

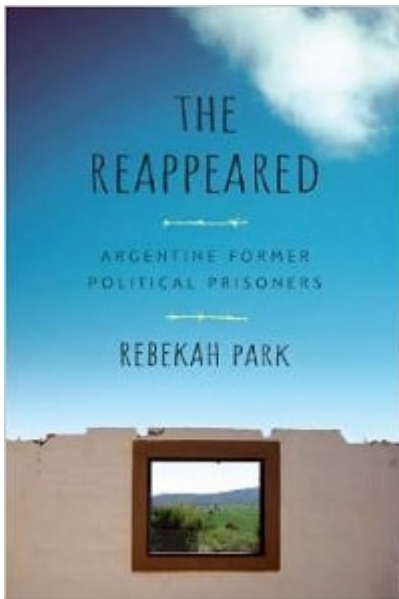


The Reappeared: Argentine Former Political Prisoners

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States resort to disappearances to remove unwanted critics or minorities from society. The act of a disappearance often follows a pattern: a group of masked armed men take a person to a secret detention facility, usually in the trunk of a car. After losing their liberty, the disappeared rarely have access to independent legal representation, are tortured, isolated, subject to mock-executions, and then executed without a trial. The disappeared vanish in mass graves. The state seldom returns bodily remains to the relatives.

States deny their own involvement in disappearances. No official records are kept of the existence of detention facilities. Law enforcement agents seldom finalise an investigation into a disappearance. As a consequence, the family members of the disappeared rarely receive information on the well-being or whereabouts of their missing relatives. This often leaves them in a state of uncertainty: they cannot mourn, nor can they hope for a sign of life (Robins 2010). It therefore comes as no surprise that most organisations dealing with disappearances are comprised of family members of the disappeared. They try to find remedies, advocate for criminal investigations, seek state accountability, or hope to get access to police files.



Disappearances happen across the world, yet when thinking of disappearances most people would conjure the disappearances that occurred during the Dirty War in Argentina between 1976 and 1983. During those years 30,000 activists and members of labour unions were abducted and never seen again (Park 2014: 1). Many babies born in prison were taken away to be illegally adopted by members of the political elite (Park 2014: 11). Most associations working to retrieve information on the disappeared in Argentina are family-based, such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo.

Both organisations received wide attention from academics interested in transitional justice and truth commissions in Latin America (see, for instance, Arditti 1999).

In fact, one could say that the field of studies on Argentina's Dirty War and the transitional justice period following it has saturated. Yet, Rebekah Park's *The Reappeared: Argentine Former Political Prisoners* makes a very welcome contribution to this field by revealing the ultimate limits of how human rights can protect former political prisoners and victims. Park conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork and oral-history archive interviews among groups of former political prisoners who were imprisoned during the military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983. These prisoners were released and established several organisations to represent their needs and memories. Park especially focuses on the work and members of the AEPPC (Association of Former Political Prisoners in Córdoba) and at tours around concentration camps now opened to the public as memorial sites.

The Reappeared turns our beliefs of victimhood upside down. Who qualifies as a victim in transitional justice mechanisms? Park argues that victims are unequal and legal rights can only do so much to protect them.



Owing to the wider visibility of family organisations, the literature on disappearances has often focused on how transitional justice (traditionally, criminal prosecution and truth seeking through official truth commissions) and legal rights can provide remedies and “truth” for the family members who stay behind (Robins 2012). In contrast, Park reveals that not every victim earns human rights protection: human rights organisations have a strong say in obscuring who can be defined a victim and who cannot.

This inequality began at the start of the transitional justice mechanisms in the 1980s. President Raúl Alfonsín started the transitional justice process in 1983 with the establishment of the CONADEP truth commission (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas) to collect victim’s stories and publish a report on the military dictatorship. During CONADEP’s hearings of victims, former political prisoners who survived the camps only played a marginal role as witnesses (Park 2014). While we would expect that those political prisoners who were lucky enough to survive the concentration camps and reappear into Argentinian society would be seen as victims who could provide valuable stories, they faced a cold welcome. The former prisoners were not seen as victims, but were suspected of being potential criminals who had struck a deal in prison so they would be released; probably at the expense of other prisoners who did not survive (p.23). Consequently, most of the former prisoners lost their status as victims.



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Park details how former political prisoners also see differences amongst themselves in terms of surviving, collaboration, and captivity. By comparing tours at two former prison sites (one given by former political prisoners and the other by students), Park distinguishes two distinct ways of memorialising space. The tours given by the students focused on human rights violations and the experience of the prisoners and their dehumanization. These tours “reinforced the



image of the disappeared as heroic martyrs, or as innocent victims” (p.53). On the other hand, the tours by the former prisoners were, for some, a way of reclaiming their own memories within the space of the prison (p.67). Moreover, the narrative of these tours did not intend to portray prisoners as victims but gave a more complete picture of personal histories, by including stories on their involvement in social movements and political activism.

The former prisoners in part resist the victim label. The political prisoners reclaim their own agency by telling “memories of resistance” and holding on to their political activism during court trials and during their captivity. They avoid telling “memories of torture” in which they become passive victims (p.13).

For instance, the former prisoners tell how they denied accusations during torture sessions or summoned the willpower to forget names so as not to betray anybody (p.83). Another act of resistance was building a community, and sharing moral support and small resources such as soap within the prison (p.90-91). Many of the former prisoners also decided not to speak of torture, even to the extent of refusing free therapeutic aid from psychologists (p.71).



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Simões (Flickr, CC BY 2.0.)

Park finds that the identity of the ex-prisoners is bifurcated: while the former prisoners lobby for reparations for their suffering with state officials, they also deny that they were psychologically affected by their suffering during oral history archive interviews (p.72). Park reveals an interesting paradox between responsibility and agency: when labelled as victims the prisoners lose part of their agency, yet when they reclaim their agency as activists inside the prison “families of the disappeared are left to wonder: what did they do to survive? Conversely, what did they not do that could have enabled others to survive” (p.21)?



The Reappeared is human rights ethnography at its best. Park does a wonderful job by carefully balancing empathy for the personal activist histories of the former prisoners while at the same time providing a critical account of the paradoxes within their narratives. The book shows engagement with the people under study, but the overall tone of the book is critical: laying bare the inconsistencies of victimhood and refusing to sing the praises of human rights as the panacea for grievances.

Noteworthy is Park's ability to navigate the political sensitivities and conflicts within the Argentinean human rights community. Her way of getting access to the political prisoner's organisations proved to be difficult at first as contact with one organisation could have limited contact with others. What is more, Park balances between describing the often intense stories of survival, anger, depression, and heated arguments without sentimentality, instead showing how the former prisoners seek a more positive story of themselves through resistance and activism.

The book gives a detailed account of life inside the concentration camps and the various tactics of resistance and communication between prisoners. Park broadens our understanding of what constitutes as a violation by including the socio-economic hardships following the event of a violation. While the protection of civil rights receives widespread attention, the socio-economic discrimination and exclusion from society of survivors is often overlooked (p.147; see also Robins 2012). Even after their degrading experiences in prison, the former prisoners experienced socio-economic exclusion: they lost partnerships, had to rebuild their families, and had difficulties finding employment (p.109). This all makes *The Reappeared* a welcome wakeup call from our dream that human rights can protect all victims equally at all times and that transitional justice mechanisms can provide sufficient redress for survivors.

Park, Rebekah. 2014. *The Reappeared: Argentine Former Political*



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