

Blood Echoes: Political Violence and Historical Memory in Colombia

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree of Bachelor of Arts Honours in
Political Science**

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Abstract

Colombia is a country whose relationship with political violence is complex and multidimensional, permeating its history and involving multiple actors. The politicization of violence reached a peak in the 1990s, when politicians, civilians, and other members of society were caught in a wave of indiscriminate violence from paramilitary forces, armed groups, drug cartels and the state itself. In response to the trauma and long-term effects of these events, the Colombian state developed memory policies aimed at constructing a historical memory capable of promoting reconciliation, understanding, and non-repetition. This thesis examines the relationship between historical memory and political violence in Colombia, analyzing the 1990s as a catalyst of this phenomenon and assessing whether memory processes have contributed to the non-repetition of political violence. While some policies achieved key benchmarks in developing a cohesive, victim-led historical memory, discontinuity and setbacks have left the process incomplete.

Introduction

"The indigenous people translated Article 11 of the Constitution: 'No one shall carry anyone above their heart, nor do harm to their person, even if they think and speak differently.' If we learn this article, we save this country."

(Jaime Garzón, cited in RTVC, 2022)

Violence is not an anomaly in Colombia, it is a constant, woven into its history from its founding to the present. Violence and politics have fostered a venomous and indelible relationship, an ever present divide looming over the nation. Many have been the efforts of those in power to prolong this violence, to silence unconformity, but blood echoes, and society refuses to give in. The Colombian armed conflict is perhaps the biggest exponent of this violence, a decades-long struggle that started with peasant guerrillas standing up against electoral fraud, inequality and abuse of the countryside. Unfortunately, the conflict metastasized into a simmering all out war that birthed drug traffickers, paramilitary organizations, guerrillas and revealed the state as an agent capable of prolonging the vicious cycle of violence. The conflict reached an unprecedented peak of politically motivated acts in the 1990s, where all of these actors unleashed a wave of violence against politicians, civilians, and other members of society. Colombia is a violent nation, yes, but its people have refused to be characterized by it. The country's history is full of those courageous individuals that stood against violence, whether by fighting it directly through political advocacy or simply standing by what they thought just. Most lost their lives at the hands of a few power hungry individuals, deepening wounds that the nation has struggled to heal.

The act of remembering is often a difficult, incredibly painful, laborious and long process. Going back and relieving traumatic memories, so often hidden but never forgotten, constitutes an act of courage and valor. Many Colombians have embodied this daring determination, remembering, seeking justice despite fighting an uphill battle against an almost kafkaesque bureaucracy. Through the efforts of countless people, not only in Colombia but across Latin America, the act of remembering acquired a political dimension, necessary for societies to navigate the trauma triggered by political violence across the region. After years of stagnation, abuse, and unrelenting violence, Colombian politics began to recognize that there could be a different path. Historical memory emerged as an alternative pathway, one that could understand the voids and mistakes of the past, and that hoped to avoid the repetition of those acts of violence that deeply disturbed the social fabric of the nation.

Research question & thesis statement

This thesis aims to analyze the state's attempts to unite society and prevent the repetition of political violence after the unprecedented events of the 1990s through the following research question: How has the Colombian state responded to the political violence of the 1990s to rebuild national unity and encourage non-repetition?

In response, the study argues that in the process of rebuilding national unity and addressing political violence, the state has articulated a specific historical memory that plays a role in reconciling a deeply divided society. However, historical memory is complex, different actors remember different events and processes. In this context, state led memory policies have embodied important efforts to achieve national unity and the non-repetition of violent events, but have not been enough

to counter polarization, persistence of political violence and public indifference, rendering the historical memory process incomplete.

Methodology

The research will first delineate a theoretical framework of both political violence and historical memory to showcase how the concepts are largely understood within political science literature. Later delving into how both terms have been adopted within the Latin American and Colombian context, and evidencing their interconnected conceptual relationship. The second chapter consists of a historical analysis of select flashpoints events during the 1990s, identified as a catalytic period for the development of historical memory in Colombia. The aim is to provide a context for the emergence of historical memory as a political tool, but also to shed light on some of the events that shaped the nation and the politics of memory. The third chapter gathers the policy analysis of two case studies: the *National Center of Historical Memory* (CNMH) and the *Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition*. (Referred to in the thesis as the Commission of Truth or as CEV), both selected because of their key role in producing an official historical memory. The analysis will recognize the benchmarks achieved by the historical memory process and the failures that have impeded the project from achieving its goal. Lastly, the fourth chapter comprises a critical discourse analysis around how historical memory and political violence, embodied by the ongoing armed conflict, are perceived presently in the country.

A note on translation

As a research project focused on Colombia, particularly on a topic specific mostly covered and crucial to be informed by national authors, many of the sources used were only available in

Spanish. Therefore, some of the direct citations included within this thesis were translated into English, with the help of a bilingual supervisor that could understand both languages and make sure of the validity of the sources used.

Chapter 1: Political violence: vestiges of dehumanization

On the 6th of November 1985, Colombians woke up to the news that the M-19 guerrilla had forcibly taken the National Palace of Justice. Holding 350 people hostage, including staff and the Supreme Court, the insurgents intended to hold a trial against president Belisario Betancourt for violating previously signed cease fire accords. As an unprecedented attack on the nation's institutions, the military forces resolved to besiege the palace with no room for negotiation. What followed has since been considered a massacre by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, as the military used disproportionate levels of force without regard for the hundreds of hostages inside. Not only that, but those able to make it out were forcibly disappeared and assassinated, including Cafeteria service workers, who were later found in mass graves. Colombians watched in horror as the palace went up in flames, images left in stone within the memories of the people.

This event of political violence embodies interesting dichotomies of how the concept might be perceived. The M-19 siege was undoubtedly an act of political violence, as their motivations were to contest the political power of the government. However, the indiscriminate response of the military can be considered one too. The destruction of the country's highest judicial institution and the deaths of Supreme Court magistrates were violent consequences that impacted the political integrity of the nation and caused generational trauma to the victims' families and those who witnessed the episode. The complexity of these kinds of events have led many authors to discuss the nature of political violence. Some authors argue that political violence can be justified in the face of oppression, while others consider that its destructive nature must be held accountable in all of its

manifestations. Many find common ground in the idea that political violence emerges as a way to contest power in some way or form, but often neglect the lingering effects of these practices.

In this section, the study will seek to grasp a comprehensive understanding of the concept precisely through its long term consequences, capable of irreversibly damaging collectives and deepening social and cultural divides. The framework will revise general understandings of the concept of political violence, to later delve into what scholars have contributed in terms of the long term impact of this problem, and what that means for its epistemological conceptualization. Finally, the chapter will turn towards how political violence is understood in Colombia, and how its consequences require complex processes of remembrance, leading to the emergence of historical memory. As a country marked by a complex history of violence, Colombia is perhaps a key case study to understand the larger implications of this issue within society.

The concept of political violence has often been described as broad and volatile, as it gathers a fairly extensive amount of different manifestations. Author Perry Mars provides a substantive definition of the concept, crucial for this study in setting a clear base for its latter interpretation:

In summary therefore, the comprehensive definition of political violence should relate to all activities involving force and resistance more or less organized in an attempt to bring about changes either within the political system, or of the system as a whole, and involving a high level of cost in terms of damage to property and/or injury to persons. (Mars, 1975, p. 228)

Mars gathers some important components of political violence, intently its destabilizing nature and its role as a means to bring about change. However, this conceptual definition only offers a surface understanding of the multiple layers of political violence, which is why it is important to take it as a starting point but not as an all encompassing definition. In his text, Mars cites author H.H Nieburg who clarifies the vast reach that differentiates political violence from other kinds of violence: “Political violence on the other hand tends to increase the risk and cost to the society 'beyond acceptable levels' since it possesses the capability for 'infinite escalation” (Mars, 1975, p. 227). Mars argues that this statement might be too inclusive, claiming that individual crime acts might also have wider systemic consequences. Notwithstanding, further readings and understandings of the concept amplify the argument that a key factor of political violence lies in its ability to permeate and destabilize societies for long periods of time.

Hannah Arendt’s work *On Violence* proves to be an essential piece of study for understanding the wider effects of political violence. She also understands violence as a means, a tool designated to achieve an external goal (Arendt, 1970, p. 46). This external goal is usually the acquisition of power, but Arendt proposes a different interpretation, one in which violence can never truly reach this goal. She states power and violence are politically opposite: “Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power's disappearance” (Arendt, 1970, p. 56). Arendt characterizes power as inherently collective, and as such does not need justification, it exists at the core of every political community (Arendt, 1970, p. 52). However, it does need legitimacy, which appears within the initial collective agreement of the community. Violence is different: “Violence can be justifiable, but it

never will be legitimate. Its justification loses in plausibility the farther its intended end recedes into the future” (Arendt, 1970, p. 52).

Arendt proposes an interesting analysis of the stakes and goals of political violence, which are further explained through her mentioning of the Vietnam War. As the conflict grew larger and the US military goal became unclear, popular support from the war shifted to one of discontent and rejection. Parallely, the Vietcong found support and legitimation from the collective society that sought to reject foreign intervention: “And as for actual warfare, we have seen in Vietnam how an enormous superiority in the means of violence can become helpless if confronted with an ill-equipped but well-organized opponent who is much more powerful” (Arendt, 1970, p. 51). Based on this example, an interpretation of political violence can be extracted. Events that fit into the definition of political violence, such as revolutions or guerrilla warfare, can begin with violent action in response to oppression. What distinguishes them is the subsequent process of legitimation, established through collective action, institutions, and consent of a political community. If this fails to occur, revolutions, guerrilla movements, civil wars and other responses to oppression can indeed also become corrupted by violence. The attention should be then shifted to acts that violently pursue long-term goals and yet progressively lack legitimation and power from collective wills.

The example of the Vietnam War, as a foreign invasion, might differ from other cases of political violence. Nevertheless, Arendt’s framework goes beyond and is useful to understand Latin American and other contexts, precisely in relation to the devastating effects of political violence. Latin American guerrilla conflicts are characterized by insurgent groups that initially waged wars against perceived injustices from the state, some even fighting dictatorships or authoritarian regimes.

These conflicts often become complex, with increasing acts of violence and unclear horizons. As claimed by Arendt's view of violence, these groups gradually lost their initial popular support and became more aggressive in the absence of power. Her theory explains the metamorphosis of these groups, initially justifiable but corrupted by the use of violence as conflicts elongate. Groups that claimed to fight against injustice, turn to abuse the populations they bow to represent, prompting protracted internal armed conflicts in which society is caught in the crossfire.

A study on the Peruvian armed conflict (1980-2000), an internal war waged by the Maoist guerrilla group *The Shining Path* and the Peruvian state, mentions the far-reaching consequences of political violence on societies:

As has happened in the Peruvian highlands, armed conflict and modern warfare not only result in human casualties, but also in the destruction of ways of life—targeting and attempting to eliminate entire ethnic groups, eradicating cultures and social systems, thus undermining the critical means whereby people can endure and recover from suffering and loss (Pedersen *et al*, 2008 , p. 214).

The study states the importance of considering the indirect consequences that can be directly tied to the extreme environments caused by political violence. For instance, the notorious erosion of family & social cohesions, dislocations of local economies & food production systems, which in turn create simultaneous stressors that can result in excess mortality, malnutrition, etc. (Pedersen *et al*, 2008 , p. 214).

Political violence has also been linked with the spread of economic and political elites, along with structural practices that use violence to silence truths and maintain the Status Quo. As a result, between 2021 and 2022 Latin America became the most dangerous region for environmental activists while also heading the lists for the region with the most journalists killed (Pedersen *et al*, 2008, p. 178). What this implies is that political violence works in favor of maintaining certain structural networks that have historically neglected the collective. Which predisposes societies to become more unequal, economically dependent on foreign nations, and unable to successfully carry out structural transformations and reforms in government, society, and the economy.

These structural consequences are also linked to the damaged political fabric of societies that endure this kind of violence. In addition to the power of elites and social barriers, societies are also impacted by the destruction of social and political culture, which makes issues like class struggle or social justice harder to discuss or resolve. For instance, Author Ignacio Martín-Baró frames polarization as one of the main sequels of political violence through his scholarly work done during the Salvadorean civil war (1979 – 1992). Martin-Baro states that the emergence of polarization during events of political violence fosters an ambiance of tension that is not only military but also psychosocial “Facts are ideologized, people are demonized, and the use of political spaces, which the evolution of the conflict has forced open, is criminalized” (Martin-Baro, 1988, p. 131).

But the effects of political violence go further than just creating polarized nations. Violence permeates generations of individuals who grow in the midst of this ambiance, fostering negative practices within the social psyche and contribute to the perpetuation of violence:

But, in turn, the people who are shaped in this context come to accept as natural the disregard for human life, the law of the strongest as a social criterion, and corruption as a way of life, thus precipitating a serious vicious cycle that tends to perpetuate the war both objectively and subjectively (Martin-Baro, 1988, p. 140)

In consequence, political violence and its effects become a much more complex phenomenon, one that spreads farther and that includes state institutions playing key roles as originators of social traumas. Martín-Baró called for a collective and transformative social approach to the question of political violence, characterized by understanding, acceptance, education and mutual agreements to solve problems instead of resorting to aggression (Martin-Baro, 1988, p. 141). Martín-Baró was assassinated by Salvadorean military agents in 1989, making his work on political violence not only valuable in its ideas but also as a testament of those who tried to achieve a political transformation that could strain away from violence.

Through the previously established theoretical framework, the Colombian context acquires a special importance within the topic of political violence. The Colombian armed conflict can be characterized as a multifaceted and long-standing struggle involving numerous actors, including leftist guerrillas such as the FARC and the ELN, paramilitary groups like the AUC, drug cartels, and the state itself, all of whom have participated in acts of political violence. Without a clear winner and the conflict being active, each of them have been permanently stained by their unwavering path of violence, deeply wounding the social and political foundation of the country. Therefore, the concept of political violence will be understood as a catalyst for numerous and complex societal problems that prolong violent practices in the country. This analysis allows the study to introduce historical

memory as a means of addressing these consequences through processes that enable societies to understand the dynamics of political violence and move toward more peaceful pathways.

For this purpose, it is valuable to include a conceptualization of political violence through the lens of the scholarly work done in Colombia. Former director of the Centre of Memory, Peace, and Reconciliation Jose Dario Antequera is a key scholar focused on historical memory and political violence in Colombia. He is the son of Jose Antequera, a political leader and member of the Patriotic Union murdered during the 1990s in Colombia. Antequera identifies socio-political violence as a systematic enactment of violations to human rights carried out with impunity, motivated by an interest to garner political and economic power (Antequera, 2011, p. 21). Political violence prompts the confrontation between armed actors, which consequently culminates in the victimization of political and social sectors through identifiable patterns that differ from those of ordinary violence (Antequera, 2011, p. 22)

The final report of the Commission of Truth constitutes a gathering of diligent investigations of the several facets of the Colombian Armed Conflict, a notable piece of study to understand the effects of political violence. The report signals the creation of collective or social traumas as one of the main byproducts of political violence. These traumas embody violent events that permanently mark the collective conscience and memory, the history of communities, their identity, and sense of belonging (CEV, 2022, p. 45). The Commission of Truth states that the lingering pain product of political violence remains present through generations, expanding its influence and impact over Colombian society (CEV, 2022, p. 49). This incredibly painful trauma has permeated Colombian society to a point where violence has become normalized and the population

desensitized. Forever representing a deep wound that has conditioned the ways in which Colombians relate to one another, generating mistrust, and empowering violent or excluding resolves to approach conflict (CEV, 2022, p. 50). In consequence, the impact of political violence in the collective has been vast. For instance, farmers and Indigenous communities saw their relationship with the land disrupted by forced displacement, while fear of developing political identities and exercising democratic forms of participation became entrenched in society (CEV, 2022, p. 53).

As a result, speaking about political violence or conflict in Colombia usually carries negative connotations, resulting in unfair accusations towards the other because of their views, facilitating the development of contempt and violence:

In other cases, political discussions about current events easily lead to conflicts that seem irreconcilable, to silences as forms of avoidance, or to categorizing others based on their political ideas rather than engaging with the person or groups in dialog (CEV, 2022, p. 62)

The inability of dialog and propensity for violence are deeply complex consequences of a society that has lived through decades of continuous political violence. According to the Commission, these are the kind of practices that the country needs to change in order to address the bigger picture:

The political and necessary transformation of Colombia require a cultural shift that promotes different models of interpersonal and intergroup relations, in which respect,

dialog, and solidarity are fostered; tools that have saved many lives, including in this country, and that form the foundation of democratic relations (CEV, 2022, p. 58)

The report mentions the need to continue these processes. The importance of changing attitudes and ways of thinking about conflict, placing the dignification of the victims at the center, and fostering actions that are sustained, long term efforts towards rebuilding the social fabric of the country (CEV, 2022, p. 59). For these efforts, it is instrumental to foster an environment where victims are able to speak about the traumatic memories caused by the violence, as a primary way to combat the silences and wounds that have remained through decades.

The goal of this theoretical framework was to demonstrate that political violence must not only be understood as actions aiming to contest political power or ideals, but rather as an overarching practice that impacts numerous aspects of social life. Moreover, the intent was to illustrate how political violence cannot be simply resolved through bullets and blood. The traumatic and multigenerational effects of this type of violence require complex processes that can transmit an understanding of this problem from places of reconciliation, comprehension and peace. This is why initiatives like the Commission of Truth acquire great importance in contexts of violence, signaling that historical memory processes can possibly come to represent the binding, collective and sustained social mechanisms that conflict scholars have called for within their texts.

Chapter 1.2: Historical Memory: past, present and future

Historical memory is not by any means a new concept, it is one that has been brewing for a long time, achieving a notable political importance by being used to recognize past events of injustice and terror. It might be important to note that this concept is often considered malleable and somewhat fluid by scholars, but this framework will seek to build a comprehensive understanding of its key bases, and its adjusted meaning for the Colombian reality. This chapter will first trace the origins of the concept and its historical development through the ideas of different scholars. Then, the analysis will focus on the Hispano-American post-dictatorial period, where the concept of historical memory became internationally recognized in processes of reconciliation and transitional justice. The final part of the chapter seeks to place historical memory within the Colombian reality, essential to understand its relation with political violence and its importance for society. With this in mind, the chapter aims to illustrate how historical memory processes are crucial for societies dealing with the protracted political violence.

A significant parting point for understanding this idea takes form in the concept of *collective memory* put forward by French author Maurice Halbwachs at the start of the twentieth century. Halbwachs' concept focuses on how memory ceases to be individual when in the presence of others "Our memories remain collective, however, and are recalled to us through others even though only we were participants in the events or saw the things concerned. In reality, we are never alone" (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 23). For Halbwachs, collective memories are shaped by the group experience, creating not only a shared memory but also a distinct identity. These memories are episodic, fragments of lived experiences, and can become unique to each group; as indicated by author

Nicolas Russell in his research of Halbwach's work "As a result, every group has its own collective memory and that collective memory differs from the collective memory of other groups" (Russell, 2006, p. 796).

Halbwachs' collective memory is crucial for understanding historical memory, as the notion of the group experience demonstrates how communities can process and reproduce memories with unique and important significance. The past can be a shared space subject to interpretation. This is particularly significant within the context of the Colombian armed conflict, as the group experience of the victims has been historically contested and marginalized by other actors including the state. As it will be later shown in the analysis, the existence of historical memory processes enabled these collective memories to finally be vindicated and given the importance the victims deserved.

The concept of historical memory continues to simmer until halfway through the century, when the horrors of the holocaust and the second world war created a collective disturbance in the psyche and memories of its victims. Importantly, the tragic nature of these atrocities put forward the moral implications and the significance of remembering history. Driven by this line of analysis, authors like Hannah Arendt began to understand the crucial role of memory in solidifying political and moral thought, providing value to the preservation of a history beyond facts. In her work "Between past and future", Arendt analyzes the disconnect between past traditions, morals, and values to the lived present. Facilitating the creation of a gap where convictions and tragedies past rejected could be forgotten, take root and grow again:

The loss, at any rate, perhaps inevitable in terms of political reality, was consummated by oblivion, by a failure of memory, which befell not only the heirs but, as it were, the actors, the witnesses, those who for a fleeting moment had held the treasure in the palms of their hands, in short, the living themselves (Arendt, 1961, p. 6)

By ‘treasure’ Arendt refers to the European wisdom, traditions, and values that came to be lost through the passage of time. Such a claim becomes even more significant in the context of the Second World War, where Europe was once again plunged into a global military conflict, this time accompanied by a barbarism not seen in decades. Through her words, remembrance then becomes a key element to prevent valuable wisdom and values from slipping into oblivion, with possible inhuman consequences, as experienced by Arendt herself during the war (Arendt, 1961, p. 6). Her interpretation is pertinent not only in this dimension, but also in that memory began to be tied to ideas of justice and morality, which would become instrumental aspects of the solidified concept of historical memory later on.

However, Arendt also understood that remembrance itself would not be enough to fill in the gap between the past and the present, even more so when that wished to be preserved can appear to be abstract and possesses a complex and deeper meaning “The trouble, however, is that we seem to be neither equipped nor prepared for this activity of thinking, of settling down in the gap between past and future” (Arendt, 1961, p. 13). It becomes clear that Arendt was calling for the creation of a broader practice, one that could understand the past, preserve what is valuable, and aid the present society not only to acknowledge it but to act in accordance as well.

The concept nurtures itself from other authors of the time, which in general lines began speaking up against the horrors of the holocaust and in doing so, gave importance to the act of remembering. An author worth mentioning is Theodore Adorno, a German philosopher who was forced into exile during the rise of the Nazi party. Adorno also recognized the liability of memory, mainly criticizing how humanity appeared to be destined to repeat the same mistakes in a never ending circularity of destruction:

The long interval between war memoirs and the armistice is not an accident: it testifies to the laborious reconstruction of memory, which remains conjoined to something powerless and even inauthentic in all those books, regardless of whatever horrors the writer witnessed (Adorno, 2005, p. 52)

Perhaps Adorno took a much more pessimistic view on past efforts of remembrance, but it is this identification of a lack of proper exercises of memory that led to the debate around historical memory. Much like Arendt, Adorno also questioned the moral implications of forgetting, questioning how human culture could build and move forward without acknowledging and bringing justice to the victims of the holocaust “The logic of history is as destructive as the human beings which it begets: wherever their inertia tends to go, it reproduces the equivalent of past calamities. Normality is death” (Adorno, 2005, p. 54). The evocation of a need for justice is once again linked to memory, which set the foundations the path historical memory would take in the coming decades.

Towards the end of the century, new authors carried on the debate of memory and history. French historian Pierre Nora is one of the key authors that contributed to the literature around this

discussion, particularly through a cultural dimension. In his work *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire* Nora presents a slightly different take on the relationship between both concepts. He emphasized that both memory and history are fundamentally different, pointing out that history takes pride on being critical and objective, lacking the emotional and cultural significance of human memory:

Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer (Nora, 1989, p. 8)

What his analysis entails is the continuous disconnect between history and memory, one being grounded on facts, dates and chronologies, while the other remains ever present, subjective, but grounded in symbols, objects, and other cultural traditions (Nora, 1989, p. 9). This distinction was meaningful for the creation of historical memory as a concept, precisely because it signaled the need for a binding element that could integrate history with the malleability of memory for a collective purpose. Nora was terrified of the impending possibility of a historicized society where memory would cease to exist, and so, he raised the importance of the *Lieux de Mémoire*. Identified as sites of collective memory that could prevent such a forthcoming “Museums, archives, cemeteries, festivals, anniversaries, treaties, depositions, monuments, sanctuaries, fraternal orders-these are the boundary stones of another age, illusions of eternity” (Nora, 1989, p. 12). The cultural prism of memory became apparent, and it gained importance when considering historical memory. The sites

mentioned by Nora are instrumental in modern processes of historical remembrance, preserving the cultural and multidimensional facet of memories in a way that cannot be easily erased and forgotten.

Having revised the literary bases that nurture the concept of historical memory, it is now possible to delve into the role of Latin/Hispano America in reaching an epistemological consolidation of this term. Until then, the efforts of these scholars had established the pillars of historical memory as a socially constructed concept, experiencing to some degree practical applications with the Nuremberg trials and other post-holocaust remembrance processes. However, it was first adopted politically and judicially in the context of the democratization processes of several dictatorships in Latin/Hispano America during the 70s and 80s. Where memory became the primary vehicle to shed light on the numerous acts of violence perpetrated by these (Jelin, 2003, p. xvi)

Author Elizabeth Jelin explains the hardships of these initial memory processes, particularly because the lingering effects of dictatorships ranged from the continuity of political violence, lasting inequality and impunity. She also emphasizes that when trying to convey the memories of traumatic events, silence is common. The reasons for this are related to institutional abandonment and fear of being misunderstood or signaled, leading to the creation of “memory voids”. These absences represent the inability to articulate or explain traumatic events, forcing a continued coexistence with them that inflicts pain in both the victims and society (Jelin, 2003, p. 17). Notwithstanding, human memory is complex, and these voids do not simply fade. As noted by Jelin, traumatic memories can reappear, usually as part of cultural and social changes that allow for the interpretation and recognition of these experiences (Jelin, 2003, p. 17)

In her text, Jelin provides what could be considered a statement close to a definition of historical memory:

Working through traumatic events requires establishing a certain distance between past and present in order to be able to remember that something happened in that past and is not the present. At the same time, it requires the recognition of current life conditions and the possibility of imagining a future. In memory, in contrast to traumatic repetition, the past does not invade the present, it informs it. (Jelin, 2003, p. 51).

A synthesis of historical memory lies here: the remembrance of past events, memories acting as a way to inform the present and influence the future for the purpose of non-repetition of traumatic episodes.

An important case study to illustrate the workings of historical memory was Spain's democratic transition from the Francoist regime. As noted by historian Paola Aguilar, the concept is most significant when institutions grapple with processes of political change, as was the case of post-Francoist Spain, a period marked by uncertainty and by the looming trauma of the war (Aguilar, 2002, p.xix). In her work, she proposes a definition of historical memory, instrumental in understanding why this type of memory only contains select events from a nation's past "We could say that the historical memory of a nation is that part of the past which, as a result of a certain situation or context, has the ability to influence the present, either in a positive sense (an example to

be followed) or in a negative sense (a counter-example, a disagreeable situation which must be avoided)” (Aguilar, 2002, p. 9).

The post-Francoist transitional period holds substantial significance when analyzing processes of historical memory. Faced with the threat of once again plunging into a civil war, the implementation of the concept in both society and the government allowed the nation to break the cycle of violence: “It was precisely these two factors, the memory of historical misfortune and the fear of the dangers of radicalization, that contributed most to moderating the demands of all the important political and social groups of the time and to legitimizing a different means of bringing about political transformations” (Aguilar, 2002, p. 151). In this way, Aguilar states that historical memory does not seek to bend history, but rather to acquire valuable lessons of the past marked in the context of the lived present.

However, the case of Spain differs from Latin American countries that implemented the concept of historical memory within their democratization processes. Spain did not hold any major public trials against the remaining members of the Francoist regime, but rather pivoted in the memory of the dictatorship and the war to resist destabilization in their transfer to democracy. The case of Argentina may be then better suited to illustrate how the concept began to be an integral part of remembrance processes that sought to bring closure to the victims and the perpetrators of violence to justice.

During the years under the PRN (National Reorganization Process) the Argentinian nation suffered countless human right abuses including political persecution and forced disappearances

involving children, events that evoked a veil of systematic terror over the population. The memories of such horror reappeared due to the cultural and social changes that preceded the end of the dictatorship, along with the increasing global importance of human rights during the period. The need to address and recognize these memories was shared by a majority of the population, leading to the creation of institutions of recognition such as CONADEP (National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons). CONDAEP produced the first report accomplished by a commission of truth called “Never again”, focused on the crimes committed by the military junta. The movement gained sufficient force to trigger the Junta Trials of 1985, a pivotal moment in the consolidation of the politics of memory and justice. Political Scientist Pilar Calveiro was one of the victims of the junta, being forcibly incarcerated in a concentration camp for political opponents. In her work she mentions the importance of the trials as exercises of remembrance and justice:

The trial of the commanders was another major exercise of recovering memory. Beyond the limitations of the sentences; beyond the fact that only the juntas were tried; beyond the subsequent “punto final” and amnesty laws; beyond the fact that all the protagonists are men still active in the armed forces, who continue their careers as if nothing had happened, the trial was the deepest blow suffered by the repressive power (Calveiro, 2004, p. 103)

The trials were meaningful not only because they punished those responsible for the atrocities committed, but because they allowed victims to put forward their testimony. In doing so, they effectively materialized one of the first practical exercises of historical memory that brought judicial justice and also served to inform society and reconcile the experienced collective terror (Calveiro, 2004, p. 104).

After understanding the facets through which the concept progressed, it is pertinent to introduce what Colombian scholars have written about its role within the Colombian armed conflict. This conflict coincides with some past events mentioned to have been linked with historical memory, as it is a problematic that expands through decades of lived experiences by victims and including different culprit factions which clouded the truth of violent events. As a part of the implementation of the concept within the legal and governmental policies to address the armed conflict, a valuable source of study is the National Center of Historical Memory.

It is then comprehensible to state a clear definition of the concept, similar to those given before in this framework, but necessary to understand the specific view of historical memory within the Colombian reality: “In general, historical memory has been understood as a field in which different narrative agents weave episodes and meanings about a past imagined from a lived present that shape the projected future” (CNMH, 2016, p. 8). In addition to this, it is important to understand that in the Colombian case, the concept is directly oriented at understanding the victims of the conflict and validating their experience “Even more importantly, we propose an understanding of our recent past that focuses on the testimony of the victims of the armed conflict” (CNMH, 2016, p. 11). The reason behind this approach is clear: victims’ testimonies are the primary vehicles through which historical memory is constructed, not only for their historical and emotional value, but also for their power to shift perceptions, generate solidarity and shape a future where these atrocities do not occur again.

The importance of historical memory in Colombia became crucial as heightened levels of political violence terrorized the nation. Becoming phenomena that permeated every inch of society, deeply wounding the institutional integrity of the country. Scholar Jose Dario Antequera mentions that events of political violence can be considered acts of social structuration, generators of social and political inertia as well as physical, social and cultural domination (Antequera, 2011, p. 37). In such contexts, he asserts the significance of historical memory policies as measures with the ability to unite the population for the purpose of healing these problems.

Antequera proposes that historical memory policies in Colombia do not seek to establish conclusions based on a concrete and detailed account of the past, but rather to pivot in “vehicles of memory” understood as combinations of testimonies, registrars, documents, monuments, and other accounts of the past (reminiscent of Nora’s *Lieux de Mémoire*). These vehicles have the goal of shaping a narrative that provides meaning to a period of time, intently, the rejection of political violence and continued remembrance of those who suffered (Antequera, 2011, p. 38). It is imperative to assert that even if this narrative is not shaped only on hard historical facts, the author points out that historical memory policies are strongly tied to the recognition of truths, justice, and reparation “Nevertheless, among the many meanings in circulation, today there is an evident positioning of historical memory linked to the imperative of guaranteeing the rights to the truth, justice, and reparation” (Antequera, 2011, p. 49).

He concludes that the final aim of these policies is that of creating an “emblematic memory”, a version of historical memory that has managed to become a socially accepted narrative and has succeeded in preventing the emergence of new acts of political violence (Antequera, 2011, p.

41). The idea of an ‘emblematic memory’ proves critical when looking at the Colombian historical memory process. The concept establishes a goal in which society is able to accept victim-led historical memory that is able to gather numerous memory initiatives that prevail in time within the hearts of Colombians across the country. The inability of reaching this goal suggests that the historical memory process is an incomplete project, a claim that will be further explored within the analysis of the state politics of memory.

As done with the concept of political violence, this genealogy aimed to demonstrate how and why historical memory came to be a crucial and perhaps unique component for societies navigating violent trauma. Historical memory emerged in the context of terrible tragedies like the holocaust or the brutal rule of Latin American dictatorships, and became a key political concept that enables societies to understand events of political violence, with the purpose of shaping a future in which these episodes are not repeated. Building on these precedents, the concept became a guiding pillar in the Colombian context, leading to the establishment of memory policies aimed at constructing a historical memory capable of breaking the cycle of violence that has long characterized the country. However, before delving into the politics of memory and their benchmarks and limitations, it is imperative to understand the catalyst which made the necessity of these measures apparent. The 1990s, a decade in which acts of political violence reached unprecedented levels, must be revised for its role in the development of a historical memory within the country.

Chapter 2: Cataclysm and “Flashpoints” events in the 1990s

Violence in Colombia is a phenomenon that became engraved in its culture and history with the passage of time. Violence has been present since the beginning of the Colombian war of independence against the Spanish crown in 1810. The struggle produced a weak Colombian state, divided in governance approaches, and later fractured between ideologies. The ideological divide led to the 'Thousand Days' War (1899-1902), in which the Conservative government and Liberal party engaged in a brutal struggle over power and property (Demarest, 2001). This conflict is considered one of, if not the biggest civil war in Colombia's history because of its sheer scale, death toll and both cultural and historical implications. Political violence would then manifest in several instances throughout the century, consolidating the inextricable relationship between violence and politics that characterizes the current Colombian conflict.

The 1900s were initially marked by the period known as *La Violencia* or *The Violence* (1930-1960s) which saw the renewed confrontation between the conservative and liberal party, this time not considered a proper civil war, but rather a different type of conflict. Both Liberals and Conservatives often refused democratic results and resorted to using extreme violence through armed resistance or attacks to demonstrate opposition (Bailey, 1967). This fueled the already existing bipartisan rivalry into a bloody confrontation that ultimately impacted at least twenty percent of the Colombian population during 1946 and 1966 (Bailey, 1967). The disturbing and relentless nature of this wave of political violence gave its name to the conflict, and triggered one of the most important events of this type of violence in Colombian history.

On April 9th 1948, leading presidential candidate of liberal ideology Jorge Eliecer Gaitan was assassinated on the streets of Bogotá. At the time, Gaitan had become an incredibly popular leader due to his outspoken support for human rights, social justice and socialist ideas that placed the people as a priority and openly criticized the Oligarchies that ruled the country (Agudelo-Gómez, 2019). On the same day Gaitan was assassinated, the angry mob took the streets of Bogotá by storm, carrying on a 10-hour riot that left much of the city's downtown destroyed. Gaitan's alleged assassin, Juan Roa Sierra, was lynched by the people and the identities of those responsible for scheming the attack were never truly clarified. Gaitan's case was a crucial event of political violence in Colombian history, as one of the many political assassinations that led to a growing disillusionment within the hearts of Colombians during the devastating years of conflict. Not only that, but it is also an important precedent for the Colombian armed conflict of the 1960s, as it will later be noted.

The Violence carried on until 1958, when the Colombian Elites devised a political agreement called the National Front, in which the Liberal and Conservative parties exchanged the power of the country after four year terms. Although this political plan managed to largely appease bipartisan violence in Colombia, its undemocratic nature became a catalyst for the creation of guerrilla groups within the country (Visbal, 2018, p. 51). In addition to this, inequality, abuse and long lasting marginalization of the Colombian countryside further radicalized these groups. The FARC-EP originated in 1964, and along with other groups such as the ELN that same year and the M-19 in 1974. The creation of these groups cemented the start of the Colombian armed conflict, which became the biggest and most significant conflict in Colombia's recent history.

But the armed conflict would not be the only issue that Colombia faced during the 70s and 80s. With guerrilla groups actively carrying out military operations across the country and a state with frail institutional grip, drug trafficking became a key factor within Colombian reality. The Medellín Cartel, led by Pablo Escobar, rose as a prominent force throughout the country, attacking the guerrillas, the state and the civil population during his mandate. Along with this, the M-19 guerrilla carried out an assault on the Palace of Justice in 1985. An unprecedented act of terrorism that also resulted in humanitarian crimes carried out by the state in its re-taking of the palace.

The 1990s became a decade of incredible importance for the study of political violence and historical memory within the country. With rising tensions due to the newly cultivated drug trafficking economical structure, the state, guerrillas, drug cartels and emerging actors like paramilitary organizations clashed in a bloody struggle for power that marked Colombian history indelibly. The intersectionality between these actors, the historical precedents, and the volume of acts of political violence make the 1990s a crucial point of inflection for the historical memory process in Colombia. On the importance of this decade, author Fernan Gonzalez posits that in the 1990s, a combination of precedents occurred: traditional violence (seen in *La Violencia*), modern violence represented by the class struggle and guerrilla warfare, and post-modern violence embodied by the globalized spread of actors such as drug traffickers (González et al., 2024, p. 57). This set of precedents allowed violent actors to proliferate and metastasize within Colombian society during the 90s.

For the purpose of this chapter, only select acts of political violence will be analyzed due to the vast quantity of these episodes during the decade. However, this is not the only reason behind

the study of particular events within this period of time. Following the theoretical framework of historical memory, authors have mentioned the importance of specific events in building these processes:

The collective memory of a country does not contain each and every one of the past episodes that the country has lived through. During each period of the life of a state, nation or nationality there are certain historical moments which, due to their special relevance to the present, acquire greater importance and are more likely to influence the train of events witnessed during that specific period of time (Aguilar, 2002, p. 9)

Perhaps another important concept to consolidate this methodology is that of “flashpoints events” mentioned by scholars Kiera Adner & Leanne Betasamosake. The concept refers to specific events in history where, as a product of long-standing conflict, unresolved disputes or state abuse, communities decide to respond with a politically charged demonstration of unconformity (Ladner & Simpson, 2011, p. 29) Paired with historical memory, the concept of flashpoints events informs the selection of specific moments in the decades of the 1990s, where political violence triggered a strong reaction from society.

The events that will be selected are those that became engraved in the memory of Colombians, conveying emotion and historical significance that later helped impulse movements, actions, and policies leading to the historical memory process. Notwithstanding, it is also important to remember that violence is often silent, and that countless people across the country, specially in the countryside, suffered vastly due to large-scale state negligence that silenced their cries for help.

By exercising this select analysis, the intent is not to nullify events that might not have reached the same level of public impact. It aims to strengthen the national processes of historical memory in the country, so that it can grow and properly bring recognition to all silenced voices.

Assassinations of presidential candidates and the UP genocide

The 1990 presidential elections were scheduled to be held on Sunday, May 27th. Following the previously mentioned historical precedents, these elections were permeated by a veil of violence that had never reached such an unprecedented level of attention from both the media and the public. Ever since the assassination of Gaitan in 1948, violence against politicians was not something new to Colombians. However, the increasing power of drug trafficking groups, particularly the Medellin Cartel, augmented these practices to unparalleled levels of violence. Fighting against the cartel was not by any means easy for the Colombian government. During the 1980s, many judges across the country were assassinated or had to flee into exile upon receiving threats from drug traffickers (CEV, 2022, p. 368). The violence escalated with the assassination of the justice minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla in 1984, ordered by Pablo Escobar, because of his ardent fight against drug trafficking. His assassination was considered a declaration of war against the state, signaling that violence against politicians was going to increase exponentially.

It is no wonder that when Luis Carlos Galan entered the presidential race in 1989, many eyes were fixated on him. A former member of Bonilla's Liberal party, Galan quickly became a promising contender for the presidency, as noted by historian Robin Kirk: "A handsome, agile politician, Galan seemed the right man for the moment, equipped with the political skills needed to handle Colombia's fractious populace as well as the United States, which considered him a promising (and

pro-extradition) replacement for the increasingly senile Virgilio Barco” (Kirk, 2003, p. 91). Galan promised to not only fight against drug trafficking, but also presented an alternative political opportunity distant from the aged Colombian elites. He advocated for peace, and for a much needed constitutional reform, along with centering ethics within his policies, which embodied an opportunity for genuine change that drew the attention and love of many Colombians (CEV, 2022, p. 172). He was considered to be the likely winner of the electoral race, considering that his debate chief, Cesar Gaviria, won unanimously after being selected by Galan’s family as his successor following his assassination.

Galan was assassinated while campaigning for the presidency on August 8, 1989. His death is mainly attributed to the Medellin Cartel, but studies made by the Commission of Truth revealed that paramilitary agents were also involved in his assassination (CEV, 2022, p. 230). Galan’s assassination was declared a crime against humanity, allowing the investigation to remain open until today (CNMH, 2025). The Supreme Court of Justice has also indicted the former DAS (previous Colombian secret service) director Miguel Maza Marquez because of his involvement in reducing Galan’s security scheme, contributing to his murder (BBC, 2016). The involvement of several actors, including those working within the Colombian state, made Galan’s and other instances of political violence extremely complicated to navigate in terms of bringing those responsible to justice. This became an important factor for the creation of comprehensive investigative organizations such as the CEV or CNMH, which tried to uncover the truth about this and other cases in a way that ensured justice could be brought through the creation of a historical memory.

Galan's assassination marked a point of contention in Colombian history. Much like Gaitan, he was a man characterized by his closeness to the people and by his commitment to change. His death was met with a profound sadness and anger from the population, particularly students, who collectively united their frustration into a march of silence titled "For everything that binds us and against everything that separates us". The movement gathered staggering numbers and was charged with political and cultural meaning:

The mobilization brought more than 15.000 young people from public and private universities in Bogota into the streets, and became the seed of a student and faculty movement that eventually brought together organizations such as *Todavía Podemos Salvar a Colombia* and *the Movimiento Estudiantil por la Constituyente* (CEV, 2022, p. 223).

Students denounced what they considered to be a national crisis, marked by violent human rights violations, institutional fallacies, and political instability (Dugas, 2001, p. 808). The march of silence became one of the most remembered moments of a collective demonstration of frustration against political violence in the country. This movement was also characterized by an amplification of the political community and demands for the modernization of democracy (CEV, 2022, p. 233). Galan's assassination is then a key historical moment for the development of a Colombian historical memory, because of its impactful and unifying nature.

From other political spectrums, interesting figures emerged during the 1990 presidential race. After the disastrous attack on the Palace of Justice, the M-19 guerrilla, one of the most significant political actors within the armed conflict, decided to give up their arms. Carlos Pizarro, the last M-19

commander, determined that the movement needed to strive for a peaceful political project. Behind this decision were military and leadership losses, loss of popular support, and Pizarro's acknowledgment that peace could kindle their political relevance, which remained in jeopardy (Hormanza et al, 2002, p. 64). Understanding the high toll of war, which mainly impacted the civilian population and fueled a social exhaustion against warfare, Pizarro led the M-19 through a peaceful and democratic transition. In the process, he even tried to get other guerrillas around the country to follow in their steps (Hormanza et al, 2002, p.80).

The political accord that led to the demobilization of the M-19 was signed on March 9, 1990. Being the first time in Latin American history that a guerrilla and a government signed a peaceful resolution, the accord had an important political significance. Within it, a commission aimed at configuring a justice reform and developing studies on the issue of drug trafficking were established. Furthermore, the creation of a national fund for peace was agreed, along with other social initiatives (Hormanza et al, 2002, p. 79) These political agreements were crucial, especially regarding the development of a historical memory in the country, as they were the first steps towards building a structure that could analyze the armed conflict in a multiplicity of ways. The government never went through with the creation of said organisms, diminishing early attempts of seeking different pathways to navigate conflict.

48 days after the signing date of the peace agreement, Carlos Pizarro Leon Gomez, presidential candidate under the movement *Alianza Democrática M-19*, was assassinated while on a commercial flight to Barranquilla. The investigation of the crime was again marked by speculation, delays, impunity, and doubts. Years later, Carlos Castaño Gil, leader of the AUC, the most prominent

paramilitary group in Colombia, declared that he was responsible for the assassination of Pizarro (Lara, 2002, p. 14). In addition, an investigation against Maza Marquez, incarcerated for being involved in Galan's assassination, was opened. He was accused of being involved in reducing Pizarro's security scheme and of trying to deviate attention from the ones responsible for the crime during the investigation (CNMH, 2025). Manuel Antonio Gonzalez Henriquez, another ex-director of DAS, has also been indicted because of his role in reducing the security scheme of the candidate (CNMH, 2025). The involvement of the state and lingering impunity yet again characterized a shocking magnicide of an important political figure. With Carlos Castaño's death in 2006, justice was never truly achieved, and while the investigation is still open, hopes for a clear resolution to Pizarro's crime fade with the passage of time.

Pizarro's death was met with sorrow from those that sympathized with his ideals; thousands gathered to attend his funeral, carrying red, blue, and white balloons mirroring the M-19 flag. His death is a point of inflection in the creation of a historical memory, not only because of the nature of his crime but also because Pizarro's ideas and movement led efforts that demanded a Constitutional National Assembly. Said Assembly was finally carried out in 1991, ignited by popular and democratic vote. The assembly represented an unprecedented political and democratic opportunity to modify the traditional structures that controlled the country. By including marginalized groups and a multiplicity of voices, it also embodied a possible solution to the armed conflict and political crisis in the country (Rampf & Chavarro, 2014, p. 21). However, even if that newly erected constitution has managed to persist through time, the same can also be said for the armed conflict. The hopes that the assembly brought in the 1990s remain as vivid but frustrated memories in the hearts of

Colombians, marking a key event in history where figures like Pizarro sought to find peaceful solutions to a conflict that continues to wage onwards.

Aside from the M-19 Democratic Alliance, other opposition parties actively participated in the electoral process. The Union Patriótica (Patriotic Union), a political branch of the FARC-EP, was born in 1985 from the negotiation process initiated between the government of President Besilario Betancur and the insurgent group (UPC, 2016). The UP quickly became a leading opposition party during the 80s and 90s, advocating for a shift from the antidemocratic legacies of the National Front. In parallel, these activities made them harness the attention of various actors involved in the armed conflict. After negotiations with the government collapsed, those that intended to stay within the party and that had already given up armed insurgency were relegated into an extremely difficult situation. Acts of violence against the party started to become more common, later acquiring a systemic nature.

Throughout the 1980s and 90s, calculated plans of violence against the Patriotic Union were placed in motion by a combination of drug traffickers, members of the military, and paramilitary structures. For instance, the “Plan Esmeralda” (1988) aimed to extinguish the influence of the UP in the departments of Meta and Caquetá. In addition, left-wing leaders also denounced that high military officers had designed two other plans of political extermination, called “Operación Cóndor” (1985) and “Plan Baile Rojo” (1986)” (Quiroga, 2003, p. 137).

A particularly important point to note about these plans, and more broadly about the political violence inflicted on the UP, is the involvement of paramilitary structures. These groups

enforced violence against the UP through multiple fronts: By terrorizing sympathizers with cruel displays of public torture, through the enactment of planned massacres such as the Segovia massacre, and with direct attacks on elected officials or political representatives of the organization (Cepeda, 2006, p. 107). That was the case for presidential candidate Jaime Pardo Leal, who ran for the 1986 presidential elections and was subsequently assassinated in 1987 by hitmen hired by drug cartels and paramilitary organizations (CEV, 2022, p. 216). Nearing the 1990s presidential elections, director of the UP Jose Antequera was murdered by a hitman in El Dorado, Bogota's airport.

In the 1990s, the paramilitary movement gained important traction due to their increasing interconnectedness with government officials: "During that same period, the activity of paramilitary groups attained new forms of legality through decrees that allowed civilians to carry arms and to organize security cooperatives known as *Convivir*" (Cepeda, 2006, p. 108). This meant a harsh escalation in the armed conflict, which had dire consequences for the already targeted Patriotic Union. Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa became the official presidential candidate of the party for the 1990 election after the assassination of Pardo and Antequera, with significant popular support. Ossa had criticized the path of armed insurgency as a way to attain social change and remained committed to finding alternative paths towards a peaceful resolution to the armed conflict (CEV, 2022, p. 216). Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa was assassinated on March 22, 1990, and to this day, responsibility for the crime remains unclear (Castellanos & Ronderos, 2016, p. 77).

The wave of political violence enforced against members of the UP has been declared a genocide by the Colombian Penal Code, supported by rulings of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (Cepeda, 2006, p. 103). The following statement of the Commission of Truth can

also serve to demonstrate the scale of political violence to which the members of the UP were subjected during the 80s and 90s:

According to the estimates by the CNMH, slightly more than one fifth of those elected from the UP during that period were assassinated. However, when considering those elected to Congress and mayoral offices, the proportion increases: one in three individuals was killed. A large number of those who survived went into exile (CEV, 2022, p. 217).

The total number of Patriotic Union members victim to acts of political violence was stated to be 5.733 by accounts of the Commission of Truth and the National Center of Historical Memory (CEV, 2022, p. 134). The Patriotic Union's political genocide became a harrowing event that defined the lives of those who sympathized with their ideals, but also of those who were related in any way to the thousands that were victimized. Moreover, the involvement of the government and armed forces in actively participating in the genocide served as a reminder of the frail institutional integrity that ruled the country. Colombia appeared to be a democracy, but a system in which those who think differently were systematically killed did not mirror the values of a democratic nation.

These memories, haunting and impactful as they were and are, became the reason behind the victims' resolve to seek justice and remembrance, even if during the genocide there was a total and complete lack of institutional support from the government. The case of the UP is considered to be of incredible significance in the development of historical memory, as the pressure of the victims led to the first governmental steps towards clarifying truth and accountability to dignify the victims and validate their suffering. The importance of the UP case in bringing attention to processes of

dignification has been subsequently noted by historians: “The recovery of historical memory for the UP has generated important processes of dignification, manifested in their capacity for resistance by preserving the dreams they once held, in their organization capacity, and in their pursuit of truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-repetition” (Hernández, 2016, p. 29).

The UP’s involvement in reconstructing a memory of the political genocide also shares critical motifs and meaning with the countless other victims of political violence across the country that demanded a cohesive historical memory process after the 1990s:

through the reconstruction of their memories, this movement seeks to make known to the public that their dreams remain alive and that the lessons of the past, while they must guide the construction of our present and future, also show us that the struggles for democracy and peace continue to be the driving force for building a different country (Hernández, 2016, p. 28)

In addition to this, the case of the UP led to important developments like rulings from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. In 2010, a ruling held the Colombian state accountable for the assassination of UP senator Manuel Cepeda. The following year, Liberal politician and former president of the Chamber of Representatives César García was indicted as the intellectual author of the Segovia massacre, in conjunction with paramilitary leaders (Hernández, 2016, p. 29). The Law of Victims, an important mechanism of historical memory and vindication, was also developed in response to the UP genocide and other political assassinations.

As shown in this analysis, during this period of time entire political movements and some of the most important leaders the country had were assassinated. All of them, in a sense, represented the possibility of change within the country, crushed because of their indiscriminate assassinations. Their memories, engraved in the minds of Colombians, became a catalyst for the creation of a historical memory process that could clarify the circumstances and authors of the crimes. Not only that, but these processes would also need to communicate the crude historical reality to the entire population in a way that ensures the non-repetition of these events.

Assassination and persecution of journalists and Human Rights activists

It is critical to understand that political violence during the 1980s and much of the 1990s was not limited to individuals in high-ranking positions within the country's political structure. Violence was widespread, and often the target shifted to those with less protection and therefore more vulnerable. Journalists and human rights activists belonged to this group, as the notorious lack of institutional support made them easy targets for those who wished the atrocities and scandals at the time to remain silenced. As it happened with the assassination of important political figures, violence enforced against these groups came from different actors within the conflict. The guerrillas, drug traffickers, paramilitary organizations, and even members of the state all had political reasons to hide what was happening during the 1990s. Consequently, violence as a means to obtain silence became a prominent and dehumanizing practice in the country.

As mentioned earlier, paramilitary structures, particularly the AUC, became a prominent force within the conflict during the 90s. Their main motivation was to wage a bloody war against the guerrillas and to seize large areas of the Colombian countryside. To achieve that, these groups

targeted the civilian population to eliminate a perceived social base through which the guerrillas thrived (even though the relationship of the guerrillas with the population was and is mainly authoritarian) (CEV, 2022, p. 106). Their responsibility in enforcing acts of political violence against civilians that sought justice through activism and journalism has been documented by the Commission of Truth:

Paramilitary groups set out to eliminate critical sectors: human rights defenders, journalists, judicial investigators, among others. In this way, they sought to silence democracy. The strategy quickly shifted from being selective to indiscriminate, a scorched-earth approach. The worst massacres were committed, producing an exodus towards cities and widespread exile that positioned Colombia as a nation in humanitarian crisis. (CEV, 2022, p. 106).

Perhaps one of the most remembered cases of journalist persecutions, which linked state agents with paramilitary officials, was the magnicide of Jaime Garzon. Garzon was a renowned journalist, humorist, humanitarian activist, lawyer, and pedagogue. However, prior to his rise to fame within the media, he was already an active member of Colombian politics. Garzon was named deputy mayor of Sumapaz and worked as the coordinator of the translations of the 1991 Colombian Constitution into Indigenous languages. During this period, he showed a deep and unmovable humanitarian devotion to the Colombian people, as mentioned by former president César Gaviria: “I also had the opportunity, particularly during the presidency, to know Garzón as someone committed to addressing Colombia’s problems: his daily commitment to the PNR, to the 1991 Constitution, and to the translation of the Constitution into Indigenous languages” (Semana, 1999).

After his work in state politics, Garzón jumped to the media, joining shows such as *Zoociedad* and *Quac! El Noticiero*. There he displayed satirical commentaries on many of the issues that characterized Colombia at the time, such as rising security problems or the perceived inefficiency of the government. His last work was in *Lechuzza*, portraying one of his most remembered characters, Heriberto de la Calle, a shoeshine boy who interviewed important politicians and public figures of the country. His comedic prowess and sharp critical commentary were welcomed by the Colombian population, but in this process, those whom he criticized were not always happy with Garzón's extravaganzas: "There were those who did not understand Jaime's art, and thus fueled their hatred. In a country where public affairs so often rhyme with personal gain, Garzón practiced a dangerous profession" (Salazar, 2011, p. 4)

Garzon was a man of peace, and towards the end of the 1990s, he became a mediator in several rescue missions and hostage negotiations involving guerrillas such as the ELN and the FARC. Instead of capitalizing on his fame and staying away from the conflict, Garzón used his influence to aid the population in any way he could, including becoming a critical player within these negotiations: "This and other interventions, such as in the release of passengers from the Avianca plane or in the kidnapping of Fernando Ramírez in Soacha, earned him the gratitude of many and the hatred of others who considered him an accomplice of the guerrilla" (Salazar, 2011, p. 4). These actions placed him on the radar of the AUC paramilitary group, which accused him of collaborating with guerrilla forces; combined with his growing popularity and political criticism, this made him a direct target "Judicial investigations have shown that it was his incisive humor, his defense of life, and his commitment to peace that led those in power to want to silence him forever" (CNMH, 2025).

Jaime Garzon was assassinated on his way to work on the 13th of August, 1999. His murder has since been attributed to Carlos Castaño, leader of the AUC, but remains in impunity since Castaño died before being brought to justice. However, the investigations done by the CNMH revealed a much more complex truth: the murder was orchestrated by a criminal network which gathered paramilitary agents, members of the DAS and of the public force; notably, José Miguel Narváez, ex-DAS subdirector, was identified as a key instigator of the crime (CNMH, 2025).

Jaime's murder is particularly important for the process of historical memory in Colombia, as his popularity among the public made him an icon whose memory has not faded even 26 years after his death. Moreover, his commitment to peace and bringing injustices to light through political criticism reminds Colombians of the efforts of all who opposed violence during the conflict. As noted by the CNMH, Garzon's memory continues to be a key element in the ongoing efforts to build a stronger historical memory in the country:

To honor his memory is to insist that no crime like this go unpunished. It is to demand that uncomfortable words and courageous laughter are never silenced again. For Jaime did not entirely die: he continues as a collective conscience that refuses to be forgotten, a symbol that calls us not to relent in the struggle for truth, justice and life (CNMH, 2025).

Although in this investigation Jaime's case was used due to his notorious popular impact, it is also important to remember those that were not publicly recognized but nevertheless incredibly important. It is estimated by the Commission of Truth that 45 journalists were assassinated between 1993 and 2000, a number that remains one of the most frightening within the history of global

journalism (CEV, 2022, p. 28). In the case of human rights activists, the number becomes even more harrowing. 4,750 social leaders were assassinated or disappeared between 1986 and 2018 (CEV, 2022, p. 4). All of these cases are important and demonstrate a larger trend in which freedom of speech and human rights were systematically violated by groups in power, harnessing a veil of violence that permeates Colombian society to this day.

Massacres, kidnapping and disappearances during the 90s

During the 1990s, the harshness of political violence reached every corner of the country. Not only harming those involved in politics or activism, but also a huge part of the civilian population. With a notorious spread of guerilla groups and paramilitary organizations, the countryside became an open battlefield where those neglected by the government were left completely defenseless. Parallely, in the Colombian urban centres, the Medellin cartel carried out a series of attacks that have remained on the collective consciousness since then. These organizations carried out large scale attacks with political motifs, and solidified practices of kidnapping as extortion mechanisms against the state to make demands, generating an impassable torment in the families and victims of political violence around the country.

Starting the decade, the Medellin Cartel was running out of fuel, prompting Pablo Escobar to escalate their violent actions against the state and the population. As extradition became a feasible mechanism to harm the Cartels, Escobar formed an organization called *The Extraditables*, seeking to deter Cesar Gaviria's government from adopting this policy change. In this context, The Extraditables decided to launch one of the most remembered acts of massive political violence. 10 journalists were kidnapped, some directly related to important political figures in the country such as

ex-president Turbay's daughter, Diana Turbay. Escobar's war increased its political dimension as the situation for the cartel worsened during the 90s, demanding amnesty through extortion and kidnapping "To carry out this strategy, The Extraditables kidnapped several members of Colombia's political and intellectual elite (CEV, 2022, p. 256)

Escobar was determined to go to impassable extents to achieve his goals, and in doing so carried out acts of violent terrorism against politicians, policemen and civilians indiscriminately:

In this context, terrorist attacks carried out by drug-related criminal groups were registered against media outlets, private companies, security agencies, and others: the bomb on the Avianca airplane on November 27, 1989; the bomb at the Administrative Department of Security (DAS) on December 6, 1989; the car-bomb attacks against the newspaper El Espectador on September 2, 1989; and the four bombs that shook the citizens of Bogotá between January and February 1993. (CNHM, 2013, p. 102).

Escobar's terror ended in 1993, when he was killed by the police after having escaped from his luxurious prison. He became a conflictive figure in Colombian history, being venerated by some, despite the atrocities that he committed. The extent of his rampage damaged countless families and disrupted the social fabric of the country by normalizing hitmen culture, drug trafficking, terrorism, and political violence in the country. The volatility of his figure, scale of his crimes, and continued presence in popular culture makes Escobar actions incredibly important for the development of a historical memory.

With the death of Escobar and the surge of paramilitary apparatuses, the guerrillas also escalated their violent actions towards the state and the population. These groups further contributed to solidify the use of kidnappings as a method of obtaining resources, always triggered by the political motifs that characterized their insurgence. One of these groups was the FARC-EP, which expanded their usage of these tactics during the 90s according to various authors:

In the 1990s, the business expanded even further. The FARC established a decentralized funding system for their guerrillas, so that each commander turned their troops into kidnapping specialists. This is how the so-called “pescas milagrosas” were created, which involved blocking the most heavily traveled roads and kidnapping anyone trapped who appeared able to pay a ransom. (Rivero, 2024, p. 34).

Between the start of the 1990s and 1995, at least 4.534 kidnappings by various criminal groups were identified, marking an initial phase of escalation. This was followed by a phase of massification between 1996 and 2000, which saw an alarming increase reaching 13.548 kidnappings in total (CNMH, 2013, p. 34). The practice of kidnapping has become a key piece in the historical memory process in Colombia, namely due to its multiplicity of levels of harm, deeply impacting both physically and psychologically the victims and their families: “Kidnapping has been consolidated as a practice that connects the most sensitive fabric of Colombian urban society to the armed conflict” (CNMH, 2013, p. 25). In this sense, processes of historical memory are important avenues through which victims can denounce their oppressors, obtain more information about those responsible, and express their grief by being heard and understood. Also allowing other members of society to connect with their pain and foster long-lasting societal sentiments.

Much like Escobar, the FARC-EP did not only engage in kidnappings and disappearances, but also actively carried out assaults towards the population, looking to seize territories and establish bases of operations or drug laboratories. The CNMH has determined that between 1988 & 2012 the guerrillas, particularly the FARC, carried out at least 854 attacks. These left 391 civilians dead, aside from the destruction of institutional facilities and communitarian areas, thereby instigating fear within the population (CNMH, 2013, p. 90).

Paramilitary organizations followed a similar line of action; although they did not engage in many kidnappings, their battle against the guerrillas was accompanied by numerous massacres of the civilian population. Some of these mass killings were enacted in order to seize territories and establish economical blockades to confine the population. Such was the case of the massacre of El Tigre in 1999 with 28 victims and El Aro in 1997 with a total of 14 victims (CNMH, 2013, p. 52). Another widely remembered case was the massacre of Rochela in 1999, where a group of 12 judicial officials who were investigating the death of local merchants were brutally assassinated by paramilitary members. Consequently sparking public outrage and resulting in paramilitary organizations being named hitmen structures by President Virgilio Barco (Patiño, 2003, p. 78).

To finalize this analysis, an event known as the massacre of Trujillo will be mentioned, particularly because it has become an important element within the historical memory process in Colombia. Between 1988 and 1994, in the municipalities of Trujillo, Bolívar, and Riofrío, human rights organizations and numerous families reported 342 victims of homicide, torture, and forced disappearance as part of a single coordinated criminal plan (CNMH, 2013, p. 147). Those

responsible were identified as drug traffickers in conjunction with paramilitary and state forces. The quantity of violent acts perpetrated with impunity and the involvement of various criminal organizations and state forces make this case unique, as it embodied one of the highest episodes of corruption, violence, and impunity within the Colombian armed conflict. After details of the massacres became public, the Colombian state was found by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (CIDH) in 1995 to have been complicit in the events that occurred in Trujillo.

In correlation to the development of a historical memory of this event, historians have said the following:

In the case of the Trujillo massacre, the greatest progress was made in search for truth, but although the perpetrators, motives, and circumstances could be determined in most cases, complete impunity prevails. The right to justice has been entirely neglected, while the state's commitments to reparation have fallen halfway short (Eusse, Suárez, & Campos, 2016, p. 158).

This last quote has a crucial dimension for the conclusion of this analysis, as it questions the reparation efforts made by the state as a core actor within the historical memory process. As it has been demonstrated in this investigation, the 1990s constituted a breaking point in Colombian history, with acts of political violence rampant and spreading across all corners of the country. The relation between the events of this decade and the subsequent development of historical memory processes has been established, but whether these processes were effective or not, remains to be addressed. Given the Colombian government's involvement in numerous political crimes, it raises

the question of whether its often weak and controversial institutions had the capacity and transparency required to implement a genuine victim-centred process of historical memory.

The next chapter of this thesis will attempt to address this question, having already delved into the importance and brutal consequences that the events of the 1990s had on the population. Two critical policies, the National Centre of Historical Memory and the Commission of Truth will be analyzed in order to understand the institutional efforts to build a historical memory against political violence and its consequences. Assessing whether these policies achieved to evoke sentiments of reconciliation, peace, and non-repetition of violent events within society.

Chapter 3: Colombian State Politics of Memory

In previous chapters, it was established that scholars identify the development of a historical memory as a key mechanism in aiding societies navigate traumatic experiences, often and in the case of Colombia, inextricably linked to events of political violence. In this chapter of the investigation the focus is to understand how the Colombian government has tried to build a cohesive historical memory to address the lingering effects of political violence. To accomplish this, two core policies implemented by the state will be analyzed: the *National Centre of Historical Memory* and the *Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition*. These two have been selected because of their unique role in developing and shaping narratives around historical memory and political violence. Other important policies like the *Special Peace Jurisdiction* will be unfortunately left out, as it contains judicial components that, although important in shaping the historical memory process, require special attention outside the bounds of narrative and historical memory creation.

Theoretically, politics of memory, as previously mentioned by Antequera, aim to shape narratives around issues such as events of political violence. In this way, societies can be better equipped to understand their past so that a sentiment of non repetition can be fostered in future generations. In Colombia, such policies needed to also clarify previously hidden truths of violent events, as well as building a comprehensive system in which the victims could be dignified for their suffering. It was by no means an easy task, particularly considering that the state itself was involved in numerous abuses, clouding the mission with a sense of uneasiness. Such assumptions are not far from the truth, as currently the historical memory project undertaken by the Colombian government remains incomplete.

The politics of memory

According to author Paola Aguilar, whose work on historical memory informs the theoretical framework of this study, the politics of memory can be understood as initiatives through which interpretations of past events, considered relevant to certain social or political groups, or to a nation as a whole, are disseminated (Aguilar, 2008). It is important to remember that the focal point of these policies is the shaping of narratives, which bind the past, present and future within the creation of a lasting historical memory “The result is a narrative that connects a past (the historical error), the present (attempts to address it), and the future (its resolution of escalation)” (Alonso, 2022, p. 379)

In the context of the Colombian armed conflict, the politics of memory are crucial due the conflict’s multifaceted nature. The different actors, state involvement and lingering impunity suggest the need for policies that work towards building integral institutions that can assess past events of violence with transparency. A notable aspect of these policies is that their implementation in the country is somewhat contemporary, having roughly fifteen years of being established in full motion, partially due to a period of transition that delayed their implementation.

The long interval

As mentioned in the analysis of the 1990s, it was clear that Colombia as a nation needed to undertake an important social and cultural shift pertaining to its approach to conflict. Particularly considering that in the year 2000, the Colombian Armed Conflict had been active for almost more than thirty years. However, the persistent growth of the guerrillas and the increase in violence led the

nation to focus on the implementation of security measures and offensive mechanisms against these groups. In short, Colombia waged war again, and the cycle of violence continued. This produced a period of interval between the 2000s and 2011, the year in which the first memory policy was implemented. These were years in which the social traumas and events of the 1990s were left unattended, while violent acts, sometimes coming from the government, carried on with impunity.

With this premise, Alvaro Uribe became Colombia's 39th president in 2002. Uribe's discourse was based around the support of the military, vinculating civilians within the campaign against guerrillas through a strong propagandistic message opposing these groups (Perez, 2011, p. 139). A key element of his policies were the defense of the CONVIVIR, groups of armed civilians focused on protection against insurgent groups. Moreover, the previous president's failed attempts to secure a peace deal with the FARC and the recently signed Plan Colombia alliance with the US further strengthened Uribe's vision to build an offensive front. In this context, Uribe set his main policy into motion, called "*Política de Seguridad y Defensa Democrática*". It was made up of three main points: "Achieving control over the entire territory, extending institutional action to the most remote corners of the country, and ensuring the protection of the civilian population" (Perez, 2011, p. 140).

Uribe intended to upgrade Colombia's military apparatus with the premise of ending the long standing armed conflict during his mandate, which lasted until 2010. With the military in full swing, on the surface, Uribe appeared successful in significantly impacting insurgent groups across the country:

Never before in the counterinsurgency struggle had the government been as militarily successful as in 2008. In addition to the military objectives achieved in dismantling the organization; violence indicators, which had already been declining, dropped substantially, further energizing the policy of non-negotiation with the guerrillas and the peace process with paramilitary groups (Pachón, 2009, p. 334)

However, soon the complex impact of these highly militaristic policies surfaced. Instead of ending the armed conflict, violence and abuses across the country grew, relationships between paramilitary leaders and the government remained, and justice for the victims was almost non-existent. Therefore, this period of intercession became a significant blockade for the development of a historical memory in the country.

The government's nexus with paramilitary groups remained an important point of contention, particularly because of the atrocities committed by these structures during the 1990s. Uribe implemented the “Law of Justice and Peace” aimed at providing paramilitary members with impunity if they were to demobilize. The workings of this law were clouded in misinformation, and suddenly the government announced the end of paramilitarism and the incarceration of their main leaders (Torres, 2012, p. 48). Despite this, paramilitary structures remained active. On this note, in 2012 scholar Aurora Torres commented on the effectiveness of this approach:

Currently, these groups operate throughout nearly the entire geography, expanding their territories and carrying out criminal actions, whether in collusion with State forces or independently. Furthermore, displacement remains constant; therefore, the Law of Justice

and Peace failed to achieve its objectives and remains enshrined as one of the many inoperative laws that primarily benefited specific sectors of the business and political elite (Torres, 2012, p. 48).

Moreover, a component of this law also included the restoration of land to displaced farmers, the retrieval of paramilitary victims' bodies, and compensation to their families by providing the truth of what had transpired. With regards to whether the state maintained these promises, Torres noted: "To date, the reparations for victims and the Justice and Peace Law remain inoperative" (Torres, 2012, p. 48). The government failed to uphold its promises, and left a precedent that characterized the state as both inefficient and uncaring for the victims.

However, the biggest setback for Uribe's militaristic approach to governance was the numerous reports of abuses and extrajudicial assassinations, in which important agencies like the DAS and other institutional bodies were included (Perez, 2011, p. 144). The continuous presence of bodies like the DAS (involved in numerous acts of political violence during the 90s), further signaled that Uribe's administration was completely detached from social processes that could aid the victims and society navigate the trauma produced by the armed conflict. It was in this context that the systematic practice of the assassination of innocent civilians by military forces known as "False Positives" took place. The government set up a reward system that incentivized members of the military to increment the number of insurgent casualties. Paired with the militaristic and violent rhetoric of Uribe's government, this situation resulted in one of the most devastating acts of human rights abuses in Colombian history. The same people that vowed to protect the nation from guerilla

groups assassinated young men of lower income families from the countryside, to report them as positive insurgent casualties (Torres, 2012, p. 49).

According to the Special Peace Jurisdiction or JEP, at least 6.402 people were assassinated illegitimately for the purpose of being reported as combat casualties between 2002 and 2008 (JEP, 2021). This proved that in the years after the 1990s, the government failed to address the systemic issues generated by the continuous political violence across the country and also played an important role in perpetuating those practices. Not only that, but the “False Positives” left yet another traumatic imprint in Colombian society, as it would take years for those responsible to be held accountable, if ever. These years became even more harrowing as the families were left in the dark about what had happened to their sons and daughters, where impunity yet again characterized the actions of the Colombian state.

Recalling Hannah Arendt’s conception of political violence, it is clear how the route taken by the Colombian state after the 1990s significantly slowed the adoption of memory policies that could enlighten a different path separate from violence. The violent and militarized approach of Uribe’s government exemplified Arendt’s critique of violence as a means of change. As it demonstrated that violence often lacks the power and legitimation to truly solve complex problematics such as the Colombian armed conflict. Scholars studying this period of time have voiced their opinions on alternative and less violent pathways, signaling elements aligned with the need of a comprehensive historical memory process:

Society as a whole must demand clarity regarding the atrocities of war, regardless of their origin; it is also called upon to demand from state authorities the full truth, the enforcement of authentic justice, and reparations for all those injured by the atrocities of armed violence. Once all Colombians have managed to understand and internalize the magnitude of the problem, we may find the path towards reconciliation and prevent the repetition of such atrocious acts. (Pérez, 2011, p. 147).

This quote is significant to understand how historical memory offers an alternative to standard approaches against political violence. Perez signals that there is a clear need of greater understanding and access to information, of justice and reparation, of the uncovering of hidden truths that have tormented families across the country for years. This is crucial because the armed conflict is not only a war between the state against insurgents, it has vast systemic and historical components like inequality, impunity, corruption and poverty. For this reason, allowing the populace to have a greater understanding of the conflict through the development of a historical memory is essential.

National Centre of Historical Memory

The National Centre of Historical Memory is the institutional organism in charge of preserving and fostering the historical memory of the Colombian armed conflict. The centre emerged under ex-president Juan Manuel Santos, Uribe's successor and former minister of national defense. Santos surprisingly drifted away from his predecessor's policies and opened a clearer pathway for an integral process of historical memory development. In 2011, Santos established the Law of Victims and Land restitution. Among other measures aimed at benefiting victims of the

armed conflict, it established the right to truth and the State's duty of memory, creating the CNMH for that purpose (Alonso, 2022, p. 377). It is important to note that despite Uribe's distance from the politics of memory, institutional bodies had begun working towards these goals throughout the duration of the armed conflict. An example of this is the *Grupo de Memoria Histórica*, funded in 2007 within the demobilization process of paramilitary structures. These initiatives all came to be united by the National Center of Historical Memory, whose aim was the following: "The CNMH established the objective of generating a narrative that would position victims as the central purpose of historical memory and to uncover the massacres committed against the civilian population by various armed actors, including the state" (Alonso, 2012, p. 377). The key difference was that previous bodies or initiatives were mostly investigative in nature, while the CNMH had the official task of shaping narratives and actively creating a historical memory of the armed conflict.

To achieve that goal, the CNMH began working on an extensive archival, historical and social investigation of the armed conflict that placed the victims and their testimonies at the center of their work: "It is indispensable to deploy a perspective that goes beyond the passive contemplation or recognition of the victim's suffering, and instead understands it as the result of identifiable social and political actors and processes, against which a reaction is necessary" (CNMH, 2016, p. 14). Such a perspective was definitely a step forward regarding the politics of memory in the context of the armed conflict, as it was the first time that an institutionally directed initiative recognized the role of the victims in building a historical memory.

The CNMH's approach towards building a historical memory was deeply rooted in the idea of guaranteeing the rights to the truth, justice, reparation and non repetition of violent acts. Within

their reports, the multifaceted nature of historical memory is emphasized, showing a strong commitment to building a cohesive narrative in which various actors from society are included: “The country is still tasked with building a legitimate memory, that instead of being consensual, explicitly incorporates different perspectives, adversaries, their stances and responsibilities, while also recognising the victims” (CNMH, 2016, p. 16). Another important aspect of their methodological approach is the selection of “emblematic events” to guide their investigation: “These are understood as sites of condensation for multiple processes, distinguished not only by the nature of the events but also by their explanatory power” (CNMH, 2016, p. 19). Reminiscent of the methodological pathway of the historical investigation of this thesis, the CNMH relies on emblematic events, but also integrates the victims’ testimonies within a larger framework that provides an understanding of the armed conflict.

The fact that the CNMH was built as an institutional organism with autonomy and resources was particularly significant. Moreover, the law that led to the creation of the centre also included a clause that prevented governmental institutions from interfering with its investigations (Velásquez, 2025, p. 15). Within its first period (dating from 2011 to 2018) the CNMH produced a total of 118 publications. Many of which examined crucial events of political violence such as massacres, genocides, guerrilla attacks, forced displacement, kidnappings among other crucial studies on controversial laws like Uribe’s Justice and Peace (Velásquez, 2025, p. 16). The vast academic work produced by the CNMH provided important and collected information that could allow for a better understanding of the conflict through the victims’ perspectives. Their lens also became broader, allowing specific marginalized groups to actively participate in the creation of a united historical memory: such as indigenous and afrocolombian communities, women, children, young adults, and

LGBTQ+ members (Velazquez, 2025, p. 16). On the impact of the CNMH's work, scholars have mentioned the following:

In this way, the CNMH reached historically marginalized and silenced areas; in that process, bonds and a fabric of solidarity emerged between victims, victims' organizations, and local universities, signifying the consolidation of an academia that is committed, allied, and accountable to the communities struck by the conflict (Velazquez, 2025, p. 16).

Many CNMH reports have been used within this investigation, particularly their cumulative piece titled *¡Basta ya! Colombia: memorias de guerra y dignidad*, due to its academic rigor, broad perspective and involvement of the victims of the armed conflict. The work done during its first period demonstrated a thorough and active motivation to foster the long awaited historical memory process in the country.

However, there are conflicting perspectives regarding the validity of these reports as more than historical pieces, but as comprehensive documents that allowed for the creation of a pluralistic historical memory narrative. A common critique among scholars pertains to the exclusion of certain voices and the homogeneity of the concept of "victim" within some of the reports made by the CNMH (Riaño & Uribe, 2017, p. 17). They argue that the reports were unable to "account for the heterogeneity of local voices and memories, nor include the diverse and differentiated universe of memories belonging to community members who were not part of social organizations networks" (Riaño & Uribe, 2017, p. 17). During the implementation of these reports within this thesis, it has been noted that they do offer important knowledge and frameworks to understand the conflict.

However, and agreeing with the latter citation, their broad nature often lacks depth in specific cases, without mentioning all the other voices that could not make it within the reports. For the purpose of this essay, which broadly analyzed the events of political violence in the 1990s, these reports were properly suited for the task. But when considering their role as products of the official institution of historical memory, these complexities need to be pointed out.

This of course does not invalidate the gigantic effort made by the CNMH, but only highlights possible tensions within the historical memory building process. Scholars also validate the efforts made by the institution, recognizing that the information of violent events and the incorporation of the victim's voices within the narrative serve the greater purpose of informing new academic work that strengthens the historical memory process (Riaño & Uribe, 2017, p. 20). Unfortunately, the CNMH has since suffered a severe institutional debacle, resulting in the stagnation of their diligent work and in consequence, of the historical memory process in Colombia.

In 2018, the CNMH experienced a dramatic shift pertaining to its leadership and direction. Under a new government led by Ivan Duque, member of ex-president Uribe's Democratic Centre's party, Dario Acevedo was chosen as the director of the CNMH. First, the fact that the president chooses the person in charge of one of the core institutions of historical memory reveals important discrepancies. It is contradictory for an institution, supposedly autonomous and in charge of a process that must be continuous, to have a volatile direction chosen by the president. As it will be demonstrated by Acevedo's case, such a mechanism is purely ineffective when trying to build a historical memory process.

One of the biggest scandals that surrounded Acevedo's direction was his negationist posture of the Colombian armed conflict. Acevedo maintained that truth is not unique, that there should be no official truths, that not one truth shall prevail over another, and that all have the same historical value (Castañeda, 2024, p. 86). Such a claim was incredibly damaging towards the efforts of the CNMH, because while the institution had approached truth with different lenses and angles, the narration of the victims always remained as a guiding point through which the armed conflict could be understood. Undeterred, Acevedo's negationist perspective claimed that the armed conflict in Colombia did not exist at all "This point is particularly striking because Darío Acevedo has stated that the armed conflict in Colombia does not exist, arguing that there is no broad consensus on this fact, no unanimous agreement to determine whether a conflict truly occurred in our country or not" (Castañeda, 2024, p. 90).

For the director of an institution whose sole purpose was to develop a historical memory of said conflict, such statements were irreversibly damaging for the CNMH as an institution "This posture renders the construction of historical memory regarding the conflict impossible, as the fundamental premise of its acceptance remains unfulfilled" (Velasquez, 2025, p. 20). Moreover, it became clear that Acevedo's position on the armed conflict mirrored the political affiliations of president Duque, a member of Uribe's party. Considering the damage done to multiple communities during Uribe's mandate, namely the False Positives scandal, the CNMH's institutional integrity experienced a significant blow.

Notwithstanding, Acevedo's direction was not only criticized by his views, but also by the CNMH's inefficiency and lack of commitment with the goal of fostering a historical memory. From

2019 to 2022, only 36 new documents were released by the CNMH, with 19 of them being reports started in the first period of the institution (Velazquez, 2025, p. 17). The rest of them lean towards more visual components, such as illustrations or comics. Such information demonstrates that during this four year period, the centre did not start any new reports or investigations on new testimonies or victims not previously included within historical memory initiatives. Moreover, other institutional bodies like the *Comisión de Acuerdos de la Verdad* denounced that at least 12 new reports were ready for publication in 2011, but upon being received by the CNHM, their process became stagnant (Velazquez, 2025, p. 18). Not only did the centre halt the process of historical memory in the country, but also actively participated in disingenuous actions that reversed important benchmarks.

Lastly, it is important to mention the controversies surrounding the Colombian Museum of Memory. This initiative was promised by the CNMH to the victims, and was identified as an important step forward for the creation of a tangible piece of historical memory. The importance of such initiatives recalls Nora's concept of sites of memory, which refers to tangible cultural manifestations that can preserve historical memory through the passage of time.

The museum began construction in 2015, but its development became compromised during the shift in leadership of the CNMH. Acevedo began undertaking revisionist measures that compromised the authenticity of the museum, such as deliberately eliminating or altering pieces of historical remembrance developed by victims of the armed conflict (Guglielmucci & Roza, 2021, p. 213). For these actions, the CNMH was stripped of its membership to the International Coalition of Sites of Consciousness. In consequence multiple victims organizations such as the Asociación Minga, MOVICE, CINEP, ASFADDES and Madres de Soacha asked for their supporting archives

to be returned (Guglielmucci & Rozo, 2021, p. 210-13). The revisionist actions of the CNMH have been criticized by academics and scholars: “However, the initial project was later converted into an instrument for revising and rewriting the recent history of the armed conflict, undoing the very principles and ideals that gave it life” (Guglielmucci & Rozo, 2021, p. 214).

Nowadays, the museum is widely regarded as a “white elephant”, colloquial term for public infrastructure projects that have remained unfinished for long periods of time. It is a physical manifestation of the inability of the politics of memory to carry out their intended mission, trampled and blocked by political sectors that refuse to acknowledge the realities of the Colombian armed conflict. It is also a reminder of how the state has played a key role in perpetuating the institutional practices that in the past led to numerous acts of political violence. These same practices presently prevent the realization of comprehensive studies that can attest to the pain suffered by countless victims across the country.

Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition.

Within Santo’s government, the paradigm shift in regards to the armed conflict did not stop with the creation of the CNMH and the Law of Victims. There were important steps towards inciting peace processes with still active insurgent groups, namely the FARC-EP, one of the most prominent actors in the conflict. The result of this effort was the signing of the 2016 peace treaties, after which the FARC-EP demobilized and several accords with the government were established. Some of these included an agrarian reform, ability to participate in political life, and the creation of a transitional justice system to assess events related to the armed conflict (JEP, 2019).

An important product of these accords was the creation of the *Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition*, composed of three institutional bodies that seek to clarify events related to the armed conflict, judge those responsible and provide reparation to the victims via judicial and extrajudicial mechanisms. These are: the *Special Jurisdiction for Peace* (JEP), a judicial organ responsible of investigating and judging armed actors and others who participated in the armed conflict; The *Search Unit for Persons Deemed Missing* tasked with tracing those who went missing during and because of the conflict; and the *Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition* (CEV & referred as Commission of Truth), an autonomous body responsible for investigating the truth about what transpired within the armed conflict, with the goal of promoting the recognition of the victims and the clarification of facts (JEP, 2019).

As mentioned earlier, only the Commission of Truth will be analyzed due to its active role in shaping narratives and building historical memory. That being said, all of these institutional organizations are of essential importance to the greater goal of dignifying the victims of the armed conflict. Expanding on the Commission's goals, these were: To contribute to clarifying the truth of the armed conflict and the violations committed, offering an explanation grounded in its complexity and in a plurality of voices; to promote the recognition of victims, their suffering, and the human rights violations committed against them; and to support peaceful coexistence across territories as a means of advancing social reconciliation (JEP, 2019, p. 4).

The Commission of Truth operated during three years (2018-2021), in which their investigations were characterized, similarly to the CNMH during its first period, by constant interactions with the victims:

In this setting, victims, perpetrators, and society at large are called upon to share their experiences and information regarding violent events; in order to create, with the support of official records, historical literature reviews, and military and state documents, a historical truth that vindicates the dignity of the victims (Ruiz et al., 2022, p. 128).

Through this methodology, in 2022 the Commission released a detailed final report about their investigations and conclusions. It provides recommendations to the state, calling for truth, justice and reparation towards the victims of the conflict. These also signaled the need of creating new policies, laws and tools that can help the country overcome the lived collective violence (Ruiz et al., 2022, p. 128).

When considering its aims and roles, the Commission of Truth had an important role to play within the historical memory process in Colombia. As supported by scholarly work, Commissions of this nature are identified as mechanisms through which states can respond to the effects of political violence “Truth commissions are, therefore, one of the possible responses to how states confront the violence incurred by one or more parties as nations transition toward peace leaving behind war and conflict” (Mora Gámez, 2022, p. 5). Important for this investigation, the Commission’s work acquires greater significance as it seeks to address events of political violence, and in doing so, contribute to the narratives of historical memory started by the CNHM.

In terms of output, the Commission of Truth developed a vast amount of reports and investigations, demonstrating a strong institutional commitment to the achievement of its core aims.

The final report compiles 785 reports, 121 cases, 25,419 transcribed testimonies, and other external sources, amounting to nearly one million judicial records and 372 databases from public and private organizations (Velásquez-Yepes, & Zuluaga-Aristizábal, 2022). Within the report itself, the Commission mentions the development of 14,000 interviews and 30,000 conversations with people from different ethnic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds (CEV, 2022, p. 24). Considering its 3 year tenure, the Commission's work shows a particularly strong contrast to other cases of institutional fallibility in the historical memory process, such as the CNMH's second term.

The final report sparked heated debates from different political spheres within the country. However, scholarly work points out several aspects that made the Commission's reports stand out from previous official narratives of the armed conflict. First, the reports provide a more explicit recognition of the state's abuses during the armed conflict, as well as its connections to paramilitary structures (Mora, 2022, p. 6). By delivering nuanced investigations that materialize the role of the state in the armed conflict, the Commission provides legitimacy to contested narratives regarding state violence. Moreover, the final report offers a detailed and vast documented description of the different vulnerabilities associated with class, gender and ethnicity in the context of the armed conflict (Mora, 2022, p. 6). In addition to this, efforts to make the reports readily available through social media, digital platforms and other outreach strategies were implemented.

These perspectives reveal that the investigative content produced by the Commission was able to address some of the questions and concerns raised in previous institutional attempts to clarify truths and develop narratives around the armed conflict. While accepting that it is impossible to provide a final truth about an ongoing conflict, these investigations gathered a plethora of

perspectives and detailed individual cases that offered important insights and clarifications about the armed conflict.

Beyond the technical and academic qualities of the reports delivered, authors have valued the effect of the investigative process done by the Commission:

Its labor has not been limited to the collection of testimonies and their cross-referencing with other sources; rather, throughout its years of operation, it has held thematic events and sessions that brought together diverse actors of the conflict, fostering processes of recognition and reconciliation (Velásquez-Yepes, & Zuluaga-Aristizábal, 2022, p. 112).

These activities are especially important when trying to build a historical memory process. Although reports and documentation are critical, community oriented events are indispensable to bring closure to the victims, and to foster far reaching understandings of the armed conflict that can permeate the damaged social bonds. The CEV expanded their activities to generate debate, pose questions, and spread insights through various outreach platforms (Velásquez-Yepes, & Zuluaga-Aristizábal, 2022, p. 113). This shows a strong commitment to foster historical memory through community building, and going to the extent of mediating events of political discussion, all crucial complementary strategies that allow the nuance of the reports to have a greater impact on society.

The impact of the Commission has also been documented by psychosocial studies and surveys. These note that firstly, the creation of more institutional bodies responsible for dealing with

political violence was an important step forward, particularly because of their role in reconstructing a historical memory. Considering the activities and perception of the Commission, these studies found that they played a key role in aiding the social fabric of the country “In all, the results reaffirm that transitional justice activities, such as collective rituals, mobilize positive emotions and a sense of transcendence among a significant group of people” (Ruiz et al., 2022, p. 148). In correlation with this information, the studies also mentioned that social reconciliation indexes also improved “Finally, it is worth mentioning that the social reconciliation indexes, both total and regional, are generally high” (Ruiz et al., 2022, p. 148). This is certainly significant, as it points towards a social paradigm shift with regards to the armed conflict. Considering that in the 2000s there was a low disposition towards reconciliation and forgiveness, seeing these perspectives shift reveals a step forward in the historical memory process and efforts to reduce political violence.

However, scholars note elements that negatively impacted the Commission's influence within the historical memory process. For instance, it was mentioned that even with the arduous outreach and engagement efforts from the organization, there was still a lack of popular and institutional support to mobilize their initiatives: “The low level of awareness among Colombians may be related to the low frequency with which news regarding its work appears, and the limited information participants report seeing on social media, television, radio and in newspapers” (Ruiz et al., 2022, p. 146). This factor plays an important role within historical memory processes, as even if these policies develop detailed reports and establish a clear narrative, their effectiveness will often depend on their ability to influence social life and remain within the collective consciousness of the nation. The lack of support coming from civil society, specially identified in the media, relates to a continuous problem of hegemonic discourses within the nation. Many of the dominant news outlets within the

country constantly decontextualize information to protect certain actors within the armed conflict, mainly the state, and in turn invisibilize the victims and their testimonies (Aguirre, 2017, p. 101).

The Commission's reports faced other challenges, specifically the need to include their contents to the larger academic fabric of the country “The narratives presented in the recent report require a shift in the way our recent history is taught in schools and universities” (Mora, 2022, p. 6). Though Colombian schools and universities do engage with the armed conflict, it is often from a broad perspective that fails to account for the multifaceted nature of the problem. Therefore, the findings of the Commission still need a better dissemination strategy that goes beyond media presence. Connecting these historical memory narratives to education is also an opportunity, as it can aid newer generations to understand the armed conflict in a different light.

As a final note on the efforts of the Commission, it is significant to highlight some of the recommendations made within the final report, as they provide important insights with regards to the Colombian state politics of memory and their future. The report *Findings and Recommendations of the Commission of Truth* comprises a document that provides proposals aimed to foster the construction of peace and wellness within Colombia through sentiments of plurality and understanding “These were constructed through broad, plural, and participatory dialogues, reflecting the voices of hundreds of communities across the entire territory” (CEV, 2022, p. 26). These cover a wide range of topics, including memory, for which the Commission proposed a “Policy of memory and truth aimed at peacebuilding and guaranteeing non-repetition” (CEV, 2022, p. 653). Some of its proposed elements include measures to guarantee the preservation of initiatives and places of memory; the creation of the Colombian Museum of Memory as an autonomous institution;

measures to preserve the memory of indigenous, afro, and other historically marginalized groups; implementation of efforts to continue mapping collective and individual victimization; and the enforcement of a plan to update the databases of victims of the armed conflict (CEV, 2022, p. 654). These recommendations are crucial for the continuous development of historical memory within the country. However, four years after the release of the final report, few if any of these recommendations have been actively implemented in the political framework of the country.

As a conclusion to this section of the analysis, a number of lessons can be extracted from the main memory policies implemented in the country. One is that the interval period starting from the early 2000s up until 2011 signified a titanic setback on the process of developing a comprehensive historical memory and memory policies. The period diminished the importance of these initiatives, and also allowed the execution of poorly developed demobilization processes with paramilitary structures that fractured the possibilities of truth, reconciliation and vindication for the victims. The state also engaged in the proliferation of political violence and negationism, erecting new wounds and social traumas that further complicated the historical memory process and armed conflict.

The case of the CNMH demonstrates an initial effort to foster an integral and victim-led approach to building a historical memory, developing important narratives during its first period. However, it also showcased how these policies can fall prey to political volatility and inefficiency if not given enough autonomy and clear direction. The Commission of Truth learned from these mistakes, and in doing so constructed crucial documents, narratives and practices for the creation of a transparent, victim-led, pluralistic historical memory. However, its failure to reach overarching sectors of society and establish national narratives of memory reveal a deeper and complex reality of

these policies. These should be developed by autonomous institutions, but also require constant support from the state and the social sector, as well as enough time and continuity, all crucial to reach an “emblematic” and overarching status of historical memory. As it will be demonstrated in the following section, the current narratives around political violence demonstrate the existence of an incomplete process of historical memory in the country.

Chapter 4: Colombia today

How do Colombians remember the violent past of a conflict that is still ongoing? Some remember the cruelty of the guerrillas, others the horror of paramilitary organizations, and perhaps less recall the role of the state in perpetuating violence. Colombian society is characterized by a deep and unrelenting political division, directly related to the issue of the Colombian armed conflict. Right-wing parties validate a memory of the conflict that negates state-paramilitary relationships, and that stands by the role of the Armed Forces in the conflict. Progressive and left-wing sectors promote a memory where the role of the state is clearly denounced, but their focus might often neglect the damage done by other groups such as the guerrillas. This political division contains certain nuances that reveal the effects of the historical memory process, both in favor of its progress and against it. The concluding section of the thesis will analyze the current perspectives surrounding the historical memory of the armed conflict. In order to examine the extent to which the memory policies achieved an unifying national narrative, or if these have fallen short of the intended goal.

Persistence of negationist narratives

As mentioned throughout the thesis, the aim of historical memory processes is to mobilize shared narratives of the past constructed by society and government, which can become legitimate or “emblematic” within the national discourse. If these narratives are able to become the guiding principle through which to understand events of political violence, they are consolidated as tools for political legitimation and reconciliation. If achieved, the historical memory process in Colombia hoped to transmit values of reconciliation, non-repetition, and understanding towards the victims across the country.

What is the state of this goal in the present day? In short, there is still a long way to go before the historical memory process can become the dominant narrative in the country. As mentioned above, Colombia is a politically divided country, and this polarization is inextricably linked to the historical memory of the armed conflict. Particularly because as explained in the political violence framework, one of the lingering effects of this type of violence is the generation of social resentment and division.

Throughout its history, Colombia has operated under numerous right wing governments, and the presence of this political sector remains prevalent to this day. The main exponent of this ideology is ex-president Alvaro Uribe, leader of the Centre Democratic party, making him a contemporary influential figure. His discourse has been characterized by a negationist lens of the armed conflict, particularly because his presidential mandates revolved around increased military activity against the guerrillas. These narratives remain attached to right wing ideologies in the country, generating a battle of understandings which deters the resurgence of a comprehensive historical memory. One of the leading claims within Uribe's narratives is the systematic rejection of the human rights violation performed by the Colombian state during the armed conflict:

A central line of Uribe's negationism was the systematic non-recognition of the grave human rights abuses committed by the Armed Forces against peasants and other sectors of rural society affected by State forces in the midst of the internal armed conflict; events for which the president almost always denied authorship, vindicating the the 'professionalism and patriotism of our Armed Forces' (De La Roche, 2022, p. 17)

In addition to this, Uribe has constantly rejected the proven links between the state and paramilitary structures (before, during and after his two presidential tenures), as well as leading defamation campaigns against progressive or left wing political sectors, comparing them to the FARC or other insurgent groups (De La Roche, 2022, p. 18). The systematic practice of negating the state involvement in several acts of political violence is evident; some of these events were examined in this thesis, like the Trujillo Massacre or the role of DAS in persecuting and enabling the assassination of presidential candidates and journalists in the 90s. This is problematic, as influential figures such as Uribe and the members of his political party actively manipulate narratives based on political ideology that absolve the state of its responsibility. Moreover, he was an outspoken critic of the 2016 peace accords, and has since taken an oppositional stance towards transitional and memory policies such as the JEP. These discourses not only fuel “us vs them” narratives, oblivious to the multifaceted nature of the armed conflict, but also reject methods of transitional justice and the development of a victim-led historical memory.

The prominence of Uribe’s negationist ideology showcases that the historical memory process in Colombia has been unable to establish an overarching narrative, even with regards to important historical understandings like the state involvement in numerous human right abuses and connections to paramilitary structures. Not only this, but the confrontational character of these discourses also signal that the historical memory process has not evoked values of reconciliation in society, leading to the increased popularity of violent political rethorics.

Steps towards a binding historical memory

However, narratives such as Uribe's are not as hegemonic, even if still prevalent, as they once were. These political fissures have allowed for progressive movements to proliferate within the country, and in doing so, the issue of historical memory has taken a greater role within the national discourse. An area where the growing interest for historical memory has prevailed is academic research:

The systematic review has succeeded in demonstrating a research interest that has been increasing over time and focusing, in greater proportion, on the analysis and reflection of the conditions surrounding the existence and implementation of official memory policies in Colombia (Riascos-Guerrero, & Arobleda-Ariza, p. 218, 2025)

The growing research interest is an important achievement of the Colombian memory policies, as a dedicated academic sector is crucial for the continuous and much needed development of the historical memory process. Notwithstanding, it is the revitalization of historical memory within social and popular sectors that indicate the extent to which this topic has gained importance in the country.

Despite criticism and failures within the process, various journalists value the efforts of institutions such as the CNMH and of the victims themselves in bringing the importance of historical memory to the forefront:

In Colombia, something similar occurs with the memory of the armed conflict. Digital projects, open archives, and citizen narratives have allowed victims, territorial communities, and social organizations to construct accounts that previously had no voice. Memory is no longer solely institutional; it also belongs to society (García, 2026)

This statement provides a significant acknowledgement. Beyond the academic quality of the numerous reports produced by institutions such as the CNHM and the CEV, it is the space they have fostered that has truly impacted society. The main achievements of these policies is that they disrupted previously hegemonic narratives, and brought to light many hidden truths about past events of political violence. The voices of victims have been amplified, opening the door to continuous efforts to build a united and non-exclusive historical memory.

In a critical opinion column on several exhibitions done by the JEP and the CEV, museologist Cristina Lleras also values the involvement of victims and communities within initiatives of historical memory: “Exhibitions are transformative to the extent that they involve victims and communities in the process of joint construction, and in what happens with those results once the process ends” (Lleras, 2024). To illustrate this point, Lleras interviews local leaders that had previously participated in these processes, and that today have developed their own historical memory initiatives. They mention retaining positive feelings from their engagement with the institutional strategies of memory, sharing that these experiences evoked in them a sense of hope for the future, particularly, if more of these initiatives were to take place and prominence in society (Lleras, 2024).

Moreover, the impact of the historical memory process has been complemented by other memory policies, such as the judicial body JEP. The JEP is in charge of clarifying past events of political violence, and of judging and sentencing those responsible. It is one of the transitional justice strategies that has remained the most active in the present day. This institution has delivered important rulings against those who perpetrated acts of political violence, ranging from state officials to FARC-EP ex-members. It has also hosted audiences where these actors accept responsibility for their actions, unprecedented initiatives part of their restorative justice model. The importance of these acts has not gone unnoticed: “We must recognize the great importance of imposing concrete sanctions as forms of addressing the rights of victims and society, the fulfillment of which contributes to the horizon of peacebuilding and the creation of possibilities for reconciliation” (Márquez, 2025). Such benchmarks are crucial for the development of a historical memory, but unfortunately, a lack of continuity within these institutional processes is a criticism that dominates current narratives around the topic.

Lack of continuity within the historical memory process

With the rise of progressive ideals, in 2022 Gustavo Petro became the first left-wing president of Colombia. As a former M-19 member, his government held up the flags of historical memory, reconciliation and support for the victims. However, the current social consensus appears to be that at least in matters of support towards the historical memory process, promises have not been met.

In an opinion column, journalist Cristina Nicholls criticized the lack of activity from the CNMH, arguably Colombia’s most important historical memory organism “However, the CNMH

has not been reborn as it should have, even though the regional and global context demands it more than ever” (Nicholls, 2023) In her article, she also opposed the display of a movie called “Matarife”, a controversial piece aimed at harshly criticizing ex-president Alvaro Uribe. Her criticism is not born from political affiliations, but rather from the use of the CNMH as an instrument of political machinery by engaging in the display of controversial, non-academic or victim-led media. While numerous academic and victim memory initiatives await funding, the state’s focus seems to be elsewhere.

Nicholls opinion is shared by other mediums, such as the journal *La Silla Vacía*. In an analysis of the state politics of memory, columnist Eduardo Gonzales highlights some of the challenges presently faced by the historical memory process. His stance is clear, co-creation matters most:

It is not merely a matter of funds or institutional agreements: a public policy, particularly of memory, requires mobilization. After all, it is the mothers of the Comuna 13 who have succeeded in moving that mountain of debris in Medellín (Arias, 2025).

The context of this quote is the finding of bone remains in a garbage dump in the Comuna 13 by the JEP, presumably corresponding to victims of forced disappearance by paramilitary and state agents during the armed conflict. The mothers of the victims played a key role in pushing authorities to investigate, while battling the opposition of right wing political figures, including Medellín’s mayor. Gonzales states that memory policies have leaned towards big institutional projects (unfinished like the Colombian Museum of Memory) and sidelined the element that made initiatives

like the CNMH or the CEV significant in the first place: the connection and amplification of communities and victims “For a national policy to function, one that is effectively diverse in its territorial coverage and its multiple memories, it must speak to the people and it must speak with them as well” (Arias, 2025).

Following a similar line, other voices continuously express concern about the diffuse influence of the historical memory process over society. In an article about the importance of historical memory, democracy and literature, professor Viridiana Molinares powerfully illustrates the state of memory narratives in the country: “In Colombia, the lived manifestations of violence run the risk of becoming distant to new generations” (Molinares, 2025). Her concern is shared by many Colombians, as the fragmented historical memory process has left cracks through which polarization and violent rhetoric can populate within the youth.

Polarization and political violence

Despite the efforts towards building a united historical memory through memory policies, Colombian society is currently experiencing unprecedented levels of polarization. Historical memory finds itself in the middle of two political extremes, where aggressive rethorics has turned spaces of reconciliation into heated battles based on political ideology and not on historical or grounded investigations.

From the right wing political spectrum, the argument of a multiplicity of memories has been used to discredit and wash away the guilt from state forces and their involvement in several acts of political violence, like those mentioned in the historical investigation of this thesis. A clear example

was a shameful act perpetrated by right wing congressmen Miguel Polo Polo, who disposed of several boots placed by the mothers of young men assassinated by state agents in front of congress as an act of remembrance and protest (Acevedo, 2024). Acts like these are becoming common in the country, fueled by aggressive narratives, showing the extent to which the historical memory process has been unable to conscientize thousands of Colombians. In response to these concerning actions, Journalist Tatiana Acevedo states that while there might be a multiplicity of memories, there is only one truth, and that is the proven state's role within numerous acts of political violence (Acevedo, 2024)

The left wing political sphere is not free of responsibility either. Despite upholding the banners of the victims and historical memory, the current administration's acts of polarization threaten to damage important developments achieved by memory policies. A recurrent protagonist in this debate is president Gustavo Petro, whose sometimes reckless attitude has prompted heated discussions around historical memory. In 2024, Petro declared the hat of Carlos Pizarro (assassinated presidential candidate and M-19 guerrilla member) an object of national heritage. Petro has also been seen waving the flag of the M-19, a controversial and polarizing statement. On the matter, many journalists have expressed the conflicting nature of these actions: "The exaltation of Pizarro's hat is problematic, given that the head of the executive branch is exalting the memory of his own guerilla group" (González, 2024). The display of a romanticized view of memory is very different from the efforts led by memory institutions and the victims, especially concerning the legacy of an insurgent group. As analyzed in this thesis, Pizarro's assassination was a tragedy and a crime against humanity, but his time as a member of the M-19 should not be overlooked because of it. Pizarro's hat could have found a perfect place in the unfinished Colombian Memory Museum, a site where his positive

and negative contributions to the country could be understood with all of the necessary context, nuances, and complexity.

The result of this battle over memory is an almost amnesiac society, constantly at each other's throats, while initiatives like the CEV and CNMH accumulate dust in a void of marginalization. Not only has the institutional historical memory process failed at uniting society and establishing clear narratives, but has also allowed for the proliferation of political violence, a problem it sought to address. Last year, Colombians woke up to the news that right-wing presidential pre-candidate Miguel Uribe Turbay had been assassinated in the streets of Bogota. The nation was shocked, as such an unprecedented event had not occurred since the episodes of the 1990s. Politologist Fabiola Calvo connects this event with a mutation of the armed conflict and political violence in the country, directly linked to the unfinished historical memory process “This situation is exacerbated by historical amnesia” (Calvo, 2025). Along with Miguel Uribe, thousands of activists and social leaders continue to be targeted in Colombia, while historical memory is pushed to a corner between ideological battles that do more harm than good to the nation.

In sum, the critical discourse analysis portrays Colombian society as one deeply divided and without a clear dominant narrative over historical memory. Despite the important progress made by memory policies, social movements, and victim-led initiatives, Colombians have not yet internalized a uniting view over the events of political violence that scarred the nation. Instead, historical memory has been subject to a battle of political ideologies, inciting more violence in the process. Even though the seeds have been planted and the benchmarks achieved stand as proof of the meaningful effects of historical memory, a lack of continuation has prevented current social

narratives to be permeated by values of non-repetition, and understanding towards the victims. Therefore, the persistence of political violence and conflict in Colombia demonstrates that the need for a cohesive historical memory remains as pressing today as it has ever been.

Conclusion: For everything that unites us and against all that separates us

“A new and sweeping utopia of life, where no one will be able to decide for others how they die, where love will prove true and happiness be possible, and where the races condemned to one hundred years of solitude will have, at last and forever, a second opportunity on earth” (Gabriel García Márquez, 1982).

Jaime Garzon once said in an interview: “I would like not to die, not to die in history, but I believe that is a very great challenge and, moreover, a very ambitious one” (Garzón, 1990s). 27 years after his assassination, Jaime’s memory remains embedded within the hearts of many Colombians, not only with sadness, but perhaps also as a seed of hope. Nevertheless, the threat of amnesia continues to loom over the nation, fueled by an unrelenting political divide. In consequence, historical memory is still relevant within the country, but has been unable to overcome polarization, continuous political violence and public indifference.

In the first chapter of this thesis, political violence was established as a phenomenon that goes beyond acts against political figures in an attempt to change a system. Political violence permeates societies, deepens structural divides, and opens wounds within the social psyche that are not easily healed. As mentioned by Hannah Arendt, many are the cases in which political violence is addressed with more violence, perpetuating a cycle that never truly ends. That was the case of Colombia for most of its history, until historical memory became an alternative through which Colombians could dream of a path void of violence and characterized by reconciliation and non-repetition. The second part of this chapter focused on examining the emergence of historical memory, inextricably linked to traumatic acts of political violence. Remembering allowed nations to

never forget those events that marked them, to fill the silences that disturbed them, and to shape a future where political violence would have no place within society.

The 1990s were a catalyst for the Colombian historical memory process. Never before had the country experienced such an unprecedented level of violence against politicians, journalists, human rights activists and civilians. Three presidential candidates were assassinated by different actors, including drug traffickers and paramilitary agents, sometimes in collusion with state forces. An entire political party was victim of a systematic genocide, while journalist, human rights activists and civilians were targeted all across the country. The analysis concluded that this wave of violence caused significant damage to the social fabric of the country, as it exhibited an impossibility to change and the fragility of Colombia's democracy. In addition to this, the convergence of different perpetrators, the state involvement and the lingering impunity signaled the need for truth-seeking and remembrance mechanisms, as it became clear that what transpired during the 90s could no longer be neglected, and less forgotten.

However, after the 1990s came the first important setback within the historical memory process. Colombian society, desperate and tired of violence, decided to bet on security as a way to address the conflict. At first, the results of president Uribe's militarized approach were outstanding, but the analysis of his 8 year rule revealed a much different truth. The political pressure placed on the military led to the "False Positives", the systemic practice of assassinating innocent individuals to make them pass as members of the guerrillas. Along with this, historical memory initiatives were neglected, and the victims of the armed conflict marginalized. Paramilitary members were provided amnesty and never taken to court for their crimes, while others remained active and in continuous

collusion with the state. This long interval period not only generated a memory void in which the past was not addressed, but also triggered more social trauma through the state's active involvement in acts of political violence.

The historical memory process officially began with the creation of the National Centre of Historical Memory and was later reinforced by the Commission of Truth. The analysis of both of these efforts reveal that memory policies are most effective when provided with institutional autonomy and continuity. The first period of the CNMH is a testament to this claim, producing a vast quantity of academic work but also shaping Colombian historical memory through a valuable victim-led lens. And despite the limited time in which the Commission of Truth operated, the autonomy given to the initiative was enough to encourage a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of the armed conflict. These truth-seeking efforts were able to propel historical memory as a key concept within national politics, and also dignified the victims by amplifying their voices. Another aspect worth mentioning is that these policies received positive responses when implementing community based approaches. This is crucial, because the analysis demonstrated that more dynamic and grassroots activities with the victims and society were particularly effective in transmitting a shared historical memory.

The second period of the CNMH exalts political bias as a major threat for the success of memory policies. The institution lost integrity and credibility from both the victims and society, and also suffered from a lack of efficacy and output. When dealing with something as malleable and personal like memory, institutions require trust and transparency in order to connect with the people. It was also noted that in the case of both policies, a lack of institutional and popular support

was a determinant factor in their limited accomplishments. Both policies were given resources, but were not treated as a priority, and therefore tended to fade into the background of national conversations. Historical memory requires a continuous process that is able to remain present within the minds of the population, and if the state itself is not able to treat it as a priority, why would society do so? Institutional commitment cannot be superficial, it must be profound and strong.

Looking at the current state of the country, it is clear that the historical memory process is incomplete. Colombia remains split in two political currents, each one representing a different memory of the armed conflict. Right wing ideologies stand by the state's abuses within the conflict, while left-wing progressive movements lean towards a victim-led history but still engage in radical stances. Polarization and political violence are therefore still present and part of the everyday life of Colombians, signaling a failure to evoke sentiments of reconciliation and non-repetition within society. Even under a progressive government, the neglect of historical memory has contributed to the never ending ideological struggle in the country.

However, the seed of hope remains. Even if the historical memory process is incomplete, it has not been entirely forgotten. The fact that Colombia is divided with regards to the armed conflict is a setback, but also means that previous hegemonic narratives are no longer dominant in society. Initiatives like the JEP still carry important significance and are constantly working towards the goal of an emblematic memory, but they require the support of both institutions and society. In this context, this thesis suggests that memory policies should revise outreach strategies to better connect with those skeptical of the historical memory process. More community based activities are needed, the Colombian Museum of Memory should be finished, and dynamic media like documentaries or

literature demand to be considered. The reality is that only a small part of the public is willing to read the vast academic work of the CNMH and the CEV, and therefore newer initiatives need to consider accessibility as a key element of building a historical memory. Moreover, education is another important factor that needs to be considered within memory creation. In other historical memory processes such as the remembrance of the holocaust, education was a powerful tool to incentivize future generations to think critically and differently about conflict. Teaching the complexities of the armed conflict and the perspective of the victims within the educational curriculum can help foster a Colombian society where violence is no longer the first and only option.

Polarization is perhaps the biggest threat to the historical memory process. Both left and right wing political spectrums engage in incendiary rhetoric that obstructs national reconciliation and prevents a shared understanding of the past. This dynamic echoes Garcia Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where the Buendia Family is condemned to repeat cycles of violence for a hundred years. Yet, unlike the Buendia's fatalistic destiny, Colombia's historical memory process offers a possibility of rupture. By acknowledging past atrocities and amplifying the victim's voices, historical memory presents a path to close the polarizing divide that prevents the goal of reconciliation and non-repetition. The foundations have already been built, but it is apparent that the process requires a larger national commitment from both society and the government, only then a shared historical memory can rise over violence and war. Historical memory is complex, and perhaps achieving a single overarching memory is a far-fetched goal. But these processes have demonstrated to be essential, and it is the continuous practice of remembrance that can aid newer generations to break the cycle of violence that has loomed over Colombia throughout its history.

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