (Bell, 2011; Crenzel, 2011; Drinot, 2009; Jelin, 1994, 2002; Lessa, 2013; Ros, 2012). The memoryscape of Chile was shaped by a similar dichotomy (Collins et al., 2013; Hite et al., 2013; Lazzara, 2006; Lira, 2011; Stern, 2006a, 2006b, 2010; Wilde, 1999, 2013). Supporters of Pinochet remembered the coup and military rule as the salvation of the country, while opponents' memory of the regime was one of violent individual and national rupture. Throughout the 1990s, Chile's memory contest swung between periodic "irruptions"—events that forced the memory question into the public consciousness—and a "conspiracy of consensus"—a widespread preference to forget (Wilde, 1999). Stern (2010) has called this rhythm to post-transition memory a "rolling impasse" (p. 3). The 1991 Report of the National Commission of Truth and Reconciliation (Rettig Report) confirmed the systematic disappearance and execution of political opponents, but its resonance was incremental and its findings, at least initially, dismissed by supporters of the regime and the Armed Forces. The negotiated transition had entrenched *Pinochetismo* in the country's institutions and continued to stymie efforts to hold members of the Armed Forces accountable for crimes of repression.

The year 1998 proved to be a turning point. Well-publicized discoveries throughout the 1990s had compounded the Rettig Report's findings and confirmed human rights abuses as a social truth. Domestic traction on accountability and Pinochet's arrest in London began to break down immunity. Sensing a chance to take advantage of the economic downturn and appeal to centrist voters, the political right stepped back from aggressively defending the regime. In the early 2000s, and seeking a new, socially sanctioned role in civil society for the twenty-first century, a new generation of military leaders also backed away from Pinochet's legacy. In this more open context, torture emerged as the focus of Chilean memory, and in 2005 the report of the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture (Valech Report) confirmed as undeniable the widespread and systematic abuse and torture under the regime. While the "impasse" eroded and the contest shifted with time, neither the "consensus" of the 1990s nor the post-1998 "season of memory" (Wilde, 2013) were able to accommodate conscript victimhood. Ex-recruits blurred the line between victim and perpetrator, and there was no room for their experiences within the polarized memoryscape (Stern, 2006a: 141–142).<sup>2</sup>

Conscript experiences differed enormously between regions, yearly cohorts, and individual regiments. The "class of '54"—recruits born in 1954 and drafted in 1973—was already inside the barracks at the time of the coup. Some took part in the "battle of Santiago," and in the weeks that followed they guarded infrastructure and prisoners, enforced the curfew, raided homes, and, in rarer cases, shot at or killed civilians. In regional centers, recruits carried out similar tasks: guard

duty, curfew enforcement, and often-violent raids. In the first, most brutal years of the repression, many witnessed the torture of prisoners, and were sometimes made complicit to varying degrees: listening to torture sessions, transporting and guarding prisoners, beating prisoners, or direct involvement in acts of torture. Political persecution also cut through the barracks, with leftist conscripts, or those denounced as leftist, suffering abuse. Beyond the “internal war,” the Armed Forces also feared open conflict with Chile’s neighbors—Peru, Bolivia, and Argentina—and recruits from all classes testify to physical and psychological mistreatment as part of their training to prepare them for all four “wars.”<sup>3</sup> Despite these significant differences, a shared way of remembering CMS emerged as ex-recruits formed groups throughout Chile.

From 2006, groups emerged and began to cooperate within one of several national-level coalitions. By 2013, nearly 100,000 ex-recruits had mobilized, but it was a fractured “movement.”<sup>4</sup> Groups differed in their strategies: most lobbied the government, two launched civil cases for damages, and one launched a criminal case. Coalition efforts were splintered, too, by leaders’ personal differences and mutual accusations of profiteering, which saw levels of practical cooperation constantly in flux. Despite the fractures, groups and their members had a common way of talking about CMS that evolved through the processes of sharing stories and crafting demands, and that gave meaning to their past experience as well as their current circumstances. In published testimonies and memoirs (Gutiérrez, 2010; Rivas, 2011; Saavedra, 2012; Seguel, 2007), unpublished written and audiovisual testimonies gathered by groups in Chillán, Temuco, Talcahuano, and Iquique, in the text of civil suits and the criminal case (Lizana, 2010; Monsalve, 2009; Montealegre, 2009), in documents produced as part of the lobby effort (Becker et al., 2009; Calderón, 2012, 2013; Calderón et al., 2011; Chahín et al., 2012, 2013; Chahuán et al., 2007), in conversations at meetings attended by the author, and in interviews conducted by the author between late 2011 and the end of 2013, mobilized ex-conscripts—as individuals and as groups—frame service as a fundamental rupture in their lives. They left the barracks changed, disillusioned, physically or psychologically broken, depressed, afraid, unable to work, unable to find work, socially ostracized, or emotionally damaged. This shared narrative of personal rupture emerged from behind fear and amid transitional truth, reconciliation, and justice.

## Fear and justice

Unlike the professional ranks of Chile’s Armed Forces, the “pact of silence” (Esparza, 2010) that former conscripts adhered to on leaving the barracks was not primarily rooted in institutional loyalty or honor, or the mutual benefit of silence, but fear. For many, the fear of death or physical harm and a deep sense of powerlessness were not ameliorated with their discharge. The Armed Forces controlled society and their omnipresence reinforced specific threats made to recruits, their families, or both, should they talk about what they had experienced or witnessed. Most attempted to forget. They avoided reminders, some resorted to drugs or alcohol, and others left their hometowns in an effort not to remember. Silence was maintained so as not to burden loved ones with experiences they found difficult and confusing, or in response to fear of prosecution, exclusion from society, or rejection and condemnation from their families or children.

The mutually reinforcing fears that guarded conscript silence did not diminish evenly, and they did not erode completely or for everyone. Fears grounded in psychological trauma shift—if they do shift—on a very personal schedule (Salimovich et al., 1992). Fears of reprisal, prosecution, and rejection, however, are culturally informed and in this case were shaped by the efforts to hold the military regime accountable for crimes of repression. Eduardo F.\* (1976–1978)<sup>5</sup> identified the transition to democracy as the moment his fear of institutional reprisal disappeared. “Until the start of democracy,” he said, “one could not talk because of the oaths of honor taken inside, where one

had to keep everything in the military and die quiet like a good Chilean. And we had the fear that military contacts were everywhere, back then they could have been” (26 April 2012, field notes). Others identify different moments throughout the 1990s when considering when their fear faded, but fear of the institution was clearly bound up with the figure of the dictator and his intelligence services (Stern, 2006a: 134). “Before, there was Pinochet,” explained Carlos Palma (1973–1975, Iquique) on why it took so many so long to begin talking (23 November 2011, field notes). Pinochet loomed over the post-transition decade: He was still Commander-in-Chief of the Army and he personified delicate civilian–military relations. For many former conscripts, eroding immunity and Pinochet’s fading influence wore down their fear of institutional reprisal. At the same time, however, it reinforced the fear of prosecution. This concern over legal consequences and the anxiety over societal rejection were tested by efforts to find justice for Victor Jara.

Jara was one of a number of artists who provided the soundtrack to the revolutionary politics of the 1960s and the “Chilean Way to Socialism” of the early 1970s. He was detained the day following the coup and taken to the prison camp inside the *Estadio Chile*. On 16 September, his corpse was found abandoned on the outskirts of Santiago, disfigured and riddled with bullet wounds (Comisión Nacional de Verdad y Reconciliación (CNVR), 1991a: 104, 130). Jara’s case has become symbolic of the human rights abuses carried out under the dictatorship. As part of the successful bid to have the case reopened in 2008, lawyer Nelson Caucoto called for former conscripts to come forward with information. It was in this context that José Paredes (1973, San Antonio) approached investigators in May 2009, and later confessed to his role in Jara’s death. Paredes detailed how he had helped escort a group including Jara to a dressing room where a sub-lieutenant played Russian roulette with the singer, firing a bullet into his head. Paredes was then, according to his confession, among the conscripts who followed the order to fire at the singer’s body (El Mercurio Online, 2009; La Nación, 2009c; Pérez, 2008, 2009b). Paredes soon retracted his statement, saying he had not been in the stadium and attributing his confession to pressure from investigators and his alcoholism. Paredes’ identification of his service rifle by serial number and forensic evidence from Jara’s exhumed body corroborated both his description of events and his denial of any involvement: the wounds sustained by Jara matched the ex-conscript’s original confession, but the discrepancy between the weapon used and Paredes’ rifle was consistent with his subsequent retraction (Pérez and Carvajal, 2009). Human rights lawyer Hernán Montealegre, who represented Paredes, argued that any conscript who acted on orders cannot be held responsible. The only responsible party, he insisted, was the person who gave the order (Cooperativa.cl, 2009b). This line of thinking was on trial elsewhere at around the time Paredes originally confessed.

In early 2008, General Gonzalo Santelices resigned after the newspaper *La Nación* reported a witness statement from September 2002, in which he acknowledged his involvement in the “Caravan of Death.” In October 1973, Lieutenant Santelices participated in the transport of prisoners into the desert outside Antofagasta where officers brutally murdered the detainees. The investigating judge in 2002, Juan Guzmán, did not charge Santelices, explaining that “if he had not obeyed this order, it is most likely that they would have killed him” (El País, 2008).<sup>6</sup> Minister Víctor Montiglio, who later took over the case, did not share Guzmán’s reasoning, and began investigating Santelices’ involvement in 2008. The General’s statement when resigning and his subsequent legal defense reiterated that it had been “unthinkable to not obey an order from a superior” without risking being shot (El País, 2008). This logic, rejected by Montiglio, was later also rejected by the courts (La Nación, 2009a).

Among the public rejections of Santelices’ defense of due obedience there was, however, a recognition of the danger of not following an order. Amnesty International director in Chile, Sergio Laurenti, acknowledged the difficulty, but noted that Santelices had chosen to stay in the Army and maintain decades of silence (El País, 2008). The case, in fact, turned on the latter point, as the issue

of “due obedience” framed a debate about institutional responsibility, military–civilian relations, and civilian control of military promotions. Human rights lawyer Hugo Gutiérrez also rejected the defense of due obedience, noting his objection to Santelices’ current, high-ranking position. Legal responsibility was to be determined by the judge, he said, but “ethically and morally” he must step down (La Nación, 2008). While Santelices’ case confirmed the legal pattern of not applying due obedience and the moral case for accountability of officers, the Jara case seemed to confirm that the moral argument with regard to conscripts was shifting.

Caucoto reiterated his call to former conscripts to come forward with information in 2009 (Pérez, 2009a). He also made it clear that the family was not pursuing former recruits: “We are not interested in going after conscripts, I should be clear: the conscripts are a part of the whole, but the weakest part, the most vulnerable part and we cannot make them responsible ... I am interested in the bosses who ordered the execution of Victor Jara” (La Nación, 2009b). Jara’s widow, Joan Turner, said she felt no ill feeling toward the “kids”: “I say kids, because they were only 18.” Her interest was finding those “who gave the orders ... , those who are morally responsible for all of this” (Cooperativa.cl, 2009a). Three years later, as part of a *Chilevisión* (2012) report on a government request to the Armed Forces for information to clarify the Jara case, neuropsychiatrist and human rights advocate Paz Rojas spoke of conscripts as victims who saw themselves as forced to torture or kill, or to obey orders against their own principles, arguing that the conscripts deserved medical, psychological, social, and economic reparations from the army.

In his small grocer’s shop in Santiago, Carlos Palma keeps a copy of Rojas’ interview on the computer behind the counter. The Paredes case offered former recruits like Carlos a moment of public acknowledgment of conscripts’ lack of power and responsibility, and ex-conscripts who followed the case often tied their fate to his. Despite the investigation into Paredes stopping because the evidence suggested he was not present at the time of Jara’s death, his eventual release was interpreted within the movement as a broader confirmation that conscripts were not responsible for crimes of repression. More broadly, it played into a feeling that the “internal war” was not their war, that their involvement—whether they were forced to act against their conscience or not—was not their choice, and that they did not belong bundled in with the regime’s “murderers” (*asesinos*). The Paredes case provided a legal principle for a sense of powerlessness that had previously been expressed most clearly by pointing out that they had been younger than 21 years of age and legally minors at the time of their service. For young men who often left school and began their working lives in their early teens, and for whom becoming a man was linked to work, marriage, starting a family, and often the rite of military service itself, the age of majority meant very little. Decades later, however, it was a way to codify their lack of power and argue their perceived reduced burden of responsibility.

Away from investigators or television cameras, former recruits had first broken their silence within their groups where they were shielded from taunts of “murderer,” and conversations were not preemptively shut down by the accusations implied in the question: “how many did you kill?” In meetings, they could talk among people who were able to understand. Despite these local networks growing into regional and national advocacy organizations, the sense of camaraderie and belonging, and the chance to share memories remained perhaps their most important function. The process of holding perpetrators to account, in particular the vulnerability of Pinochet and high-ranking officers before the courts and the Jara case, provided important moments that gave some former conscripts the confidence to talk publicly about their experiences.

## Truth and reconciliation

The revelations about human rights abuses of the 1990s and early 2000s provided many conscripts with a shared context for their experiences. Conscripts from humble backgrounds with little

education and who were not politically engaged had not necessarily been aware of a broader national context for the events of their service. They understood their experiences as personal, or limited to the context of the unit and the orders of their “crazy” instructors. Decades after his service, Andres V.\* (1975–1977, Temuco) gave an insight into his own narrow perspective, explaining that he “never had a problem with Pinochet. He never beat me” (24 April 2012, field notes). For others, the revelations undid a narrative of patriotism. A former recruit who appeared in the documentary *El soldado que no fue* (Gutiérrez, 2010) explained how he had left the barracks “Pinochetista.” Similarly, A.E.G.V. (1973–1974) described the “propaganda” inside designed to stoke pride at having helped save the nation from communism. He contrasted that type of pride with his recurring nightmares and fears of reprisals from superiors (Seguel, 2007: 278–279). Alberto D.\* (1986–1988, Angol) entered the barracks over a decade after A.E.G.V. and had grown up under, and believing in, the military regime. The mistreatment he received in the barracks, he explained, undercut his pride. The transition to democracy, which came close on the heels of his service, was particularly tough, with his personal awakening settling into a society-wide awakening (26 April 2012, field notes).

The revelations also provided former recruits with socially confirmed points of reference. The most significant case to emerge was that of conscript Michel Nash. Nash disappeared in the weeks following the coup. As a member of the Communist Youth, he was uncomfortable about orders to participate in raids on homes and requested to be excused. On 29 September, he was shot in Chile’s far north while “trying to escape.” His body was never found (CNVR, 1991a: 233, 1991b: 253). At the same time, Carlos Droguet (1973) was serving in Santiago. He prefaced a conversation about his service after a group meeting in 2013 with a photocopied image of Nash and a short text outlining his demise (27 April 2013, field notes). He used Nash’s confirmed fate to provide context for his own suffering, fears, and sense of vulnerability. During a subsequent interview in his home in La Pintana, Carlos spoke of his health issues and depression that he traced back to his service. He also said he had only learned of Nash’s death many years after leaving the barracks. He went on to recount the deaths of conscripts in his own regiment that were known to him at the time, or that he witnessed (17 June 2013, interview). Nevertheless, in framing his memory of service and explaining the fear inside the barracks, he chose a case from thousands of miles away of an official victim.

The state-led truth and reconciliation process also established reparations programs. Throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, the government offered material reparations to different categories of victims (Lira and Loveman, 2005). For conscripts, the payments made to others converged in the mid 2000s with their own declining health, continued poverty, and accusations of corruption to help shape their memory framework. Daniel Pizarro (1973–1975, Santiago), for example, recounted an incident after the coup where a bus pulled up in front of him and his *compañeros* with 10 or 12 detainees. Daniel’s captain shot the detainees with a burst of machine gun fire. That day still weighed heavily on him four decades later. “And that weight got heavier,” he said, “when Pinochet got sick and they discovered that he had three ingots of gold.” Pinochet’s “gold”—a reference to the Riggs Bank scandal—runs through most of what Daniel remembers. Allegations of corruption against the Pinochet family had “irrupted” during the 1990s, but for many loyalists, the 2004 discovery of millions of dollars in secret bank accounts in the United States finally undercut the narrative of salvation and the Pinochetista image of the selfless patriot. In the *población* of Huechuraba, Daniel was working transporting and selling fruit with no hope for a pension. In light of the Riggs case, his memory played the now cynically remembered idea of being told by the General that he was a hero off against the present contradiction between his continued economic struggle and the Pinochet family fortune. The “stain” on his life and the difficulties it produced—workplace discrimination, difficulty providing for his family, the lack of a

pension, living in the *población* and with fear of retribution—were brought into sudden relief by the secret Pinochet monies (11 May 2012, interview). The same sense of betrayal, and the question of whose “unscrupulous pockets” (Seguel, 2007: 140) their money had been funneled into, run through memories of hunger, deprivation, and non-payment during their service.<sup>7</sup>

C.D.C.A. (1982) remembers deductions made from his pay as well as the scarcity and poor quality of the food in Punta Arenas. When they did receive some money, he writes, what was left after the subtractions never left the barracks, and instead found its way into “the pockets of corporal R.” who sold bread and donuts to hungry recruits (Seguel, 2007: 31). The small monthly pay conscripts were meant to receive was reduced, they testify, to very little or nothing by deductions for films they never saw, non-existent hairdressers, sport and recreation activities they say never took place, a laundry service for clothes they washed themselves, or maintenance or replacement of their equipment and weapons.<sup>8</sup> “They told us,” writes J.G.S. (1975–1977, Calama), “Lieutenant A. pays you, and Lieutenant O. makes the deductions!” (Seguel, 2007: 23). Conscript pay was further reduced by savings deposits and social security contributions made on recruits’ behalf. They remember being told money was being put aside for them for when they left the barracks. At the end of their service, however, they received nothing.<sup>9</sup> The non-payment of contributions in turn produced a gap in the number of years they contributed to the pay-as-you-go system or reducing their benefits under the investment account model introduced in the 1980s.

Daniel’s sense of abandonment and betrayal, C.D.C.A.’s memory of corporal R.’s donut enterprise, and the broader ex-conscript sense of economic victimization should also be seen in the context of massive income inequality and disenchantment of the 2000s. Widespread disillusionment with the failed promise of the transition emerged at the turn of the century as economic growth slowed, unemployment rose, and large sectors of society saw little or no benefit from the booming 1990s (Han, 2012; Stern, 2010: 182–189). Furthermore, the most recent reforms to the pension system in the mid 2000s failed to capture the self-employed or workers in the informal sector (Stern, 2010: 336–337), groups that include the majority of former conscripts. Most work in labor-intensive industries or informally or both, and they understand their employment trajectories in terms of their service: entering the barracks cost them jobs or the opportunity to finish school or study, lingering physical or psychological scars left them unable to perform certain kinds of work, or workplace discrimination left them unable to find stable employment. Aches and pains attributed to their training, in particular, also began to “blossom” around this time, as president of the group in Temuco Luis Burgos puts it (23 April 2012, field notes). These factors converged at a moment when many faced the challenge of educating their children or sending them to university in Chile’s expensive education system.

The pensions and health and education benefits awarded to victims tapped into the ex-recruits’ economic hardship, health problems, their own interrupted education, and their present struggle to educate their children. Groups codified their shared sense of entitlement to reparations in light of the benefits awarded to others, and they used the existing institutional entities for assessing victims, as well as the structure, amount, and delivery of benefits as models for their own calls for reparation (Becker et al., 2009; Calderón et al., 2011; Chahuán et al., 2007). Both individual ex-conscripts and advocacy groups, however, faced significant obstacles to inclusion not only in the truth and reconciliation process, but also in the memoryscape that informed, and emerged from, the efforts to find justice, establish truth, and repair victims of crimes of repression.

## Politics and memory

One hundred and two former conscripts testified before the Valech Commission. Given the commission’s mandate, however, it determined that “it was not possible to declare as victims persons

who denounced imprisonment or torture while completing their CMS, as it was not possible to clearly determine the political motivations for the events described” (Comisión Nacional Sobre Prisión Política y Tortura (CNPPT), 2005: 85). Conscripts were again excluded when the Valech Commission was reopened to receive new cases in 2010. In August 2011, “Valech II” added almost 10,000 names to the list of recognized victims, including Luz Arce and Miguel Estay. Estay, a communist, and Arce, a member of the MIR, both broke under torture and turned collaborators. The recognition of known collaborators as victims sparked controversy. Victims’ groups, which had previously rejected the possibility of conscript victimhood, considered it an “affront to the victims” and demanded the list be revised (El Mostrador, 2011). While only 2 years earlier the Jara case had seemed to open some public space for conscript victimhood, the Valech II controversy shut the door on those who blurred or crossed the line between victim and perpetrator.

Both the mandate of the Valech Commission and the response to the updated list are indications of how conscript victimhood could not be easily accommodated within formal truth and reconciliation process or the memoryscape that evolved during the “long transition.” In one sense, the Rettig and Valech Reports obscured the politics of the repression by legitimizing victims and suffering on “both sides” (Klep, 2012: 261; Wilde, 2013: 46). At the same time, however, they also reflected a political dichotomy that defined Chile’s “memory struggles” by confirming victim status as a political category. Conscript memory, however, cannot compete in these struggles. The conscript narrative does not imply a particular political interpretation of the coup, the dictatorship, or understanding of its legacy. Moreover, it is compatible with other memory narratives of military rule. The most immediate reason for this is that no political consensus exists among former conscripts.

Most former recruits from all classes argue that they were not politically aware before their service. They do recall expressions of political conflict: the chaos of the pre-coup years, the violence of land seizures, their mothers lining up for over-priced goods, and later the protests and violence of the 1980s. They insist, however, that as boys in the countryside or the *poblaciones*, political engagement was both secondary to work and subsistence and buried by fear and taboo.<sup>10</sup> As individuals, their twenty-first-century interpretations of the coup and military rule vary significantly and are informed by the same memory contest as the rest of Chilean society. Nevertheless, while political positions may differ, ex-conscripts are bound by a shared narrative of personal rupture. This dynamic was evident when leaders of local groups and representatives from Santiago gathered after a regional meeting in July 2012 in the southern town of Nacimiento. At one point, the conversation drifted toward the legacy of military rule. Those touting the triumph of the Chilean economy disagreed with those highlighting human rights violations before the discussion was steered back to their common sense of victimhood (8 July 2012, field notes). The conversation is an indication of how, as a matter of practicality, the collective narrative could not be based in a shared political identity, but also how conscript memory moves alongside the politicized memoryscape. However, ex-conscript memory’s position parallel to, and not within, the memory contest is due not only on a lack of consensus, it also reflects the difficulties that arise when activating that contest.

During a conversation in Temuco, Daniel Gómez (1978–1980, Punta Arenas) who works in the office of the local group emphasized that recruits “were very young, we didn’t know anything about politics, many of us were from the countryside, without any political knowledge” (24 April 2012, interview). He later conceded that those conscripts who had been politically active would probably not mention it (26 April 2012, field notes). There is good reason not to mention it: Remembering CMS in terms of the memory contest engages the strict duality that leaves conscripts claiming to be victims stranded between opposing narratives. In her work on the Rettig Report, Lira notes a similar tendency to underplay political affiliations among the families of the



disappeared and murdered. It was as if, she writes, “recognizing the reality of the conflict reactivated political polarization, ideological differences, and hatred, and hindered memorialization” (Lira, 2011: 124). Similarly, ex-conscripts sought to avoid activating the contemporaneous memoryscape. Patricio Farías (1973, Punta Arenas), for example, was nervous about revealing his party affiliation when remembering his service. He saw Santiago for the first time after being flown into the capital in the weeks after the coup to patrol its unfamiliar streets. In Santa Cruz, prior to being drafted, he had joined a party in an effort to find work, he says, and without naming the party he conceded that it was leftist. He had never told this part of his story before, and his hesitation was due to how this piece of information would complicate how his story was received (19 June 2013, interview).

The tendency to de-politicize memory can be seen, too, in the shifting use of references and the strategic move away from the human rights paradigm by lobby groups that represent around two thirds of mobilized ex-conscripts. From the late 2000s, the Antuco tragedy emerged as a significant reference point for conscript suffering. In May 2005, five companies of draftees set out to march across the side of the Antuco volcano in southern Chile. Despite concerns about approaching bad weather, the order was given to proceed with the exercise. Extreme conditions set in, the temperature plummeted, the group lost its way, and 44 recruits and 1 sergeant died. “The same thing happened to us,” confirmed two former conscripts in the minutes prior to a 2012 group meeting in Nacimiento (8 July 2012, field notes). Former recruits readily identified with the cold, the “crazy” orders, and the deaths.

The Antuco tragedy became a useful point of reference when explaining the experience of military service between 1973 and 1990 (Seguel, 2007: 43–44). It could tap into the widespread grief that poured out as the bodies were recovered in the weeks following the incident without activating the memory contest and the rigid assumptions about victimhood that otherwise forced conscripts into the gray zone between narratives. It became more useful, for example, than the Nash case. While the fate of Nash resonated with many former recruits as confirmation of their worst fears, it also turned on a political purity. Nash was killed for acting in line with his political and humanistic convictions. What made his case so compelling was also what removed it from the general conscript experience. Most former conscripts did not take a stand against the regime’s actions. This difference can be seen in the public echo of the case not as a reference point for the experience of CMS during the regime, but as the centerpiece for the conscientious objector movement of the 1990s (Baronti and Toro, 1999: 35–45). Antuco, however, was much more accessible.

Seguel (2007), editor of a 2007 collection of testimonies, contextualized for his readers his over-estimation of six thousand conscript deaths under military rule as equivalent to “134 Antuco tragedies” (p. 210). Similarly, a 9-minute video used by the ex-conscript group of Temuco in meetings with politicians splices footage of its members describing the lingering damage from CMS and showing their physical scars, or mothers of dead conscripts talking into the camera, with television coverage of the Antuco tragedy. The television footage shows a grieving father speaking of his rage and feelings of helplessness, and a distraught mother asking: “why did you kill them?” The words superimposed on these images read: “Not only in Antuco did conscripts die doing their duty.” The Antuco case also shaped lobby groups’ calls for reparations. The payouts to victims’ families were included alongside the transitional processes as precedent and as a model regarding the value of pensions requested. Group leaders listed the young men from 2005 alongside the other repaired groups in society (Calderón et al., 2011).

The projection beyond the context of military rule was not accidental. Group leaders recognized the difficulties that arose from engaging in the human rights paradigm. In May 2012, this acknowledgment could be seen in the latest of a series of resolutions passed in Congress regarding conscript demands. Unlike previous resolutions, 606 made no mention of human rights and instead

advocated for: “The recognition of conscripts as victims of illegal and arbitrary act by the State of Chile, via the conduct of the Armed Forces” (Chahín et al., 2012: 4). Former recruits continued to draw private meaning from the language of human rights, and human rights formed part of the legal strategies employed in cases quietly working their way through the civil and criminal courts. However, as a public, lobbying strategy the focus shifted away from the political category of human rights to rights guaranteed in the constitution and the laws governing military service.

At end of 2013, the avenue to reparations via the congress came to a head with the presidential election. The ex-conscript lobby had received a boost during the 2009 campaign when Sebastián Piñera’s team committed to examining the groups’ demands if elected. This was interpreted as a promise to find a solution and underpinned increased lobbying activity during Piñera’s presidency. With his term now coming to an end, and the political right facing certain defeat, ex-conscripts and their political supporters—from both sides of politics—pushed harder for a solution (Chahín et al., 2013). On 1 October, Defense Minister Rodrigo Hinzpeter promised a concrete response within 90 days.

The two main candidates in the election were former president Michelle Bachelet and Evelyn Matthei. As daughters of Air Force General Alberto Bachelet, who died in 1974 as the result of political torture, and Air Force General Fernando Matthei, who was a member of Pinochet’s *junta* from 1978 to 1990, the “Generals’ daughters” made Chile’s past very present. This presence compounded a rare level of commemorative activity in the lead up to the 40th anniversary of the coup. One prominent moment was the series *Chile. The Forbidden Images: 40 years later* (Chilevisión, 2013), which showed footage of the coup and life under the dictatorship not previously been seen on Chilean television. The interest in new images sparked, too, an interest in new perspectives, and for the first time, ex-conscripts who served in 1973 were sought out as witnesses for their memories of the coup by television and radio outlets. However, the public interest in conscript accounts of the coup rarely extended to the “movement” and never to classes that served between 1974 and 1990. It also dissipated quickly. The annual commemorative season tends to end with the *fiestas patrias* on 18 September, and a 3-day march by ex-conscripts from Rancagua to Santiago’s *Plaza de los Heroes* in November, for example, drew little attention. When dozens of former recruits arrived in the capital, the *plaza* was overwhelmed with thousands of council workers who had been on strike for nearly a month (13 November 2013, field notes). The march suffered from poor organization, but the lack of space in the *plaza* is representative of the lack of traction ex-conscripts achieve. The march had been organized in an attempt to pressure the government ahead of its promised response. In December, that response dismissed—apart from minor technical concessions—the bulk of the ex-conscript lobby’s demands and rejected their legal arguments. The incoming Bachelet administration was committed to an ambitious reform agenda and historically aligned with the established politics of victimhood. By the end of the year, then, a political window seemed to close for the “movement.”

## Conclusion

Chile after Pinochet was both haunted and shaped by the question of how to remember the 1973 coup and 17 years of military rule. This “memory question” has been anchored by a shifting contest between political narratives, neither of which can accommodate a conscript memory of victimhood. A convergence of cultural, political, generational, and economic factors in the first decade of the twenty-first century broke down some ex-conscript fears and provided cues and catalysts for a conscript narrative. A movement with a shared narrative evolved as truth, reconciliation, and justice overlapped with ex-recruits’ aging bodies, persistent poverty, and concerns about their ability to retire and educate their children. Despite emerging in interaction with the transitional processes,

ex-conscript victimhood could not settle within Chile's "politics of memory" that had both shaped and been shaped by them. Instead of competing in the contest, ex-conscript memory is apolitical and compatible with other memory frameworks of military rule. The apolitics of memory rest on a lack of political consensus among former recruits, but also the desire to avoid activating the politicized memoryscape that leaves the story of military service automatically stranded between its extremes.

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## Notes

1. Figures provided by the *Director General de Movilización Nacional* in December 2013 and January 2014.
2. There has been little scholarly interest in conscript memory of twentieth-century political conflict. In Chile, Stern (2006a) refers to the exclusion of the conscript experience from the memoryscape in the late 1990s (pp. 134–142). In Argentina, Lorenz (2012) describes the tension that frames the engagement between conscripts who served in the Falklands/Malvinas War and the Argentine human rights movement born out of the dictatorship (pp. 211–240).
3. Accounts of military service that denounce mistreatments and torture as part of training appear throughout interviews and documentation produced by the "movement." For published accounts, see testimonies in Seguel (2007), Gutiérrez (2010), Rivas (2011) and Saavedra (2012).
4. The timing and size of the mobilization are based on figures from the Army's General Archive regarding the increase in applications for certificates of service, which ex-conscript groups, almost universally, made a prerequisite of membership (2 December 2013, field notes).
5. Where former conscripts are cited, their names are followed by the years marking their entrance into, and discharge from, the barracks, as well as the location they spent the majority of their service, if this information is known. The names of recruits cited from published sources are kept as they appear in those sources. A pseudonym, denoted with an asterisk, has been used if field notes of encounters with ex-conscripts or non-published testimonies are cited, or if the interviewee requested it.
6. Verdugo's (2001) book on the Caravan of Death illustrates how the campaign was designed to instill fear and obedience among officers.
7. Seguel (2007: 23, 112, 125).
8. Seguel (2007: 38, 45, 54, 56, 58, 90, 94, 106, 129, 131, 149, 167, 244, 246, 272); testimony by Isidoro G.\* (1987, Punta Arenas).
9. Interview with Claudio de la Hoz (1973–1975), 27 April 2012; testimonies by: Camilo L.\* (1973), 2006; Amaro S.\* (1974–1975, Calama), undated; Renato S.\* (1974–1977, Antofagasta), undated; René B.\* (1983–1984, Chillán), 2007; Franco C.\* (1973–1974), 2007; and Seguel, 2007: 65, 244–245, 258, 267.
10. Claims of no interest or engagement in politics are consistent with contemporaneous sociological work on youths from poor rural and urban communities (Mattelart and Mattelart, 1970; Weinstein, 1985, 1989).

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