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On narratives and memory: a reflection on the Colombian armed conflict from military history

Section: HISTORY

Scientific and technological research article

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Sobre relatos y memoria: una reflexión sobre el conflicto armado colombiano desde la historia militar

Sobre relatos e memoria: uma reflexão sobre o conflito armado colombiano desde a história militar

Sur récits et mémoire: une réflexion sur le conflit armé en Colombie depuis l'histoire militaire

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Abstract. Military historical memory involves the construction of the different military institutions' common past without its study necessarily depending on the recognition of the individual from a humanistic perspective. The objective of this proposal is to analyze, from the perspective of *life stories*, the experiences of national heroes and their contribution to the construction of military historical memory. Using the symbiosis between the historical analysis of the armed conflict and the accounts of active officers of the Escuela Militar de Cadetes "General José María Córdova" that were part of units directly related to the armed confrontation in the Colombian context. We highlight their participation as historical generative actors.

Keywords: armed conflict; life stories; military historical memory; historical memory

Resumen. La memoria histórica militar incluye la construcción del pasado común de las diferentes instituciones militares, sin que su estudio necesariamente dependa del reconocimiento del individuo desde una perspectiva humanista. En este sentido, el objetivo de esta propuesta es analizar desde el enfoque de *historias de vida* las vivencias de los héroes de la patria y su aporte para la construcción de la memoria histórica militar. A partir de la simbiosis entre el análisis histórico del conflicto armado y los relatos extraídos de los oficiales activos que hacen parte de la Escuela Militar de Cadetes "General José María Córdova" y que estuvieron en unidades directamente relacionadas con la confrontación armada en el contexto colombiano. Se resalta su participación como actores generadores de memoria histórica.

Palabras clave: conflicto armado; historias de vida; memoria histórica militar; memoria histórica.

Resumo. A memória histórica militar envolve a construção do passado comum das diferentes instituições militares sem que o seu estudo dependa necessariamente do reconhecimento necessariamente do indivíduo a partir de uma perspectiva humanista. O objetivo desta proposta é analisar, a partir da perspectiva de *histórias de vida*, as experiências de heróis nacionais e sua contribuição para a construção da memória histórica militar. Utilizando a simbiose entre a análise histórica do conflito armado e os relatos de oficiais ativos da Escuela Militar de Cadetes "General José María Córdova" que faziam parte das unidades diretamente relacionadas ao enfrentamento armado no contexto colombiano. Destacamos sua participação como atores geradores históricos.

Palavras-chave: conflito armado; histórias da vida; memória histórica militar; memória histórica

Résumé. La mémoire historique militaire implique la construction du passé commun des différentes institutions militaires sans que son étude dépende nécessairement de la reconnaissance de l'individu depuis une perspective humaniste. L'objectif de cette proposition est d'analyser, du point de vue des *récits de vie*, les expériences des héros nationaux et leur contribution à la construction de la mémoire historique militaire. En utilisant la symbiose entre l'analyse historique du conflit armé et les récits des officiers actifs de l'Escuela Militar de Cadetes « général José María Córdova » qui faisaient partie des unités directement liées à la confrontation armée dans le contexte colombien. Nous soulignons leur participation acteurs génératifs historiques.

Mots-clés: conflit armé; histoires de vie; mémoire historique militaire; mémoire historique.

Introduction

Colombia is a country marked by the long-standing armed conflict. During the last decade, students of the social sciences have developed a special interest to contribute to the understanding of the dynamics of conflict configured in different scenarios and by multiple actors (Pecaut, 2003; Bolívar, 2005). In this process, the recovery of historical memory has shaped a conceptual and methodological focus, which leads to permanent research efforts to develop a culture for peace (Lira, 2010).

The Colombian National Army, in the process of transformation and permanent renewal, plays a vital role as a strategic actor in the construction of historical memory, particularly, military historical memory. From a humanist perspective, this work suggests the recognition of the individual, his experiences, and reflections both in the contexts of training and his or her military experience (Mejía & Chaib, 2014).

In keeping with Piper-Shafir (2013), ostensibly, speaking of historical memory implies dealing exclusively with the actors' condition as a victim of the violent social phenomena. However, the construction of historical memory has determining characteristics that also describe the importance of recognizing the achievements of the subjects that intervened in the events. Thus, in this text, we highlight the need to heed the valuable effort of these men assuming a constitutional mission by recovering the experiences of the officers of the National Army as national heroes. Similarly, the aim is to link the stories with the reconstruction of the events of the armed conflict that have taken place between the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st.

Here, life stories assume special consideration as methodological tools that enable the reconstruction of meanings from a temporal perspective, given that they focalize the forms of exchange and circulation of memory within the culture (Molina, 2010). These narrations help to visualize the personal struggles experienced by the heroes of the country in the different scenarios of armed conflict in Colombia. These are stories that not only account for one voice; they allow the interpretation of the context in which the event was framed (past) and from which it echoes (present), as well as the time and new meanings (future) that are produced. In this regard, Mèlich (2000) states:

The narrative is a carrier of meaning; it does not try to solve problems (in the manner of technical specialists) but rather, to cause the human being to face fundamental questions of his existence. Through narration, humans live the past in the present; understand that the past is still open, that it has not ended. Through narration, humans are listeners of the voices excluded from history. Through narration, the reader is welcoming, receptive and accountable for the other. Because in the narrative the reader does not read an objective report, not even the experience of the writer, of the survivor, but of the absence of testimony. (pp. 139-140)

Constructing and reconstructing memory is primarily a reflective practice (Molina, 2010, p. 65) that, to comprehensively understand the phenomenon of violence in a context such as Colombia, requires methodological and conceptual efforts such as those found in the academic context of the Escuela Militar de Cadetes “General José María Córdova” –hereon, Esmic– this research project was carried out and its developed. In its first part, the project allowed the definition of *heroic actions* and the development and analysis of 10 life histories of officers linked to the ESMIC, which motivated the inclination to place the individual at the center of the military processes as a transforming agent.

A second phase was developed for 2018 given these results and their projection, which sought to feature the Colombian historical context during the periods in which the narrating participants’ “historical memory” took place and is remembered. The previous allowed us to analyze and understand, from historical and anthropological approaches, the violent events that took place in the last stage of the armed conflict and the new reflections that have been constructed and deconstructed as a contribution to military historical memory.

Advances in the construction of military historical memory

According to Castillejo (2005), any social research on the facts of violence and its memory poses a series of complex issues to social scientists in general. Approaching and interpreting a recent past has become a broad field of study that includes multiple approaches, parting from the premise of memory as a source of the narration of the individual’s memory. Thus, memory is understood as a framework of interpretation that updates a historically and culturally situated shape, constructed by temporal experiences that can be located in space (Ramos, 2011).

Memory, then, cannot be conceived as a recollection, but as a rereading of occurrences, which is not detached from the accumulation of experiences and the conditions of the present (Fernández, 2007). This rereading drives to select events and postulate sequences, which, in turn, acquire valuations that make them –or not– plausible. As presented by Visacosvsky (2007), “The selection of events is not only an intellectual function that persists in the realm of ideas; it often materializes in the delimitation of spaces or in the conservation of remains or relics, all of which require practical devices through which past events are made meaningful to the present.” (p. 63)

Anthropological studies on memory have been distributed in several fields of deliberation: memory as an inherited tradition, memory as a source of history, and memory as a strategic use of the past (Castillo, 2018). In particular, *historical memory*

is a type of story that includes political and social elements of a community, which comes under tension from the historical and political context from which they arise.

According to Castillo (2005), the scale of analysis of the narratives of these memories, from the collective to the individual, positions the issue of the individual's experience as a valid source of knowledge. The individual dynamics of the narrative is a personal and intimate experience that often detaches itself from historical discourse and, occasionally, produces a collective memory that can be inherited; both forms end up being conceived as a past in the present, a strategic way of conceiving that past.

From an individual level, memory is a process inherent in a person's very existence. The narration of memories is shaped by the person, in many cases, as a social process that includes it in the formation of collective memory; "the past is socially relevant because it constitutes a living force, which provides the foundations for claims of identity, legitimacy, and conflict in the present conditions." (Viscosovsky, 2007, p. 63)

Acknowledging that a reflection must be made regarding the construction of military historical memory from an individual scale to recognize and view military subjects as key actors within the Colombian internal armed conflict and accepting the proposals by Castillo (2018), it can be considered that the reconstruction of historical memory not only fulfills the task of recalling the context from the institution's socio-cultural interpretation but also contributes to the truth about a determining actor of the conflict. This idea expands the analysis scenarios, which have initiated from a reductionist conception of the Military Forces, and allows for the voices of the victims, heroes, and other social actors, reaffirming their humanity.

At present, the concept of *military historical memory* is still in the process of configuration, although some elements provide a notion of understanding and construction. Researchers such as Pastrana, Vera and Valdivieso (2016), from the Escuela Superior de Guerra, have stated that historical memory, in the military field, could be defined as the construction of the collective past of the different military institutions if its onset is the point of view of each one of the individuals that compose them. Likewise, De Mares, Camargo and Ortiz (2014) stress that, in the military context, common historical references are shared in each country, revealing some traditions that have been carved in time, while others have disappeared. These symbols reflect their values that evoke certain events that must be analyzed, among many other elements, to understand their complexity.

Consecuentemente, las Fuerzas Militares reconocen que es importante y pertinente garantizar que las instituciones que la componen —cuyos miembros han participado directamente en el conflicto armado— permitan que sus miembros expresen su memoria viva sobre las experiencias que han tenido. De hecho, la memoria colec-

tiva generada a partir de este actor se vuelve imprescindible para la búsqueda de la verdad, pues con ella se estaría ampliando el espectro de la memoria histórica nacional (Pastrana, Vera & Valdivieso, 2016). En ese mismo sentido, el director del Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (2014) expresó, al referirse a la importancia de la voz de los miembros de las Fuerzas Armadas en la construcción de la memoria histórica colombiana, “que sus vivencias, testimonios y sus archivos son fundamentales para reconstruir la historia de nuestro conflicto de una manera más completa e incluyente”.

Therefore, the Military Forces recognize that it is critical and pertinent to guarantee that the institutions that compose it—whose members have directly participated in the armed conflict—allow its members to express their living memory of their experiences. In fact, the collective memory obtained from these actors becomes essential in the pursuit of truth because it expands the spectrum of the national historical memory (Pastrana, Vera & Valdivieso, 2016). When referring to the importance of the voice of the members of the Armed Forces in the construction of the Colombian historical memory, the director of the National Center of Historical Memory (2014) expressed “that their experiences, testimonies, and dossiers are fundamental to reconstructing the history of our conflict in a more complete and inclusive way.”

Methodology

This research is a qualitative-interpretative study, whose central input was the narrations of life stories obtained through the application of in-depth interviews to 10 officers associated to the ESMIC. The interviewees were selected based on their fulfillment of four specific conditions: 1) Expressing interest in participating in the study¹, 2) Having more than ten years of involvement in the National Army, 3) Being an official connected to the ESMIC, and 4) Having operative experience in territories of armed conflict in Colombia.

The documentation phase of the research, which took place in 2017, allowed defining the conceptual categories that subsequently structured the in-depth interviews in the following four planes: 1) Contextualization in the formation process, 2) Trajectory and territory, 3) Heroic act represented in experiences, 4) Scenarios of armed conflict, and 5) Learning. In 2018, a historical analysis of the narrations was made to contextualize the facts of the armed conflict that framed the occurrences and experiences in temporality and social reality; this was done from a humanistic approach.

1 The project was authorized by the ESMIC Ethics Committee in 2017. The interviewees signed a participation, data management, and dissemination of results consent.

To this end, micro-narratives were drawn from the life histories, namely, those involving the deductive categories of “heroic act” and “territory in armed conflict.” The first category is construed, according to the interviewees, as the acts implying placing the common good on the forefront; this includes the civilian population, the welfare of the soldiers, and the general good of the country. These experiences embody a sacrifice of one’s interests for honor, in which confidence is demonstrated in the face of disadvantage. The second deductive category, “territory in armed conflict,” refers to those regions struck directly by armed actors, which determined fundamental tasks for the National Army between the last decade of the 20th century and the first of the 21st.

The temporality and the social and geographical space of the country were outlined in the life stories that were addressed. The meaning given by subjects to recollection as a process of reconstruction of historical memory was continuously maintained during the interpretation of the narratives. According to Castillo (2018), historical memory is divided in two. The first is what is remembered (what was obtained through an event). The second is the historical, which is what has marked a milestone for the individual, in this case, the facts that marked the officers interviewed from a humanist perspective.

Milestones: a context with many stories

The internal armed conflict in Colombia presents several nuances of analysis, for instance, establishing its start date; this has generated countless debates of academic, political, judicial, and reparation orders (the following can be consulted, among others, Jaramillo, 2014, 2015; Montalvo, 2012; Sánchez, 2015). Determined by these debates, the start date could be between 1948 and 1964, years in which the violent events in the country had a high intensity (Comisión Histórica del Conflicto y sus Víctimas, 2015).

The conflict has also been characterized by various processes, among which are sectarian behavior among political parties, partisan hegemonies, initiation of political pacts (National Front), growth of military units throughout the country to counteract the criminal actions of the peasant and urban guerrillas, the creation of self-defense organizations, the emergence of criminal gangs, the participation of international military doctrines to strengthen the operations of the special units of the National Army, the performance of successful military operations at the beginning of the 21st century (which began with the disarticulation of illegal armed groups), the influence of drug trafficking as a method of financing both guerrillas and self-defense groups, and a historical contextualization based on the bipolarity of political ideas (capitalism and socialism), among others (ESMIC, 2018).

Encapsulating the armed conflict in Colombia is a complex task, which entails great responsibility. The increase in the number of historiographical productions as the years and events pass is noteworthy. Peñaranda (2015) states, “While the panorama of violence in Colombia becomes increasingly complex, the profusion of studies on the subject grows. A review of the bibliographic records shows a figure surpassing 700 article and book titles produced after 1990.” (p. 33)

In keeping with this academic scene, it is important to highlight the bibliographic production at the beginning of the 21st century of the Military Forces, which have subsisted in conflict scenarios, taking part in events of significant impact at the regional and national levels. It is this diffusion that has expanded the understanding of the phenomena that constitute the Colombian armed conflict. Particularly, in the context of Colombian military history, dividing the armed conflict into stages is a stimulating exercise. Identifying the guerrilla war phase, its shift to a war of movements and, later, to a war of positions becomes, undoubtedly, a chronology of the conflict from a more orthodox and not so linear perspective.

Retaking the proposal by Aguilera (2013), the guerrilla of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) based its strategic model, for more than fifty years, on the combination of a prolonged people’s war and a model of insurrectionary war. The first was given according to the three basic modalities for the understanding of the conflict, guerrilla warfare, war of movements, and war of positions. Guerrilla warfare, then, was understood as the accumulation of forces to disperse the enemy, form small embryos of power, and the disputing of territories. Its war of movements confronted the accumulated forces with those of the enemy, integrated the war fronts,² bolstered rearguard zones, and used war resources at a large-scale. The war of positions attempted to defeat the Armed Forces, combined insurrection with war, destroyed populations, and consolidated guerrilla power in large part of the territory. Its insurrectionary war model was similar to the one developed by the Sandinismo in Nicaragua. From this model, the FARC obtained the idea of developing a planned general insurrection, which relied on the organization of urban networks and the approximation of rural forces to urban centers, culminating with a marked guerrilla offensive on the capital of the country.

This panorama contextualizes the last stage of the conflict, marked by a shift from a war of positions and the return to the guerrilla war in 2002 given the increase of military operations by the Colombian Armed Forces. Establishing a temporality is somewhat risky, however, if the war of positions is taken into account, it is feasible to consider the establishment of the Caguán demilitarized zone as the last phase of the

2 Structure of the guerrilla organization.

armed conflict with the FARC, mainly since 1998 (a turning point that compelled the rethinking of the military actions transpired in a large part of the national territory). The narratives presented ahead are set during this period; this frame of reference, in which this exercise of historical memory, allowing the inclusion of the voices of the National Army actors is carried out, shares categories of common space and types of military operations.

The nineties and the armed conflict in Colombia

This stage was branded by an increase in violent acts in several regions of the country, organized mainly by the guerrillas of the FARC, the National Liberation Army (ELN), and the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). The nineties were the most critical period of guerrilla activity and growth, a product of the unfolding of fronts and the consolidation of the war economy, given the multiple problems of public order faced by the State. “The main focus of the guerrillas was strengthening the Eastern Bloc, which achieved about 29% of total military capacity.” (Casilimas, 2015, p. 73)

Confrontations began to change significantly towards the end of the nineties (Figure 1) as a result of two lead factors the strengthening of bilateral relations between the United States and Colombia, which opened the strategic revolution begun in 1998 by the Armed Forces; and the implementation of Plan Colombia. The latter attained assistance from the United States, making the country one of the primary recipients of military equipment and advice from the United States Military Forces worldwide. Accordingly, the country’s denomination of laboratory of counterinsurgency war aimed at combating drug trafficking and organizations outside the law was withdrawn (Fajardo, 2014).

The degradation of the conflict affected the military actions by illegal armed groups in large areas of the national territory. This expansion of their actions unleashed an increasing number of murders, kidnappings, threats, and displacements of the civilian population of urban centers and department capitals (Echandía, 2001). At this point, the geography of violence in the country changed, and a spatial and temporal pattern emerged, manifesting itself in the places where the narratives presented next take place.

Ituango (1997)

Ituango is a Colombian municipality located in the northern sub-region of the department of Antioquia, bordering to the north with the department of Córdoba and the municipality of Tarazá (Antioquia), and to the south with the municipalities

of Peque and Dabeiba, to the northeast with the Cauca River and to the southeast with Sabanalarga (Antioquia).

In the nineties, the AUC Miners block, directed by Ramiro Vanoy Murillo alias “Cuco Vanoy” subdued Ituango. According to the testimonies proposed by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (Judgment of July 1, 2006):

El Aro was a town of three hundred (300) to five hundred (500) people where people worked the land and raised cattle. By mule, a person could reach El Aro in six hours from Puerto Escondido or eight hours from Puerto Valdivia. The union of three mountain ranges called the “Nudo de Paramillo,” located in El Aro, offers a transit route to different places, making El Aro an area of guerrilla influence. The area is a strategic transit point for four groups, the Army, police, paramilitaries, and guerrillas. (p. 24)

The paramilitary incursion began on October 22, 1997 (Figure 1). On October 25 of that same year, the paramilitaries murdered ten people and, in the following days, burned houses, commercial premises, and ranches around the town. By October 31, the paramilitaries exited the town after having burned it down completely and stealing livestock from its inhabitants (Judgment of July 1, 2006).

This is the way it was described by one of the interviewees who participated in the military actions of El Aro:

[...] and in that first rotation, I had seven injured. I was able to disembark, and we prevented them from taking that town. Then, it was the people’s reaction that marked me the most [...]. Seeing some children from a little school offering us something to drink after it happened, seeing their faces of joy saying: ‘soldier, take this water or take this from the small school’s cafeteria,’ with a sincere hug. (Entrevistado 06, 2017)

Following Ugarriza and Pabón (2017), according to military figures, the armed actions of the FARC and ELN during 1998 affected a good part of the country’s infrastructure; they left disastrous results for both the civilian population and the Armed Forces. According to military intelligence evaluations, these were the result of the application of tactics in regular and irregular war that delivered considerable blows in areas such as El Billar, Miraflores, Mitú, and Pavarandó (Figure 1). This infectious diffusion, established at the end of the nineties, created a dynamic of spiraling violence that affected both members of rival groups and non-members. It also promoted a series of violent actions that were concentrated in specific geographic areas and subsequently spread to contiguous areas, and tended to persist throughout the first decade of the 21st century (Echandía, 2001).

However, for 2000, the national territory witnessed the events that occurred every day in the “demilitarized zone,” established by President Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) (Figures 1 and 2),

... who authorized the territorial clearance to develop peace dialogues with the guerrilla of the FARC-EP. By means of Resolution No. 85 of October 14, 1998, the guerrilla group was granted political recognition and with that, the area in question was determined, consisting of five municipalities, San Vicente del Caguán (Caquetá), La Uribe, Mesetas, Vista Hermosa, and La Macarena (Meta). The extension of the territory covered 42,000 km², approximately. (Ariza, 2014, p. 15)

However, once the dialogues were disrupted, the escalation of guerrilla violence spread throughout eleven departments, and the national government was forced to declare a state of emergency. As in the previous decade, violence not only affected combatants but also civilians, including politicians and ex-combatants who were victims of violent actions and murder (Figure 2) (Ugarriza & Pabón, 2017).

The Armed Forces' control of the demilitarized zone was already evident; an example of this was the military actions in 2000 (Figure 2). According to Yaffe (2011),

[...] the intensity of the armed conflict in Colombia, measured through different variables –such as the number of war actions, homicide rates, and acts of terrorism– and with data from various sources, decreased since 2003 in many regions of the country. (p. 191)

Even when these actions diminished, the conflict acquired new dynamics in the following years, which revolved around contradictions of the cultural and historical axes, mainly, on the control of the territory.

Caquetá (2007)

Caquetá is a department in the south of Colombia, with a territorial extension of approximately 89,000 km², bordering the departments of Meta, Guaviare, Amazonas, Putumayo, Cauca, and Huila. It has approximately 483,834 inhabitants and is surrounded by numerous tributaries and thick tropical rainforest. The department is a transit corridor between the Amazon, Andean Region, and the southern part of the Eastern Plains; it is considered as a territory of colonization and an expanding agrarian frontier (López, n.d.b). Thus, Caquetá is relevant in the history of the Colombian armed conflict; to the FARC guerrilla group, it represented one of the most significant funding sources of the country because of its great extension. This expanse allowed the proliferation of illicit crops and (based on the armed control they achieved at the time) the partial control of trade (understood as extortions

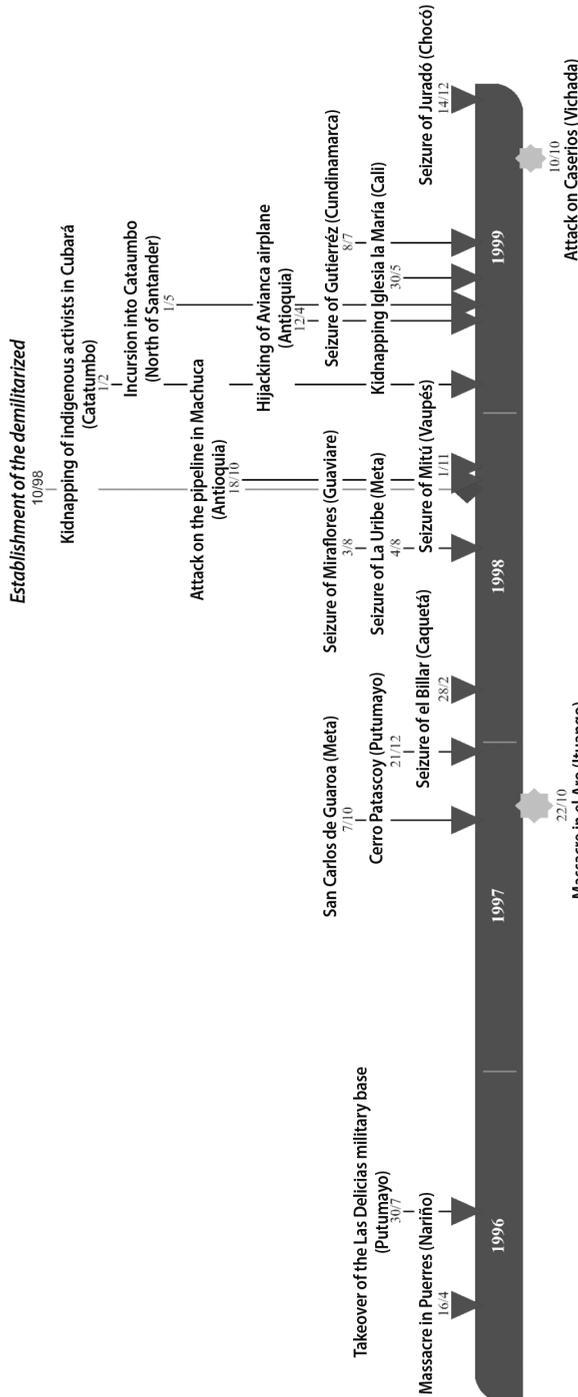


Figure 1. Violent acts perpetrated by illegal armed groups in the nineties.
Source: Created by author.

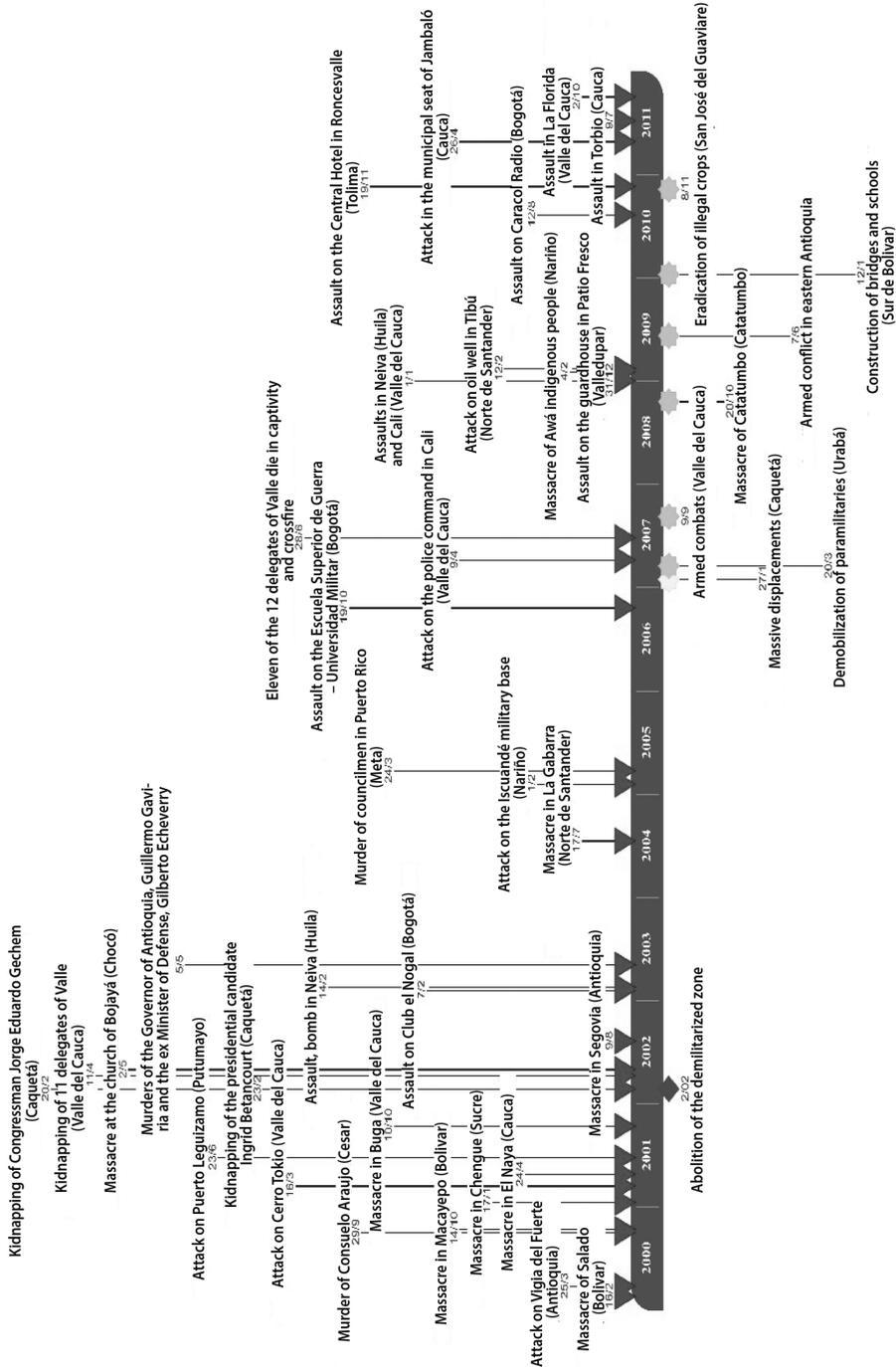


Figure 2. Violent acts perpetrated by illegal armed groups in the first decade of the 21st century. Source: Created by author.

on any economic activity in the region). The guerrillas entrusted the mission to the group's Southern Bloc, which was one of the most intensified and protected by the FARC's secretariat. Meanwhile, the last four governments entrusted the mission to the Colombian Military Forces (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013).

The information on the relationship between the territory of Caquetá and the armed conflict is considerable, given its self-identification as one of the departments having endured the most guerrilla attacks during the last years of the conflict. In addition to being considered a FARC enclave during the demilitarized zone (1998-2002) (Figure 2), Caquetá is the fourth department most affected by guerrilla incursions. "These violent demonstrations seem to be associated with the territorial dispute between the guerrilla and the State, taking into account the dynamics of the conflict" (Centro Nacional de Memoria, 2016, p. 216). This context increased the likelihood of the displacement of the civilian population from rural to urban areas.

The recurring confrontations between the insurgent groups and the Armed Forces are evident in the fragments of the narrative presented below, which evokes the constant dispute over the territory between various actors in the conflict:

[...] some personnel were lost (two soldiers), and the situation continued. The enemy was latent; it was night, and I had just delivered the Air Force's weapons, which they called the bombing. We heard many whimpers, and we did not know if they were the voices of the enemy or our commandos. [...] During the tour, I had two youngsters almost 40 minutes under a tree that fell on them, which did not crush them, but injured them; we heard them ask for help, but we could not remove the tree. I do not know where we found the strength. (Entrevistado 05, 2017)

Valle del Cauca (2007)

Valle del Cauca is a department located in the Colombian southwest; it has an area of 22,140 km² and borders the departments of Chocó, Caldas, Quindío, Tolima, and Cauca and, to the west, the Pacific Ocean. Historically, Valle del Cauca has been alluring to businesspeople, as well as to different organized armed groups. Among the latter is the FARC guerrilla, criminal gangs, and emerging groups that find in this department an excellent outlet for their drug shipments through the Pacific Ocean, resulting in territorial and union disputes (IGAC, 2018). "The mixture of guerrilla presence, violent actions by *gamonales* (private landowners), the consolidation of drug trafficking, and the complicit and criminal action of the public force created an explosive cocktail that produced a chain of violent events that have affected the department since the 1980s to the present." (López, n.d.c, p. 6)

This concoction of actors involved in the conflict escalated to the city of Cali, where the kidnapping events of delegates of the Valle occurred (Figure 2):

On April 11, 2002, members of the FARC –disguised as soldiers– arrived at the facilities of the Departmental Assembly of the Valle del Cauca shouting bomb threats. Between the panic and confusion, the twelve delegates were boarded on a bus and taken to the outskirts of Cali. Once far from where they boarded, the guerrilla group informed the deputies of the kidnapping. For years, the FARC insisted that the government enact an exchange law that never prospered. On June 18, 2007, the guerrilla group issued a statement announcing the death of 11 of the 12 deputies. (Ugarriza & Pabón, 2016, p. 289)

The following narrative describes the military actions carried out in pursuit of the delegates and their captors on the day of the kidnapping; it presents the loss of uniformed personnel during the rescue attempt.

These people had mined all of the access roads. I began to see mutilated soldiers. There were seven maimed soldiers, and one soldier was injured in the descent, he fell badly, he impaled himself with a stake and fell badly, and shrapnel also wounded him. I took a decision. I said: ‘No! No more, be still!’ I explained the situation to my colonel, and then he said: “No, let’s reorganize, and that’s it”; and I said to him: “Look, my colonel, I request that the other company of my battalion be disembarked in these coordinates.” And he told me: “And, how many wounded did he have?” [...] There were 12 who lost their legs. That was one of the most complicated missions. (Entrevistado 06, 2017)

Urabá (2007)

The region of Urabá has an extraordinary geographical position. Its rainforest serves as a crossroads between the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean. This crossing has been an area of contraband activities linked to drug and arms trafficking, as well as other illicit acts carried out by illegal armed groups since the nineteenth century. This area of confluence is located between the departments of Antioquia, Córdoba, Chocó, and El Tapón del Darién, on the border with Panama (PIB Colombia, 2018).

Historically, self-defense groups have been extant in the region since the 1960s, as well as the inception of liberal and socialist guerrillas (Pardo, 2015, p. 469). In the early 2000s, these groups began to increase their participation in specific strategic regions associated with the armed conflict. One of these regions was the Urabá region of Chocó and Antioquia (Figure 2). They also instigated high-impact criminal actions, expanding their territorial dominance along the Atrato River coastline, imposing criminal actions such as massacres, assassinations, and intimidation (Taborda, Muñetón-Santa & Horbath-Corredor, 2018). The richness of the region’s soil attracted settlers who established large industries and who also entered into a struggle for land; this set up a forced modernization in the implementation of labor,

commerce, business, and capitalist relations based on dispossession, inequality, and territorial control (IPC, n.d.).

Because this has been a region that has experienced armed confrontation dramatically, both because of the conflict between the insurgency and the State, and because of the implementation of the country's second paramilitary laboratory, this narrative highlights the relationship between the different subjects of the armed groups, especially, the reaction of several members outside the law facing their capture.

They told me to watch them –said the officer–. When I went and surrendered them to the Modelo de Montería prison, they all shook my hand, and they said: ‘Thank you, Lieutenant!’ I stayed behind and asked them: ‘hey, why do thank me, brother? I just came to put them in the bullpen?’ ‘It is just that you saved our lives.’ These are little things that you remember. (Entrevistado 08, 2017)

Catatumbo (2008)

The Catatumbo is a subregion of the northeastern department of Santander. It is made up of the municipalities of Ocaña, El Carmen, Convention, Teorama, San Calixto, Hacarí, La Playa, El Tarra, Tibú, and Sardinata. This region holds the indigenous reservations of Motilón-Barí and Catalura. The people of the Catatumbo maintain that a series of converging conditions –among them, the biodiversity of the territory, the border with Venezuela, and the State's marginalization– have been the causes for the progress of the armed conflict. In fact, marginalization by the State has allowed the early presence (at the end of the seventies) of the ELN and EPL in its territory, and in the mid-1980s, of the FARC. Already in the nineties and in the 2000s, the paramilitary onslaught brimmed the territory of the Catatumbo (Centro de Memoria Histórica, n.d.).

The period from 2003 to 2013, became a defining historical moment regarding the criminal actions of the two most important guerrilla groups in the country, the FARC and the ELN. During this time, the massacres and attacks against the civilian population and the stations of the public force increased (Figure 2). “The two groups established an alliance to halt the intervention of the self-defense and the Armed forces; examples of this were the cases of Catatumbo, Sur de Bolívar, Serranía del Perijá, Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, and the areas of Cesar and Magdalena.” (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2016, p. 101)

During this territorial dispute, the Military Forces were trapped between the different illegal actors in the conflict.

I decided to continue the BPM³ next to an abandoned house. The real intention was to sleep inside the house but, thank God, I had excellent non-commissioned officers. A first corporal told me: 'Lieutenant, look, this is the chronicle of a death foretold, house, water, shadow ... we have everything. There must be something here.' In the afternoon or evening, we decided in the to move about 100 meters from the house. I think it was God's doing. Some soldiers entered the house, I argued with them to get out of the house, and we were able to get them out. Then, two hours later, the house blew up, the house exploded. (Entrevistado 09, 2017)

Southeastern Antioquia (2009)

The department of Antioquia is located in the Colombian northwest, bordering the departments of Córdoba, Bolívar, Santander, Boyacá, Caldas, Risaralda, Chocó, and the Atlantic Ocean. Eastern Antioquia, one of the nine subregions of the department of Antioquia, in particular, has been the scene of the differentiated presence of the armed conflict, resulting from the confrontation between the actors. This sub-region has experienced different economic, social, political, and cultural impacts and has suffered the effects of a war that has kept the communities subordinated to the logic of the territorial dispute (González, 2015).

The department of Antioquia's outlet to the sea has determined the actions of the organized armed groups (the self-defense groups and, of course, the FARC), who found a way to swell their coffers mainly from drug trafficking, extortion, and kidnapping. The particular dynamics of the eastern region of Antioquia explain the respite of the conflict concerning other subregions such as Urabá and Magdalena Medio, without implying a lesser intensity (González, 2015).

By the mid-1990s, paramilitarism was present in eastern Antioquia, mainly in the townships of San José (La Ceja), La Danta (Sonsón), and the municipality of San Carlos. "San Carlos is located in the sub-region of Embalses in eastern Antioquia. It is a mountainous and water-rich area, which became a strategic territory; given that around 33% of the country's electric power is generated there, different armed actors were soon attracted" (Osorio, 2013, p. 133). These geographical characteristics compelled the many violent acts perpetrated during all of the 90s and the beginning of 2000 (Figures 1 and 2), among them 33 massacres, more than 600 homicides, 350 disappearances, 170 victims of antipersonnel mines, and 20,000 displacements, as well as the damage inflicted on the national infrastructure (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2011).

3 Mobile Patrol Base: A sector used by a military unit in which the personnel is situated triangularly to carry out safety and maintenance activities, among others.

The narrative provided by an interviewed officer indicates the reconstruction of the social fabric and the recovery of the memory of the conflict in this area of the country.

I was an operations officer in San Carlos (Antioquia), and if you visit someday, go to the park, there is a statue of San Carlos of the Massacres, and, there are green flowers, which represent the missing, many green flowers; the red flowers, represent the perished townspeople. One day I asked someone: 'Why do you do that?' And he said: 'Because we can never forget what happened and all the effort we have made so that this does not happen again.' (Entrevistado 01, 2017)

San José del Guaviare (2010)

San José del Guaviare is one of the four municipalities of the department of Guaviare. Its development and population is linked to the colonizing activities and the extraction of rubber from the Amazon forest with which it limits; this has generated, since the 19th century, various forms of unremitting violence, which transformed, at the end of the 70s, into coca crops created by peasant migrants from the center of the country (García, 1995).

With the 80s came the debate between the possible relationship between the FARC and drug trafficking, which generated a change in the dynamics of the conflict because of the oversupply of coca and a fall in prices that strengthened the guerrilla group instead of weakening it. By the nineties, coca crops exceeded 25,000 hectares. However, several manual eradication and fumigation projects were started, especially in regions such as Caquetá and Guaviare. In the face of the progressive guerrilla domination, drug traffickers reacted and created self-defense groups, which had their highest activity between 1999 and 2001, resulting in multiple confrontations for the land control that affected the civilian population. Because of this new dynamic in the rural areas of the department, the public forces focused the execution of their military operations in the area specifically to decimate the illegal armed structures operating in this region (Gobernación del Guaviare & OIM, 2015).

Within the operations of the public force was the eradication of crops.

The central mission was to eradicate illicit crops. So, if 150 people show up with the intention of banishing the Army, to end the mobile eradication groups, they literally said: "We are going to clobber the Army, let's get those guys out, who are here." So I went on my own and told them that we should talk. I talked to them about what we could really do, what we are experiencing, why we are going to destroy ourselves, [...] I managed to convince them to allow us to eradicate in their territory. (Entrevistado 02, 2017)

Sur de Bolívar (2010)

“The department of Bolívar has a special geographic importance for having scenarios such as Montes de María, to the north; the Serranía de San Lucas, towards the center; and the south of Bolívar, which is part of the sub-region called Magdalena Medio that it shares with Cesar, Santander, Cundinamarca, Caldas, Antioquia, and Boyacá” (López, n.d.a., p. 2). It has an extension of 25.978 km² that limits with the departments of Atlantic, Magdalena, Cesar, Antioquia, Cordova, Sucre, and with the Atlantic Ocean to the north.

Being a strategic point “because it represents a source of resources for survival, with high and flat areas and mobility corridors, such as the San Jorge and Magdalena Rivers, which constitute an important outlet towards the Caribbean coast for coca produced” (López, n.d.a), the armed groups have been in constant dispute for the south of this department. For years, the high number of illicit crops has driven different groups outside the law (including the FARC and ELN) to dispute control over the territory and illegal activity intensely. This interest has made the southern part of Bolívar one of the most prominent areas concerning the internal conflict; here, the Military Forces have developed countless operations to provide calm to the peoples.

Therefore, the importance of the social management carried out by the Army in the area is highlighted:

We organized community centers as shelters, with the community, so that children from fringe areas would not have to leave and return the same days. They stayed there from Monday to Friday. The same community action organizations provided administration and food. On Friday, they would go home with their mothers and return. We built bridges because, to get by, they had to take off their little shoes and cross the ravine and four main streets. To have a sense of belonging in their township, they wanted to make it a municipality. (Entrevistado 06, 2017)

New challenges in the construction of military historical memory

Placing the subject and his or her memory as a source of information allows opening a space for the reconstruction of national historical memory. In this regard, the spatial perspective plays an essential role in the understanding of the causes and dynamics of the conflict, combined with the methodological proposal of recovery of historical memory through the life histories of the National Army officers. This exercise allows us to return to the history of Colombia, from the occurrences and experiences that have marked the lives of its protagonists.

The task of recollecting and narrating has generated new reflections and meanings, which determine an understanding about reality today, in which, its leading role has allowed to create individual heroic perceptions for the last stage of the internal armed conflict. These versions are fundamental for the configuration of the history of the Colombian conflict.

The highest peaks of the humanitarian disaster were seen between 1999 and 2002, the most significant number of displacements, homicides, threats, anti-personnel mines, kidnappings, and confrontations, among other violent acts. It is during this period where most of the narratives occurred, located in local geographic space and forming a multi-scale condition that can be represented in timelines. It is also during this period that the military actions reported by the officers configure the heroic acts, resulting from the violent actions of various armed groups.

The Military Forces have been determining actors in the context of the Colombian armed conflict. Therefore, as a social group, it requires agglutinating elements, such as shared memory, to uplift the development of a collective and find its own identity (Castillo, 2018, p. 57), also built from a humanist perspective that parts from the individual memory.

For more than fifty years, the historical context of the Colombian armed conflict has had different views, approaches, and dynamics of analysis that allow understanding the relationship between war, conflict, and violence. The conflict between the different armed actors has impacted most of the regions of the country forcefully. Hence, the heroic acts of the officers interviewed, in the context of this violent setting, have generated feelings of institutional pride and recognition of their work as Army officers.

The Colombian armed conflict has driven different analysis scenarios in different areas. The social and human sciences have a latent commitment concerning this phenomenon. However, generating new conceptual and methodological forms of work that allow research and intervention processes to generate new knowledge and thus overcome what we know as “more of the same” is worthwhile.

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